

# A SURVEY OF WATERCOLOR PAINTING IN THE 20TH CENTURY

**A tribute to the first Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary International  
Watermedia Masters**

## INTRODUCTION

After China opened her doors to the world again, I seized the opportunity to organize the University of Minnesota Art and Craft Tour of China, in 1982. When we were in Hangzhou, I visited the China Academy of Fine Arts (Formerly the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts) to negotiate with the leaders of the Academy to establish the very first exchange program in the arts with the University of Minnesota. From 1984 through 1987 I led 25 students each year to China to study Chinese painting and calligraphy. During that time I was also invited by art academies and organizations to give lectures and painting demonstrations. Whenever I visited Nanjing, I always made a point to visit Prof. Li Jian Chen (1900-2002), founder of the Jiangsu Watercolor Research Institute and considered the “Father of Chinese watercolor painting,” I also visited other artists of the Institute. In 1987 the China Academy of Fine Arts and the Chinese Artists Association organized my solo exhibition that traveled to 9 major cities in China. When my exhibition was presented in Nanjing, I had more opportunity to exchange creative ideas with Prof. Li and the artists of the Institute. Many artists became good friends. I have kept in touch with some of them and enjoyed lasting friendships.

In 1995 Prof. Chang Houxing, the Secretary-General of the Jiangsu Watercolor Research Institute visited the US, presenting exhibitions and giving lectures. I invited him to do a workshop at the Duluth Art Institute toward the end of his US tour. We spent one week together in Duluth and chatted late into the night every evening. One of his wishes that he expressed to me was to host an international invitational watermedia exhibition in Nanjing. Today, the wish has become a reality and the first Invitational Exhibition of Contemporary International Watermedia Masters is open at the magnificent new building of the Nanjing Library.

To commemorate this important event, the Jiangsu Watercolor Research Institute is publishing an exhibition catalog. Prof. Chang asked me to write an introduction for the catalog. I know that I am not knowledgeable enough to do the job, but I do not want to disappoint his earnest request. This exhibition is limited to the Western style of watermedia paintings. In the past fifty years, the advancement of this medium seems to concentrate in the United States and China; the former represents the West, and the latter represents the East. We can see that very clearly from the number of artists represented by the two countries in this exhibition. Out of the about seventy international artists invited, twenty-six are from the United States, and twenty-two are from China. I am focusing my discussion here within this scope.

## WATERCOLOR PAINTING IN THE WEST

During the Renaissance, German artist Albrecht Durer (1471-1528) had already mastered sophisticated watercolor painting techniques. However, the major advancement of the medium had to wait until the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century England. After one century's continued development and improvement, England had produced many great watercolorists in that period. The most influential were Paul Sandby (1730-1809), Thomas Girtin (1775-1802, and Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851). Watercolor had reached a flourishing and mature state in this period, and England was also honored as the "Watercolor Kingdom."

American watercolor originated in the English roots. John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) was an English artist as well as American. However, under the popular demand for developing an American national identity, he and Winslow Homer (1836-1925) had already shown a special esthetic quality and American feeling. They established the foundation of an American tradition and served as a strong force to propel the American watercolor to vigorous advancement. Following them America produced many great watercolorists. Among them were Childe Hassam (1859-1935), Maurice Prendergast (1859-1924), Thomas Eakins (1844-1916), John Marin (1870-1953), Edward Hopper (1882-1967), and Charles Burchfield (1893-1967.) Watercolor had occupied an important place in American painting. The number of watercolorists, and their accomplishments had way surpassed that of England.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, art in the West had faced the extreme polarization between the avant-garde and the traditionalists, and the abstraction and realism. Artists were forced to choose between the two. If they chose the middle route, they were attacked from both sides and dismissed as mediocre or inferior. Originally it was considered that watercolor would become the medium that best represent the American national traits, only to be replaced by abstract expressionism. Its ideology dictated what was art and what was not. Watercolor painting therefore, was at a low tide.

During the 1960s, realism had gradually returned. However, it was in 1982 that the Newsweek magazine boldly confirmed its resurrection. On its June 7 cover, Newsweek featured William Bailey's half nude portrait of a young lady. The caption reads: "Art Imitates Life-The Revival of Realism." After the 1960s, artists gradually started to repudiate ideology, and embrace pluralism. Hence, all kinds of art forms flourished. Among them are Conceptual Art, Pop Art, Minimalism, Photo-Realism, and installations. The art world suddenly became exciting again. This exciting period also revitalized watercolor painting.

In 1966, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City held the Centennial Celebration of the American Watercolor Society Exhibition. This important event was considered the beginning of American watercolor renaissance. In the meantime, America also replaced England to become the "Watercolor Kingdom" of the twentieth century, and proclaimed "watercolor is the American medium."

