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Ancient Inspirations: Recent Works of Calligraphy by Yong Cheong Thye

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Ancient Inspirations

Recent Works of Calligraphy by Yong Cheong Thye

Born in Singapore in 1946, Yong Cheong Thye is an acclaimed artist who specialises in both traditional and contemporary Chinese calligraphy. Over the years, he had collected top prizes in nationwide competitions for Chinese calligraphy, and his works had been featured in exhibitions in Canada, China, Switzerland, France, Japan, Nepal and many other countries. Currently, he is also the official spokesperson for the Chinese Calligraphy Society of Singapore, the Vice-Chairman of the Federation of Art Societies, and the Vice-Chairman of the Shicheng Calligraphy & Seal Carving Society.

Yong's love affair with Chinese calligraphy began at an early age, although he was never quite a serious practitioner while growing up. He first came into contact with the art form in primary school, when lessons on Chinese calligraphy were part of the school curriculum. Chinese calligraphy also continued to exert an important influence in his formative years as he subsequently entered a secondary school headed by a principal who was a dynamic calligrapher.

Shortly after graduating from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in 1966, where he had spent years studying Western art, Yong finally went on to expand his profound interest in Chinese calligraphy under the Master Calligrapher, Mr. Tsue Ta Ti. It was also during this period that he developed an immense passion for the oracle bone script (甲骨文), which was one of his late teacher's favourite.

Having dedicated himself to the art form for over thirty years now, Yong's knowledge and mastery of Chinese calligraphy span across its varying forms and traditions. His ability to produce deft and elegant brushworks in different scripts – oracle bone, clerical, standard and cursive – is in itself a laudable feat by traditional standards. With this exhibition, the artist has achieved yet another milestone

through an interesting and groundbreaking series of calligraphy that bespeaks creativity, elegance and finesse.

For instance, many of the works feature an unconventional pairing of the ancient oracle bone script with the relatively modern cursive script. In this piece, two distinctly different scripts have been employed to reflect the same message, resulting in an intriguing blend of traditional ideograms with structural contours that juxtapose against the more fluid and sinewy strokes of the cursive characters.

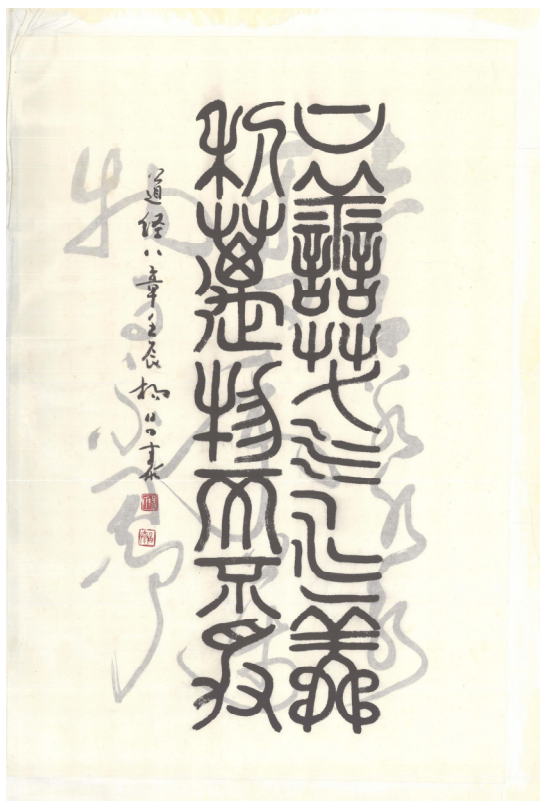


Fig. 1 Quote from Lao-zi. Yong Cheong Thye, 68 x 45cm

The oracle bone script (甲骨文) is one of the oldest forms of Chinese writing, and the earliest variant of Chinese calligraphy. Its use dates back to between 1500 to 1000 BCE. During this period, the writings were etched onto turtle shells and animal bones, which were subsequently used for divination by the royal court of the Shang Dynasty, giving rise to the name “oracle bones”. Often described as “pictographic”, the characters from the oracle bone script are thought to be stylised drawings of objects they had been devised to represent.

On the other hand, the cursive script, also referred to as the “grass script” (草书), is a relatively modern style of writing in Chinese calligraphy. The cursive script comprises a quick and fluid style and its official use can be traced back to the Han dynasty, around mid-200 AD.

By incorporating such contrasting sets of signifiers and aesthetic traditions in his works of calligraphy, what is supposedly a traditional art form has been injected with a touch of modern sophistry and contemporary flavour. Even the antique frames to the artworks were carefully handpicked by Yong to reflect a sense of ornate datedness. Although both the oracle bone script and the cursive script usually convey one and the same meaning in a piece, the characters from the respective scripts are highly stylised, and their marked differences in forms produce intriguing tensions that can leave one feeling both confused and mesmerised.

In some works, Yong also deliberately plays on the placement of the layout. For example, he would sometimes reduce one script to the backdrop by having the other script written over on the other side of the rice paper, allowing the two scripts to overlap or frame each other in a thought-provoking manner. In a piece like this, even the bold and creative layout of the writings assumes a fascinating entry point of its own. It is also noteworthy to mention that in addition to Chinese calligraphy, Yong is adept at producing seal carving designs and the stamps that signed off all his works are mostly products of the artist’s own craft.

Looking at the works in this exhibition, there can be little doubt that Chinese calligraphy, although ancient in roots and usually conventional in execution, is not always necessarily at odds with modern improvisations. Through his thoughtful treatment and innovation, Yong has shown that there is always room for new forms of expressions and interpretations to emerge, hence further enriching the complexity of this art form.