

UNITING THE REPRESENTATIONAL & THE SPONTANEOUS/LYRICAL/EXPRESSIVE A NEW WORLD OF WATER AND INK

Throughout the history Chinese brush painting, deeply inspired by nature, has upheld an artistic style with representational skills employing the right brush strokes, colors, and composition by means of learning from nature and from ancient masters. The ideal art should capture the essence, not just the appearance, of the subject depicted and invest it with a lively quality.

Since Song dynasty the schism between the Southern School and the Northern School signaled a new artistic awareness in favor of spontaneity and lyrical unification of art, poetry and calligraphy.

It was not until the Ming and Qing dynasties that the emphasis of the expression of the inner mindspace over the representational, as advocated by the School of Scholar-painters", became the preferred mode, hence the shift away from the realism that reached its climatic achievement in Tang and Song paintings.

As an artist from the 21st century, with inspirations from both Chinese and Western traditions, Dan-Fong Liang exemplifies an artist that has successfully re-established the importance of representational skills, while realizing the possibility of incorporating the spontaneous, lyrical ideal that reflects the profound intellectual cultivation from within, thus bridging the gap between the Northern and Southern Schools and reaching a happy union of the representational and the spontaneous.

Dan-Fong Liang has realized her goal to become an artist with lifelong devotion and innovations, practicing both Chinese and Western media. Commencing with learning from ancient masters and from life, she has embarked on training primarily in traditional technique, and matured to become a master full of originality. This

will be further explained in terms of her command of formal qualities, her study and transmission of Chinese brush painting through publications, and an overview into her works in this publication as revealing examples.

Chinese brush painting which has, over the years in institutions and universities, acquired a new name *sui mo hua*, literally meaning “water-and-ink painting”. Formally it signifies the skillful control of water and ink through the command of the brush in order to accomplish the desired effect.

Dan-Fong Liang has been versed with the art of calligraphy, particularly in her writing of the running script. As she is also a master in Western media, it is not surprising her command of the brush is fostered by solid experience from decades of practices in both Western and Chinese media.

Dan-Fong Liang is a master among masters in the control of water. The dry, wet, intense, or soft gradations conditioned by the amount of water contained, can greatly affect the brush strokes. Also being a well-known watercolorist, she can magically transform the water with ease and elegance.

While it is crucial to create as many gradations of ink tones as possible, with Dan-Fong Liang it is often magical to see how she tips the brush in a bit ink here and water there to create infinite shades of ink colors from the very dry, “burnt” tone to the lightest wash of grey.

In the 1980 publication in English, “A Study of Stroke in Chinese Brush Work (Happy Painting Studio Publication) Dan-Fong Liang explored key aspects of the brushstrokes, their value, shading, associated feelings, the grouping, weaving of the strokes, and the application. She clearly presents in-depth instructions according to the tradition on the use of water and ink in an organized manner.

Step by step she explained the brush strokes from their origin in calligraphy to artistic application in painting. These pith instructions resulted from years of artistic and teaching experience are not just theoretical, but applicable, helpful tips in art.

The ten chapters in her 1986 publication, “Instructions on Chinese Brush Painting” (Chung Hwa Correspondence School, Taiwan) further provides an overview of Chinese art history, various styles, introductions of the tools used in the studio, and detailed instructions on how to draw the four gentlemen up to landscape and figures. These instructions are designed to provide keys to Chinese painting to whoever could not learn from her in person, and have, ever since, promoted the transmission of Chinese brush painting to nearly every corner of the world.

Dan-Fong Liang’s works in this collection witness the magical touch of the master with full command of the afford-mentioned key aspects of Chinese brush paintings, and the seemingly effortless union of the representational and the lyrical. These works are mainly of two types: creation in the spirit of traditional subjects, and paintings from life —both reflect her distinct personal style and her ability to resort to or break through traditions, but not confined by it.

In terms of subjects the works are organized into six categories: 1. Figures, 2. Landscapes, 3. Four Gentlemen, Pines, and Maples, 4. Flowers, 5. Birds, Fish, and Animals, and 6. Fruits and Vegetables. They exhibit various styles ranging from the detailed, the outlined, the monotone, bold ink play to paintings with colors rich and elegant.

While most paintings in Figures are depictions of ancient figures from imagination, such as representations of Bodhidharma, the fisherman in the “Water of Canglang River”, and the “Warrior”, some are portraits of her family members. For example, “Playing the Qin” is a portrait of her father Ding-Ming Liang playing one of his favorite musical

instruments. "My Children", "Mother and Son" are portraits of her children and grandchildren. Just as her superb skills in watercolor and oil paintings, these portraits capture the figures in fresh, lively manner in succinct, minimalist brush strokes.

Although some landscapes are traditional in subjects, the compositions and meaning endowed are original. The untraditional, impelling "Snowy Night", "Bright Sun", and "Village" are what she experienced in travels, not unlike in the Chinese version of plein air expressed through the medium of water and ink. With "Four Gentlemen", again, Dan-Fong Liang creates original compositions made possible by observations from nature while rendering traditional subjects. The rest of the works that depict flowers, vegetables, fruits, birds, fish, and animals are all based on observations from life, demonstrating her command in different subjects and media.

It would also be illuminating to also pay attention to her inscriptions. Most of the time she puts down the date and signature with or without the name seal or mood seals. Sometimes she wrote a poem, or did long inscriptions. She varies the style according to her feeling and the composition, and inscribes mostly in running script, though rarely in standard or cursive script. Due to her solid training in calligraphy since childhood, her running script or cursive script are both refined and expressive. One can see the influence of Wang Xi-Zhi, the 4th century Chinese "Sage of Calligraphy", in her elegant style with an unique feeling evoking the tension of walking on a steep trail. I've examined her inscriptions and noticed she has already formed her own calligraphic style at a very young age, but has acquired the touches of the master over time.

I think it is important to point out that it is due to Dan-Fong Liang's ability to capture the lively spirits of the objects that she outshines the others. In her "Instructions on Chinese Brush Painting" she

emphasizes the importance of not only learning from ancient masters, but also studying from life. She has realized this ideal with more than four decades of travels since 1974, plein air studies, and drawing from life. She is capable of infusing the spirit of the modern into traditional subjects. Her commands of Western technique in drawing, watercolor, and oil painting also enrich rather than interfere her approach to Chinese painting.

The publication of this long-awaited book offers precious opportunities to savor/ relish her elegant masterworks to one's satisfaction. The moment has come to recognize her achievement particularly in Chinese painting that deserves genuine appreciation. The fact that she has taught classes in Chinese brush painting in colleges and universities, and overseas upon invitations of the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Overseas Compatriot Affairs Commissions, and published the aforementioned books on Chinese paintings in Chinese and in English testifies to her being a rare artist that explores Chinese brush painting both in theory and in practices.

Dan-Fong Liang is an artist accomplished in traditional Chinese brush painting as well as in Western media. She is capable of understanding the profound in the tradition, at the same time realize them in the experiential. She can be freely expressive without ever violating the fundamental. From age 13 to nearly 80, she has not stopped painting and exploring. She has journeyed far and deep, and turned the frontier into a new world vibrant with endless beauty and possibilities.

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February 10, 2012