## FACTORS OF PROSPERITY

Other factors also contributed to the ascendancy of watercolor:

First was the boom of the watercolor societies. With the motivation of the American Watercolor Society and the National Watercolor Society, watercolor organizations sprang up like bamboo shoots in the springtime in every region, state and city. Watercolor Magazine listed about 150 significant societies in the United States in 2006. These organizations hold annual exhibitions and workshops to encourage and nourish the next generation of watercolorists. They also publish newsletters to keep members informed and in close contact.

Second was the ever-more-abundant availability of improved and new art supplies. Because of the American artists' enormous appetites, the many abandoned old European color, and paper mills reopened for production. They also improved or developed new products. Traditionally watercolor paper came as large as 22 x 30 inches (56cm x 76cm). Now the paper is available in the sizes of as large as 40 x 60 inches (102cm x 152cm) in sheets and 10yard x 55 inches (10mx1.137m) in rolls. Artists can select any sizes that suit their needs. There are also new painting grounds such as the synthetic yupo and watercolor canvas. Besides paper, new colors such as acrylic were also introduced to artists.

Third was the thriving publishing industry. In the past thirty years, many scholarly watercolor history books and numerous instructional books have been published. In 1988, the American Artist magazine published a special issue Watercolor 88. Because of the popular demand, it later became a quarterly Watercolor magazine. The Artist's Magazine also produced Watercolor Magic in 1993 as a one-time-only special issue. It later became a quarterly magazine and recently changed to bimonthly. Starting with the February 2008 issue, it will again change the name, to Watercolor Artist, to better reflect the level of sophistication of the medium and readers. The International Artist, although a multi-media magazine, devotes substantial space to watercolor painting. It also promotes the international exchange of creative ideas. More recently, many instructional videos and DVD's have flooded the market. Artists can now bring their most admired instructors into their living rooms.

## TRENDS TOWARD PLURALITY

Recent trends in watercolor can be summarized as follows:

First are the creative ideas and contents. Traditionally, watercolor painting leaned toward realism. The subject matter was also often restricted to landscape and still life. Now the watercolorist's concepts embrace that of all media of painters, from abstract and semi-abstract to photo-realism. As to subject matter, all are include, from landscape and still life to figure and wildlife. Moreover, the style presents a refreshing new look and reflects the spirit of our times. Both the quantity and quality of abstract painting have greatly increased. The accomplishment of figure painting has reached its new heights. The still life has also achieved a more advanced level of sophistication.

Second are the painting material and methods. Traditionally “watercolor” refers to paintings executed with transparent colors mixed with water. Now the definition is expanded to include any painting executed with any kind of water-soluble colors such as acrylic, gouache, casein, and egg tempera, or any combination of them. The new term “watermedia” is now used to differentiate from “transparent watercolor.” Traditional watercolor paintings were executed mainly on sized heavyweight paper made of cotton or linen. Now artists are using any kinds of painting ground, such as illustration boards, synthetic yupo, and watercolor canvas. Except for the Transparent Watercolor Society of America and Watercolor West, any watercolor exhibition will accept these watermedia paintings.

Third is the diversity of watercolor techniques. Traditionally, artists mostly use either the controlled glazing technique or the more direct wet-on-wet approach, or a combination of the two. Now there are numerous new techniques. Most of these are aiming at achieving rich and exciting textures. Some times they rely on combining special material to achieve the result. Photo-realists also employ airbrush in addition to the painstaking controlled glazing technique. Inspired by the woodblock printing and wax resisting method in fabric, some artists use the masking agent and pour liquid watercolor to carry out the process. I am sure many artists are continuing to search for more new techniques.

## WATERCOLOR PAINTING IN THE EAST

The Western Jesuit missionaries introduced watercolor painting to China as early as the nineteenth century. In 1911 the new Republic was established. The May 4th Movement in 1919 immediately followed it. The young generation was anxiously looking to the West for inspiration. Western thoughts therefore surged in China and made a great impact. The new Chinese educational system was modeled after that of the West. The Western style of watercolor painting was incorporated in the curriculum. Although the ideas and techniques of the Western style watercolor is significantly different from that of the traditional Chinese painting, the material and tools are quite similar. For this reason watercolor was easily accepted by the Chinese artists. Gradually art academies were established. Many ambitious young artists also went abroad to study in the West. This period grew a new generation of professional watercolor teachers and artists. The most influential artists included Li Tiefu (1869-1952), Zhang Meisun (1894-1973), Li Yongsun (1898-1999), Li Jianchen (1911-2002), Pan Sitong (1904-1980), Wang Zhaomin (1908-), Fan Mingti (1915-), Gu Yuan (1919-1996) and others. Although there were some conflicts among different schools of artists, they were not as polarized as that of the West. Therefore, during this period the development of watercolor painting in China was basically homogenous.

