

KOH MUN HONG



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Koh Mun Hong (b. 1952) is a self-taught poet and artist versed in the art of Chinese calligraphy and ink painting.

Specialising in *gongbi* (工笔) style painting (Chinese ink) of nature such as lotus, birds, bamboo, Koh has received local and international acclaim for his intricate, deeply expressive and emotive works. In 2015 alone, Koh exhibited his works in Singapore, China, South Korea, Japan and Canada. These include a calligraphy exhibition as part of Xi'an Calligraphy College's 30th Anniversary in China and the 7th Asan International Painting and Calligraphy exhibition in South Korea.

A mentee of the late Pan Shou (Cultural Medallion recipient, 1986), Koh is often described as the successor to the late artist. Beyond mastering the brush, Koh stands out as a literati artist who pens his own, unique Nanyang-themed poetry. He also published a book entitled *Meng Xuan Yi Hui* 《梦轩艺荟》, featuring a collection of his paintings, calligraphies and poems at his second solo exhibition in 2008. Additionally, Koh's poem was featured in an anthology commemorating the 100th anniversary of Deng Xiaoping's birth in 2004.

Koh's contribution to the classical form is evident from his list of achievements. Since clinching the first prize in the Chinese Calligraphy Competition (1972) organised by the then Youth Association, which was also his first award for calligraphy, Koh went on to attain various accolades locally and internationally. His achievements include the 3rd Siaw-Tao Annual Distinguished Art Award (2007) awarded by Siaw-Tao Chinese Seal-Carving, Calligraphy and Painting Society in Singapore and the “本年度特选卓越书画家:艺术之光” (i.e. most excellent calligraphy artist of the year) award by Ngee Ann Cultural Centre in 2007. In 2008, Lianhe Zaobao honoured Koh as one of the Best 10 Local Artists of the Year.

A well-respected role model to younger artists, Koh is a dedicated educator who is passionate about grooming the next generation of calligraphy practitioners and instructors in Singapore. Besides exhibiting extensively, Koh continues to give lectures on Chinese calligraphy as well as classical Chinese poetry. In February 2016, he was a speaker at the National Gallery Singapore's Ink Master Series Lectures – “Ink Development during the Song and Yuan Periods”. ■

KOH MUN HONG: TRUE TO SELF

BY CHOW YIAN PING

To create a rich and phenomenal body of Chinese ink painting and calligraphy works in 21st century Singapore has required Koh Mun Hong to lead a life of a semi-recluse. Avoiding, for decades, frequent solo exhibitions that may bring about instant fame and quick monetary gain in a world that is increasingly plagued by the ills of materialism, he had his first solo exhibition only at the age of 46 and the last one was more than eight years ago. Being true to himself has enabled him to be true to his art.

Proficient in Chinese classics, poetry, calligraphy, painting and seal carving, Koh is one of the last Singaporean artists working in the tradition of the Chinese scholar-painters, and the only one who has never had formal art training and remains self-taught.

Koh's humble abode for the past twenty-six years in the eastern heartland of Singapore is named *Dwelling of Dreamy Utterances* (说梦轩). He has transcended conventional HDB-style living by spending much of his time surrounded by the arts and nature. As advocated by Ming dynasty scholar, painter, gardening master Wen Zhenheng in the treatise *Superfluous Things* (长物志) of 1637, the scholar-painter should live far from the crowd, be surrounded by plants, antiques, books, and away from worldly desires. Koh is also an accomplished gardening master himself. He maintains a flower garden at

Xiang Lian Temple (香莲寺), filled with over thirty pots of lotuses and lilies of various kinds, and other rare plants. He can be seen working in his garden every day, rain or shine.

It is no wonder that Koh's art exudes the fundamental Chinese philosophical belief of *tianren heyi* (天人合一) – being one with nature – which elevates the viewer of his art, from a mundane environment into the spiritual world. As we experience beauty through Koh's body of works, drifting into one of otherness from reality, our souls and spirits resonate with that of nature's timelessness.

In calligraphy, Koh is a master of the “running script” (行书 *xingshu*). With its font more easily recognisable than the “cursive script” (草书 *caoshu*), Koh feels this is a more relevant writing style for modern-day Singapore. He says in an interview with the author:

The running script is the most expressive in terms of form: how the dots and lines make up its structure. It is best able to represent the calligrapher's inner world of thoughts and feelings, and his understanding of aesthetics and beauty.

It was his secondary school Chinese-language teacher Chen Xing who first introduced Koh to brush and ink in 1966. Pioneer artists and calligraphers Chen Jen Hao and Pan Shou, who

were both his teachers and friends, greatly influenced his calligraphic style and approach. Koh also owes his understanding of the Chinese classics and grasp of the brush and ink technique to his 16-year stint from 1973 to 1989 as an administrative staff at the Bank of China. Recognising his unusual talents, the bank's management encouraged Koh to make good use of his time with the bank to also read, write and paint.

