The Tao of an Artist: Master Watercolorist Finds His Own Way

Most artists express themselves better with pictures than with words. Add the difficulty of communication through a translator and it’s easy to understand why, when asked to explain his art, Chinese watercolorist Dai Chengyou picks up a slip of paper and a pen and starts drawing.

He begins with a circle, then divides it with an S-shaped curve. Half is shaded black; the other is left white. He outlines a white dot in the black half, and draws a black dot in the white half. This yin-yang symbol, Chengyou says, has been a symbol of the Taoist philosophy for more than 1,000 years.

“If I use the Taiji to describe my art, the white part represents Eastern art; the black represents Western art,” he explains. “In Chinese painting, the subject stands out against white paper. In European painting, the focus is on light and shading the area around the subject.” And whereas Chinese painting involves copying the masterworks of the past, European painting looks to the present moment for inspiration.

Both approaches were a part of Chengyou’s aesthetic education, and both have a place in his current style. An exhibition of his recent works, all models of Taoist harmony—between man and nature, between positive and negative space, between Impressionism and Realism, between East and West—opened in November in the fine arts gallery at Indiana University South Bend.

Chengyou has visited IUSB before, in 1990, and he’s back this semester sharing his watercolor technique with students there. Art professor Anthony Droege, in turn, has visited Chengyou’s home campus in China, Northeast Normal University. Over the years, the men have become good friends. “I can say that South Bend is my second hometown,” Chengyou says, smiling.

Droege reports that Chengyou enjoys a unique status in China. While most artists there continue to concentrate on the landscape and other natural subjects, Chengyou has built his reputation on images of people. “He’s known for his figure paintings—he’s considered one of the best.”

With mock pride, Chengyou displays another one of his quick sketches, drawn while watching the TV news. With just a few strokes, the artist had captured extraordinary likenesses of America’s two would-be presidents. “According to appearance, I’m for him,” the artist reveals, indicating the sketch of Al Gore with a chuckle. “But,” he adds, pointing to George W. Bush, “I do support his dad.”

Impressive little portraits like these, made of his classmates when Chengyou was still a teenager, convinced him that he should be an artist. “My parents disagreed with my interest,” he recalls. “They didn’t have much of a cultural background. But after I showed my talent in senior high school, my parents began to realize my ability and were proud of me.” Decades later, after major exhibitions across East Asia and in London, Chengyou still thinks of himself as a student.

“I am teaching Chinese painting here, and at the same time, this is my chance to see American painting, to visit museums. . . . It’s good for me to come here to learn,” he says. He also hopes to give viewers here some sense of the beauty of his homeland. Like many Chinese of his generation, Chengyou suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution. He was shipped off to a mine and labored there for years,
Rugman Joins the Faculty of the Kelley School of Business

In January 2001, Alan M. Rugman joined Indiana University’s Kelley School of Business as the first holder of the L. Leslie Waters Chair in International Business. The Waters Chair is named in honor of the Kelley School professor who was instrumental in helping to implement the school’s mission of internationalization following World War II.

Rugman, one of the world’s leading researchers in multinational business, comes to IU from Templeton College at the University of Oxford in England, where he served as the Thames Water Fellow in strategic management. A Fellow of the Academy of International Business and of the Royal Society of Arts, Rugman has been identified as one of the most frequently cited scholars in international business. His primary research focus in recent years has been in the area of global strategic management, while much of his earlier research centered on the theory of the multinational enterprise.

A prolific writer, he has published over 200 articles dealing with the economic, managerial, and strategic aspects of multinational enterprises and with trade and investment policy. He has authored 30 books, including The End of Globalization: Why Global Strategy Is a Myth and How to Profit from the Realities of Regional Markets, published this year in the United States by AMACOM, and is co-editor of Oxford Handbook of International Business, published this year by Oxford University Press.

He earned a B.A. degree in economics from Leeds University, a master of science degree in economic development from London University’s School of Oriental and African Studies, and a Ph.D. degree in economics from Simon Fraser University.

The Tao of an Artist continued from page 3

smuggling bits of coal in his pocket to use for drawing. Still, his love for China—its people, its natural riches, its legends and philosophy—reveals itself in every stroke of his brush.

Several of Chengyou’s landscapes portray one of his favorite sights, the majestic Yangtse River amid changing seasons, its cliffs dusted with snow or vibrant with spring leaves. Many other paintings have connections to Chinese literature or history, such as the beguiling Twelve Beauties in Jinling, based on a popular classic novel. “The only way to know China is to go to China and see it for yourself,” Chengyou admits.

“But if you can’t go to China, and one of the paintings makes you curious, you can ask me about it, and I will try to help you understand.”

“A lot of people like my paintings,” he adds, recalling his last local exhibition, from which several dozen works were sold. “Why?” The artist shrugs, then says, “The beautiful thing is a global language.”

—Julie York Coppens
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