When the Peoples’ Republic of China was established in 1949, it brought a new prosperous momentum to China. With enthusiasm and devotion, artists created many wonderful paintings to celebrate accomplishments of the new China. During this period, undoubtedly the Chinese painting was strongly influenced by the Russian social realism. In terms of the subject matter, there was a mark increase in figure paintings. Many of them depicted people of the working class

and the everyday life of minorities. The style of painting had also greatly diversified. Watercolor painting had experienced a period of prosperity during the 1950s and 1960s. Unfortunately, the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 brought unprecedented catastrophe to China. Everything was in ruin. Watercolor painting was desolately depressed.

In the 1980s, China went through reform and again opened to the outside world. This has breathed new life to China. It also brought a new spring to watercolor painting. The new thoughts were like roaring waves surging forward with great force! In the meantime, advanced information technology has enabled easy access to the Western art scene. This stimulated the Chinese artists to embark upon ambitious an exploration of new ideas and techniques and therefore greatly diversified the creative concepts, contents, formats, and ways of expression. However, the influence from the West, once again has raised the vigorous debate whether the Western painting should be assimilated into the traditional Chinese painting.

## WATERCOLOR PAINTING IN THE FUTURE

### CONTINUE THE TRENDS OF DIVERSITY

During the first half of twentieth century, art experienced unprecedented polarization, and artists wasted tremendous amount of time and energy in this meaningless conflict.

The seventeenth century French philosopher and mathematician Blasé Pascal (1623-1662) said: “A man does not show his greatness by being at one extremity, but rather by touching both at once.” The Chinese sage Mencius’ doctrine of mean and Daoism’s philosophy of harmonizing yin and yang had expounded this theory over two thousand years ago. It is of course difficult for artists to embrace both extremities, because they are trying to achieve balance that resists balance.

Robert Grudin in his book *The Grace of Great Things* says about the creative mind, “An especially important aspect of memory is our attitude toward the thought of our predecessors. It is striking how many noted revolutionaries and innovators ... are maintaining continuity with the past or restoring old ideas that have been corrupted or forgotten ... Many new ideas are analogies to, or new applications of, old ones ... To the inspired as well as to their audiences, innovative insights contain a sense of something completely new, but it is also the rediscovery of something always true.”

Peter London in his book *No more Secondhand Art* observes that it is a false dichotomy to divide art into representation and abstraction and leads to mutual antagonism and a useless diversion of creative energy. Rather than slicing all of art into the two large, antagonistic categories of realism and abstraction, he considers that all art is abstract as much as all art is representational. It is because every made image, whether it is portrayed in its visual exactness or its symbolic equivalence, involves an elaborate sequence of mental operations, from perception to selection through strategizing to representation.

I strongly feel that a good painting should have a strong abstract design behind it, while a good abstract painting should have a profound inspiration that comes from keen observation of the real world. Artists who choose to work in abstraction, semi-abstraction, or representation are partly depending upon how important audience participation is. I believe that by subscribing to plurality in creative concepts and processes, artists will be liberated from the bondage of tradition and tyranny of prejudice. They will have a whole new wide world for them to inquire, research, explore, and experiment. I predict that artists of the twenty-first century will have the wisdom and open-mindedness to continue accept the trend of plurality.

## EAST MEETS WEST

The traditional Chinese painting emphasizes on idea, spiritual quality, brush work, and ink tone. Paintings are done on exquisite thin unsized paper or silk. It is difficult to make changes; therefore, it must be executed with speed and spontaneity. The Western watercolor painting emphasizes on reality, physical likeness, light, and color. Paintings are done on sized heavy cotton or linen paper. It is possible to make changes; therefore they can be gradually built up by using glazing technique.

Even with their differences, the Chinese traditional painting and the Western counterpart accomplish the same magical esthetic quality that set watercolor apart from any other painting medium. I visited the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing in 1985. When President Hou Yimin and I were viewing an exhibition together he made a remark: “Nowadays, the Chinese paintings are more and more becoming like the Western watercolor.”