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To fully explore the extensive and profound history and art of Chinese calligraphy, Koh started his artistic journey by copying rubbings from inscriptions on ancient stelae and block-printed editions of works by ancient masters. For Koh, equally important is developing a good eye for high-quality works through the process of taking in the scripts by silent reading.

Having spent great effort to study the scripts of the two Wangs, namely Wang Xizhi and his son Wang Xianzhi (Eastern Jin dynasty), Chu Suiliang (Tang dynasty), Mi Fu (Song dynasty), Zhao Mengfu (Yuan dynasty) and Shen Yinmo (1883-1971), Koh developed



KOH MUN HONG (LEFT) WITH CHINESE ACADEMIC AND WRITER, QIAN ZHONGSHU, 1985
 Photo courtesy of Koh Mun Hong



引維 | GUIDING THE DUCKLINGS, 2013
 Photo courtesy of Koh Mun Hong

his personal style in running script, which is a grand synthesis of the masters' work, reflecting the sophistication and refinement of the modern scholar-painter. Koh's brushwork possesses fluidity in movement, yet is full and substantial. Each character is self-contained and, at the same time, expansive on its own: Taking into careful consideration passages that "open and close" (开合 *kaihe*); "rise and fall" (起伏 *qifu*); as well as expressing the composition's poetic and painterly flavor (画意 *huayi*). For Koh, this is very much like a Chinese landscape painting.

The physical gesture of wielding the brush and the marks it leaves on paper reveal much about the calligrapher, which Song dynasty calligrapher Huang Tingjian described as the "resonance" (韵 *yun*). Koh's resonance can be described as elegant, untrammelled (雅逸 *yayi*) and natural (自然 *ziran*) – a reflection of his ideals on art and life.

As a naturalist, it is not unusual that in painting, Koh veers towards the aesthetics of Song dynasty painting, which he considers to be the pinnacle of Chinese ink art. Koh says:

Nature's aura and beauty is profoundly depicted in Song painting. By the detailed style of *gongbi* (工笔) in the way of the Song masters, I can best reflect the inner thoughts and feelings of my painted subjects. *Gongbi* 'writes' a painting with fine brushstrokes and intricate but laborious applications of colours, to reveal the natural colours and fine textures of living things with lifelike vividness. When working on a *gongbi* painting, I am brought back to my childhood days, observing the world with childlike simplicity and joy.

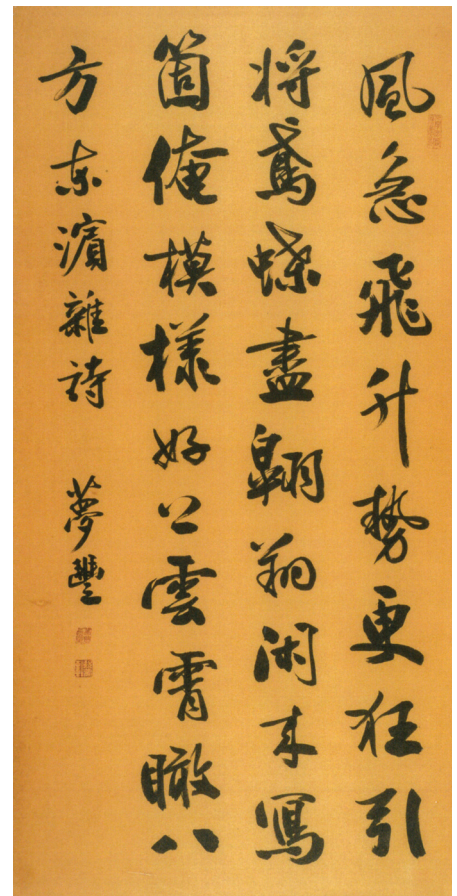
Koh is also proficient in freehand paintings that "sketch the idea" (写意 *xieyi*) and often freely integrates the two

styles of *gongbi* and *xieyi* in a single work. In fact, calligraphy, poetry and painting are often brought together, with poetic and pictorial imagery complemented by calligraphic lines and poem, to fully express the artist's mind and emotions. Although rendered in the style of Song paintings, the painted subjects, colours and composition of Koh's works are undoubtedly informed by day-to-day living in modern Singapore where Koh has spent most of his life.

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In *Egrets in the Lotus Pond* (Ink and colour on rice paper, 2014), one sees a pair of elegant egrets searching for food amongst lush leaves and flowers in a lotus pond. The softness and wetness of the lotus leaves, the fragility of the lotus flower, are all succinctly portrayed by juxtaposing the *gongbi* and *xieyi* styles and the masterful use of the "boneless" (没骨 *mogu*) painting technique. While the rich colours and details of the lotus plant take foreground in this work, the egrets stand out through their stark simplicity in colour and form. On closer survey of the painting, one reads the five-character Chinese quatrain (绝句 *jueju*) written in the poetry style made most popular during the Tang dynasty. It reminisces the coming and going of the birds, of beauty and of time. A further inscription to the side will inform the viewer that this painting was painted after taking a walk and encountering the scenery at the Ang Mo Kio-Bishan Park.

