

Nomadic Traces in the Art Community

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Everyone more or less has a hobby, and my hobby is calligraphy and painting. Some view this as an arduous career, a path less travelled, trudging until one grows grey with little accomplishment. I, however, pay no mind to such matters, for I have never been ambitious in my life. I find happiness in the ordinary, and success holds little importance for me, as it has been for decades. Even as I reach old age, my spirit still moves forward eagerly, as it had in my youth.

My fondness of painting began early in my childhood. Creations at that time were of course childish and free-spirited smears here and there, following no principles or boundaries. It was not until I came of age that I began receiving formal education through Mr. WANG Chan Lo at the Xiling Calligraphy and Painting Society in Hangzhou City, dipping my toes into the world of art. I heard somewhere that it would take a few years just to handle the basics of mountain-water painting. Of course, being stubborn as I was, I had to give it a go, thinking if I failed, it would not be too late to back out and resume elsewhere. Instead of teaching me how to paint a tree or a stone, my teacher gave me a whole painting to copy. After a week, I figured mine looked pretty similar, and handed in my work anxiously, feeling like an unsightly fiancé meeting their parents-in-law for the first time. Not until Mr. WANG nodded in acceptance did I breathe a sigh of relief. From then on, my confidence grew. To make the most of my time without affecting other studies, I woke up each day at the crack of dawn, and reached for my paper and brush. Even during the harsh winter when the water would freeze, I would warm the ink stone and water, practicing continuously.

I studied for around seven years in the Xiling Society, and it was not until Mr. WANG passed away did I finally end my learning. During those years, I copied several authentic pieces from the Ming and Qing dynasties, as well as collotype-printed collections, exploring outside of Mr. WANG's teachings. Sometimes I accomplished these with ease, other times I felt they were out of my league. At that time, my lack of understanding in application hindered me in strenuous ways, yet my courage to continue never dwindled. My labor throughout those years had not gone to waste, establishing my fundamental ability of calligraphy and painting.

My hometown, its landscape of six bridges and three mountains lying in scenic tranquility, its waters glimmering under sun rays, the mountains shrouded in haze, was picturesque. Thereafter I did my military service in Nanjing City. Jinling, Xuanwu, Mochou, Yanji and Taicheng would have provided enough material for illustration. However, limited by mundane reasons, I was unable to travel far, only painting where my path and heart led me. Using techniques solely obtained through teachings and by following the footsteps of copied artwork, my work lacked individuality.

The 26th year of the Republican Era (1937) announced the beginning of civil war and an emergence of a new epoch. People rose to action, I myself included, marching

from Nanjing to Hubei, through Hunan, Guangxi, and Chongqing and finally residing in Sichuan Province for nine years, travelling back and forth to Chongqing City constantly. The encounters during this period never ceased to amaze me. For example, the towering and precipitous landscape of the Guilin mountains, the meandering and crystal gleam of the Jialing River, the rapid and torrential shores of the Yangtze River, the obscure and steep peaks of the Three Gorges. With each sight, my feelings transformed along with my works, and I experienced the ancient citations as intended. As FAN Kuan of Northern Song Dynasty quoted, "The best teachings come not so much from painting itself," and as SHI Tao said, "Amass the abundant wonders of the world, but only draft small traces of it." During my years in Sichuan, I benefited in terms of both theory and technique under the teachings of Mr. CHEN Shieu Wong.

The 34th year of the Republican Era (1945) marked the end of war. I left Sichuan to serve at Hudu (at the downstream of Huangpu River). However, the good times were short-lived. In 1945, I fled and took refuge in Taiwan. Since then, 28 winters and summers have come and gone. Being a long term resident in a foreign land, I indulged myself in work, yet never for a day did I lapse my hobby in ink wash painting. I focused all my spare time on painting, as if I ate, slept, and breathed ink wash paintings, not missing a day. After retirement, I became more diligent than ever. I travelled far and wide; from Ali Mountain and the Cross-island Highways, to Qingshui Cliff and Sun-Moon Lake, I often searched for inspiration. Having boated once across the Taiwan Strait, I have seen the rise and fall of its deep water as magnificent as mountains. Whenever my heart would begin to stir with this memory, I would go to linger by the shores, observing the aesthetics of the choppy waves. With what I perceived through my eyes and mind, I tried different methods to translate the sights onto paper, dotting the waves. Mountains in Taiwan mostly consisted of thick patches of bamboo trees, hardly any stone surface; therefore, I dotted, then shaded in for surface texture, or clustered straight dots to create mountains or trees. The colossal and rugged mountain stretched and enveloped the north-west cross-island highways; landscape fissured and wrinkled, I could only try to grasp its approximate appearance of little substance.

The aforementioned can be described as a learning process. As for the creative process, it can be roughly divided into two approaches, one that is meticulously thought out, the other spontaneous. The former is for large-scale paintings, or ones with specific titles in mind. These need to go through a thought process. We can avoid problems in the middle of the task by making drafts in our mind before we start. The latter is impromptu creation. When it comes to ideas, an art creator can immediately paint, follow their thoughts and then stop at a proper moment all in one shot. (Sometimes I wake up at midnight because some lovely inspiration comes to my mind. I would immediately turn on the light, get dressed and write the synopsis down.) However, whether the former or the latter of these methods, both are simple to describe, but hard to execute. How to make them work smoothly actually depends on the fundamentals. So, I usually encourage young enthusiasts to work hard, or else expectations will be high but the actual result will be low. In that case we can only sigh and are not able to do anything about it.

It is hard to learn the basics, so what we need is to sustain a spirit of perseverance and never give up. A principle we need to know: walking a long distance starts from the first step; climbing high starts from the base. If we toughen our confidence, we will finally achieve the goal through daily accumulation. We have to pay attention to three “mores” in our learning: paint more, think more, and see more. As the *Analects* say: “Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous.” To paint more is important but we need to think more at the same time. Another point is to see more: look more at others’ works, read more books of the past and present, and observe nature more. If we have our feet firmly planted on the ground, we will have nearly achieved half of the success, because the three “mores” are mutually connected. On one hand, to practice more can familiarize one with painting, but not much can be deduced from this without thinking. On the other hand, a painter cannot fulfill the design in their mind or their expression when facing beautiful scenes if they merely think without good skills. Advice from others may help one’s defects. We can gauge the level of art we have reached by encountering other works. Reading is beneficial for art practice, especially those readings relevant to painting. As for observation, learning from nature is the key to innovation. However, not everything will go smoothly. When encountering a disparity between mind and hand, will and reality, one needs to know that this is a trial and a test. Don’t be upset, keep calm in exploring the situation and at the end of the day, the problems will be solved. Once overcoming a difficulty, another new stage will appear. This process is circular. We need to face the challenge with a fighting spirit; the bright future will be ahead of us. It is true to say that failure, experience and the harvest are all connected. For me, I am still a researcher of such situations. I recall one time when I was painting, I felt very upset. I therefore wrote a poem to delineate such difficult mental states – to be relaxed or to be serious is always a confusing dilemma. Thus, I don’t think I am any kind of painter: I am just an unimportant nomad in the art community.