In reality, there are numerous examples of the synthesis of traditional Chinese painting and Western watercolor. During the Qianlong reign (1736-1795) of the Qing Dynasty, many Western Jesuit missionaries were enticed by the emperor to become court painters. They occupied extraordinary positions in the immediate surrounding of the emperor, and worked in Yuan Ming Yuan, the magnificent summer palace containing many Western features. Among these artists, Giuseppe Castiglione (1688-1766) was most well known to the Chinese. He painted in the traditional Chinese style, but incorporated the Western chiaroscuro to build up forms. Henry Matisse’s (1869-1954) bold calligraphic brush strokes and flat plane in his paintings were clearly an Eastern influence. In 1956 the Chinese contemporary master Zhang Daqian (1899-1983) visited Pablo Picasso (1881-1973). In his studio, Picasso showed Master Zhang five albums of his Chinese painting in the style of another Chinese contemporary master Qi Baishi (1863-1957). Master Zhang was impressed by Picasso’s refreshing composition and powerful brushwork, but felt inadequate in his ink tone quality. German expressionist Emil Nolde (1867-1956) had painted watercolor on Chinese xuan paper with strong pure color. In recent years many American artists also adopted Chinese paper and brushes for their paintings.

The traditional Chinese boneless style paintings, which do not rely on ink calligraphic brushwork as foundation, are actually watercolors done on Chinese paper. The more recent masters such as Ren Bonian (1840-1895) and the Lingnan School artists were clearly influenced by the Western watercolor. The splash ink and color paintings of Zhang Daqian’s later years were the integration

of East and West painting concepts and processes. I have never seen Prof. Xu Beihong's watercolors, but his famous painting "Spring Rain Over the Li River" which so superbly expresses the misty drizzling atmosphere, is considered a traditional Chinese painting, yet it could also be regarded as a watercolor painting done on Chinese xuan paper. The works of Lin Fengmian (1900-1991) have epitomized all the concepts, material, and processes of the East and West. His paintings, regardless landscape, figure, or still life, could be exhibited in any American watercolor exhibitions. Recently I saw some contemporary innovative Chinese style gouache paintings in books. Many of these paintings could mingle well with the contemporary Western watermedia paintings as milk with water. The senior Chinese American watercolorists Chen Chi (1912-2006), Dong Kingman (1911-2001), and Diana Kan (1926-) are the pioneers in synthesizing East and West. Inspired by them, I also have been exploring and experimenting with the ways to synthesize the concepts, materials, and processes in the past thirty years. Katherine Chang Liu's recent paintings are mostly abstract, yet the beauty of her calligraphic lines and the poetic quality of her paintings reflect the Chinese cultural background. Although Zheng Liang Feng's painting technique and his material are basically Western, a large proportion of his subject matter expresses the Chinese people, especially the minorities with the Chinese feeling.

Under closer examination, actually the traditional Chinese painting already possesses plurality. The Chinese painting emphasizes line quality, which has the abstract beauty of Chinese calligraphy. The Chinese instant style and the Zen and literati paintings are forerunners of expressionism. As far as the painting subject matter goes, the West stresses human activities, while the Chinese landscape, figure, still life and wildlife paintings were equally developed and had achieved maturity during the Tang and Song period (618-1279.)

Today's Chinese artists have a better understanding of Western art, than of the western artists. However, the advances of transportation and information technologies have greatly shrunk the time and space that speeds up the international and cultural exchanges of the arts during the twenty-first century. I am certain that this will bring more integration of painting concepts and techniques of East and West, especially now that China has experienced unprecedented development and economic growth and is playing an increasingly important role on the world stage. Countries all over the world are showing increasing interest in learning the Chinese language and culture. It is not difficult to predict that this will speed up the process of pluralization. The prosperity of art needs economic support. To say that in the near future that Shanghai will become an important art center to rival New York is absolutely not unrealistic.

## CONCLUSION

In science, newly proven theories replace the old ones to advance knowledge. In art, however, a new art form does not replace the old one. A new art form, concept, process, style or subject matter is only different from the others. Neither do I believe that one art form, concept, process, style, or subject matter is superior to others. It is the artistic excellence that can evoke a strong response and transform people's lives that matters. Therefore, All arts should coexist and their

collective efforts enrich our lives.

When we contemplate upon the complexity of interconnectedness of human activities, we know that it is impossible for us to sever the ties between the past, present, and future. We need the revolutionary spirit of the avant-garde to explore new frontiers and propel art forward. We also need the guardians of the truth of traditional values, to transform the revolution into evolutionary and sustainable art.

It is my belief that in a truly free world, artists should be allowed to express their unique visions and create their work in whatever art form, concept, style, media, process, or contents that are most true to their hearts and natural to their hands. After the Cold War, we thought that mankind had finally come to its senses to bury the hatchets and make peace only to see that we have fallen into chaos again and again. Only when mankind is enlightened enough to accept diversity can there be peace on earth. Only when artists can accept plurality and create work that is universally and eternally true can they bring mankind an enriched and bright future.

Cheng-Khee Chee (Xu Jingyi)  
Associate Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota, Duluth, USA  
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