In fact, Koh's works often feature local fauna, flora and people. Frangipanis, bougainvillea, cats, mynahs, parrots, tropical fish, merry-makers at East Coast Park are some of his favourite subjects.



东滨杂诗 – 咏风筝 | POEMS FROM EAST COAST PARK – SONG OF THE KITE, 2014
Photo courtesy of Koh Mun Hong



白荷 | WHITE LOTUS, 2014
Photo courtesy of Koh Mun Hong

To capture the spirit and character of these subjects, Koh developed the habit of making sketches and drawings in pencil and pen of scenes around Singapore's heartland, parks and seaside. He has accumulated a large compilation of these since the 1970s, and they serve as rich references for his ink renditions. The final ink works, often portrayed in bright tropical colours, always exude that distinct resonance of a scholar-painter.

The clue to that aura lining Koh's works is in his way of life and his approach towards art, of allowing time for the artist to sink into the essence of his work and for the work to speak to him. To finish a 137cm by 70cm *gongbi* work, such as *Joy Under the Blue Sky* (2003), which depicts a white cockatoo perching on the branches of a white frangipani tree set against a brilliant sapphire blue background, Koh worked for more than three months, with a one-year break in between. He explained that the break was necessary because at that point in time, he had lacked the courage and peace of mind to complete the work. It is of no surprise then that it is never Koh's intent to sell or give the work away.

No matter the art form, Koh credits his late mother for initiating him into the world of art, always supporting and encouraging his interests and experiments in gardening, writing and drawing when he was young. In art as in life, Koh believes that every artist should walk his own path. He says:

Don't talk about connecting with the times, about becoming less Chinese, or about removing one element or another

About the writer:

Chow Yian Ping is a writer. She was art editor of *Lianhe Zaobao*, Singapore Press Holdings, and curator at the Singapore Art Museum.

¹ Chow Yian Ping, *The Dialogue of Art: Back to the Self* (Interview and Conversations with Koh Mun Hong and Low Kim Chit), in *ZBBZ Art*, 早报报志.艺术, SPH, June 2016.

² 虹光虽弱,聊以自照,悠游浊流,谁与同调

(from Chinese painting). All this is very short-sighted. Some people even say that Singapore painters should try to make their Chinese paintings less Chinese and should refrain from writing inscriptions. These are all naïve and narrow-minded opinions. When you do something very, very well, it does not matter if you do it in a traditional way or in a more modern fashion... The responsibility of the painter is to play to his strength.¹

Koh strongly articulates such beliefs and feelings through his art, using imageries of symbolism, style and brushworks, and further expanding them through calligraphic expressions and poems. In a 2007 *gongbi* circular fan painting of tropical neon tetra fish, Koh wrote this poem to reflect his thoughts:

*His glow may be feeble
Good only for lighting one's own path
Swimming leisurely in murky water
Who else will share his tune²*

Savouring the richness of Koh's oeuvre is to read into the timelessness of a contemporary Singapore artist's re-interpretation of the scholar-painter's art form. As an artist who integrates and synergises poetry, calligraphy, painting and seal carving into an artwork, Koh embodies the spirit of 'mixed media' or even 'multimedia' art in modern terms, but in a tradition that traces its roots from the Song dynasty. Koh's life and his art, is a Singaporean Chinese intellectual's most powerful statement of staying and remaining true to oneself in a westernised, profit-driven and always fast-changing society. ■



WORDS OF APPRECIATION

能获得“文化奖”这份特殊的荣誉,我非常感激我的推荐人,陈建坡先生,以及给予我肯定的艺术界同道、师长们和有关的工作人员。

我生性喜爱大自然。美景、花鸟、鱼虫、牲畜,都是我从小挚诚的伙伴。母亲更从旁引导,维护着我这种单纯的天性和兴趣。数十年来,花鸟陪伴我成长,是我画作的主要题材。师长、家人、朋友给我指导、扶持、协助。我今天得到的荣誉,也应当是他们合力耕耘的成绩。我谨致万分感激。

绘画、书法、诗、文是我毕生向往的事业。我将不懈地、执著地探索追求,并为创作更好的作品,继续努力。

I express my heartfelt gratitude to my nominator Tan Kian Por, mentors, fellow artists and peers who believed in my practice and supported me.

I thank the National Arts Council. Being awarded the Cultural Medallion is indeed a great honour.

I have always loved nature since young. As a child, I treasured the flora and fauna around me as if they were my playmates, so naturally I was always inspired to transform nature's beauty and glory into literature and art. For this, I am especially grateful to my mother because her love and guidance allowed me to pursue my artistic interest wholeheartedly. And to my family, mentors, peers and friends: for your unwavering support, this award also belongs to you!

With this award, I am committed to continue to strive towards greater heights in painting, calligraphy and poetry – my lifelong passions.