

Friends of Lim Tze Peng Proudly Presents

Tze Peng: Songs from the Heart

子平：心画



Reading Material

Text written by: Ho Sou Ping

“Calligraphy is the highest form of Chinese Art.”

“中国最高的美学是书法。”

Lim Tze Peng

Lim Tze Peng’s Artistic Vision

Lim Tze Peng has managed to integrate calligraphy and painting; his work successfully embodies the traditional Chinese art theory of calligraphy and painting sharing the same roots.

While the historical tradition in Western painting demanded realism, Chinese painting since ancient time was preoccupied with capturing the spirit of the subject matter. For instance, when a Chinese landscape painter composes a painting, he does not necessarily need to depict it as a specific scenery of a certain place, but to use the subject matter as a means of reflecting his thoughts and ideas. The landscape painting might be seen as a vessel for his aspirations, in this case, an idyllic retreat into nature or the desire for serenity which are traditional literati values. As such, capturing the essence of the subject is more important than simply reproducing the natural scene.

Imagine removing the visual reference from a traditional Chinese ink painting and leaving behind only the lines –this in fact amounts to calligraphy. Therefore, calligraphy is a painting without an explicit representation of the subject matter. Incidentally, Western abstract art is based on a similar theory. The two have the same effects despite their different origins.



Figure 3.1 A work by Yuan Dynasty painter, Ni Yun Lin
The landscape does not represent any particular space or time in real life; rather it exists solely to express a solitary and serene state.

Understandably, Lim Tze Peng firmly believes that calligraphy is the highest form of Chinese art. Chinese calligraphy is far more challenging than painting because its visual language relies on the sole use of lines and the level of aesthetic merit is utterly exposed at first glance, allowing no room for misgiving.

The Importance of Lines in Chinese Calligraphy

The concept that calligraphy and painting share the same roots can also be expressed through the fundamental element of line. When asked to depict an apple, a Western artist would likely paint an area with colours and try to show volume, light and shade. On the other hand, a Chinese artist would succinctly bring the apple into form through the method of outlining.

Therefore, the quality of the line or brushwork is of utmost importance to a Chinese artist. In fact, most Chinese artists view calligraphy and painting as equally important to their practice. Lim Tze Peng is no exception. He believes that lines could reveal an artist's inner essence and character. Through composition, ink, brushwork and visual content, a piece of calligraphic work can express various aesthetic qualities, revealing a state of mind, space, and rhythm amongst other things.

Upon looking at Lim Tze Peng's work more closely, one experiences the rhythm, character and vigour of which he has dictated using the brush (Figure 3.2).

Lim Tze Peng was exposed to the major schools of thought in Chinese calligraphy including manuscripts and steles, and was largely influenced by the latter. As such, his strokes are bold and resolute, and bear the element of *jin shi wei* ("bronze and stone flavour"), conveying majesty and solemnity.

"Muddled Writing"

Between 2005 and 2006, Lim Tze Peng was in search of a breakthrough in his calligraphic style. Years of practice enabled him the mastery of deftness and dexterity over the brushstroke. As writing became more and more spontaneous after decades of practice, maintaining the forms to characters gradually decreases in emphasis or is discarded altogether. As a result, he accomplished something extraordinary and ground-breaking in the history of Chinese calligraphy –he abandoned the forms of the characters.

For thousands of years, no matter how free of restraints an artist was, even if the writing was conducted in the wildest and most cursive instances, one thing remained unchanged –the form of the character was preserved intact and distinguishable for people to read it as a text. Lim Tze Peng broke this barrier and in doing so, liberated the brushworks and emotions such that there are now no more restraints of any sort; new visual expressions emerged with even more possibilities for experimentation. As a result, the artist has effectively blurred the division between calligraphy and painting.

Calligraphy No. 1 is a defining work of this period. The strokes are evidently carried off with steadiness, fluidity and elegance. While it resembles a work of calligraphy, almost no existing characters can be deciphered. Interesting, the artwork still possesses all the aesthetic qualities of calligraphy.

Traditionally speaking, when arranging the different characters into a composition, balancing their differences in forms, densities and spaces may sometimes translate to a degree of loss in visual aesthetics. For example, the "muddled writing" in Figure 3.5

is so dense that traditional calligraphy would have been impossible. However, the “muddled writing” is capable of overcoming this technical dilemma because it needs not compromise beauty to adhere to the integrity of form.



Figure 3.5 *Calligraphy No.5*, 2008, Chinese ink and colour on rice paper, 137 x 71 cm

Some traditionalists were shocked by Lim Tze Peng’s radical style as it did not seem right that one could call a piece of artwork calligraphy if it did not contain decipherable words. This is precisely the reason why a breakthrough as such never quite happened in China –Chinese artists continue to be bound by revered centuries-old frameworks in their practices.

Once the shackles broke and one could stand outside of these limitations, a whole new dimension of possibilities inevitably opens up. Lim Tze Peng is able to achieve innovation in his calligraphic expressions because he has thrown himself into experimenting freely and relentless. For instance, he sometimes has a completed calligraphy turned 90 degrees only to rewrite on it again, hence putting forth new and unique effects in the process (Figure 3.7).



Figure 3.6 *Calligraphy No.1*



Figure 3.7 *Modern Calligraphy*, Undated, Chinese ink and colour on paper, 105 x 103cm. Collection of Dr. John Chia

This piece of calligraphic work is even more advanced than *Calligraphy No. 1*. The lines are dense, giving it a riveting presence.

Conquering the last unscaled peak and foraying into the unknown

At long last, Lim Tze Peng has come to achieve many an artist's dream –arriving at a new frontier in art. It was as if he had arrived at the summit of the last unscaled peak on earth and what lay beyond was a realm yet to be explored.

In recent years, Lim Tze Peng has produced numerous exciting calligraphic works with some carrying the bold, organic incorporations of colours. While he might not be a pioneer in this method, he has ventured further than most. His innovative compositions are a testament to the immense potential of calligraphy as a visual expression.

This new body of work is the culmination of years of extensive practice and with it Lim Tze Peng established a new milestone in the history of Chinese calligraphy and ink painting.

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