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**EXHIBITION**

# Tracing the evolution of Chen Wen Hsi's works

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THERE'S a good chance you "own" a Chen Wen Hsi without realising it. Take a look at the \$50 note in your wallet: the pair of magenta-coloured gibbons scampering across the currency note were painted by the late artist, who is recognised as one of the founding fathers of modern art in Singapore.

The original painting of gibbons can be seen in an ongoing show titled *Convergences: Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition* at the Singapore Art Museum (SAM). But, of course, *Two Gibbons amidst Vines* (c. 1980s) would cost considerably more than your \$50 bill; a Chen of that size would easily fetch around \$20,000 to \$30,000 in the market, says SAM curator Low Sze Wee, who put together the centennial show.

From concept to opening, the show took two years; about a third of the 123 works on display are from SAM's collection, the rest loaned from institutional and private collectors. Together, the works represent over six decades of Chen's artmaking, and are valued at more than \$9 million.

Chen Wen Hsi (1906-1991), who was born in Shantou in Guangdong province, trained at the Shanghai Art Academy in the late 1920s, and came to Singapore in 1949. Once he settled here, he made a profound impact on Singapore's art scene as an artist who worked with the traditions of East and West; as a teacher at institutions such as the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (1950 to 1959) and of future Singaporean artists such as Thomas Yeo and Earl Lu; as a gallerist who ran two art galleries. Mr Low says: "Chen is one of the most signifi-

cant Singapore artists of the 20th century, who pioneered new ways of making art that was both modern and local."

The centennial show is hung thematically in four sections, but you discern a rough chronological progression as well, in how the artist's work evolved.

In the first section, *Tradition*, the influences of particular styles/artists from the history of Chinese painting can be seen — such as the sparse brushwork and asymmetric compositions of Bada Shanren in a work like *Birds on a Rock*. While in his squirrel series, we see how Chen took on board the style of an artist like Xugu but transformed and made it his own.

Gibbons, incidentally, were a favourite subject; 14 of them star in the largest work on show, a Chinese ink painting commissioned in 1977 that was hanging in the lobby of the Central Provident Fund building.

Though he started painting gibbons in China, it was in Singapore that he first saw — and owned — an actual gibbon.

"He had all kinds of animals from gibbons to squirrels," remembers Lam Pin Foo, a retired lawyer and collector of local art, who has 20 Chinese brush paintings by Chen, some handpicked by the artist whom he knew personally. Chen "really enjoyed showing us his miniature zoo which he kept in his backyard", he adds.

There is also a section devoted to Chen's works in the finger painting tradition, a minor part of the artist's oeuvre but "one which contributed to his fame", according to Mr Low.

Interestingly, 10 such paintings by Chen have been donated

by Vivien Goh to the Next Chapter community services, to raise money to help rehabilitate ex-prisoners. Arthur Phua, prison counsellor and pastor, says that Next Chapter is looking for buyers, preferably someone who will buy all the paintings together for about \$100,000.

In the exhibition's second section — *Life* — hangs *The Ferry*, an oil painting of a Balinese boatman. It is the exhibition's best representation of Chen's contribution to the so-called Nanyang School of painting.

This School — which in fact encompassed many different styles — came into prominence after a painting trip to Bali that Chen took with three fellow artists in 1952, in search of fresh inspiration; the results were presented in the seminal *Pictures of Bali* exhibition the following year.

*The Ferry*, part of that show, was acquired by SAM for \$360,000 at a Sotheby's auction last year, creating a new record for an oil work by Chen (his works usually sell for between \$10,000 and \$200,000). But if you are surprised that the Nanyang style is only a footnote in the current show, the curator explains that to Chen, it was not a defining aspect of his oeuvre.

Prepare to be surprised further by the third section, *Explorations*. In its way, it is the most disconcerting part of the show — the works are like a *rojak* or jumble of many different styles and media.

But this is an important representation of how Chen — like many South-east Asian artists of the time — responded to modernism in the West: not conceptually, but as a visual buffet from which they could pick and choose stylistic elements.



**Unique style:** *The Ferry* is the show's best representation of Chen's contribution to the so-called Nanyang School of painting

A "resolution" to our puzzlement awaits in the last section, aptly titled *Synthesis*. It features only Chen's later Chinese brush paintings; one wall is devoted to cranes, another to landscapes, and in them you see a progression from the objective to a more subjective interpretation.

Apparently the artist himself once remarked that he was no longer painting cranes from nature, but from his mind.

"It is his innovations in Chinese brush painting that earns Wen Hsi a place in art history," notes Mr Low. "There is growing international recognition of the contribution of artists who left China prior to 1949 and continued with their modernist art practices in places like Singapore from the 1950s onwards. Museums in

China are increasingly recognising the contributions of artists like Chen as important 20th century figures in recent discussions about modern Chinese art."

Chen brought the modern way of thinking and Western art — such as distortion from Cubism or the expressionistic colours of Fauvism — into brush painting. But beyond the experimentation, he synthesised these elements of East and West into a style of his own that is also quintessentially "Singaporean".

*Chen Wen Hsi Centennial Exhibition, Singapore Art Museum, till April 8, 2007; 10am to 7pm daily. Admission at \$5 and \$2.50 (concession). Extended hours and free admission on Fridays from 6 to 9pm.*