



Shining Venice,
2013,
18 x 27 cm.

Chien Chung-Wei

The art of teaching watercolour

BORN IN TAIWAN IN 1968,
THIS ARTIST HAS GAINED A
SOLID REPUTATION AS A
TEACHER...WHO ISN'T AFRAID
TO USE TECHNOLOGY.

The Art of Watercolour: What do you like about watercolour?

Chien Chung-Wei: Watercolour has always been the best material for teaching students about colours and is used in elementary and middle schools because the brushes and paints are easy to carry. Also, in fine-art and art-related schools and colleges, watercolour has always been one of the core curriculum activities because of its rich and versatile expressive ability. From both professionals and amateurs alike, watercolour painting always seems energetic. During the 80s, under the influence of Photorealism, popular in the western world at that time, watercolour in Taiwan gradually became a 'serious' media and was no longer considered a leisure time pursuit.

What prompted you to start teaching?

Watercolour as a painting medium possesses a longer history than oil painting. Over the years however, it has gradually been neglected in fine art-related classes in colleges due to the growing demands for a more shocking means of expression in contemporary art. But on the other hand, as higher education prevailed, people became more cultivated with a more developed interest in culture and a better taste for art. Thus, watercolour became the best introductory media into the world of fine art. Today many watercolour societies, local governments and enterprises are holding on-site painting competitions and activities, with the result that watercolour has bloomed amongst amateur circles, despite being disfavoured by the academic world. And that's why over ten years ago, I decided to stop teaching at school and started my own classroom to spread what I jokingly call the 'People's Watercolour Movement'!

Please explain to us the basics of your teaching?

As is widely known, watercolour can be regarded as one of the hardest and most technically demanding painting media because controlling the flow of water and the drying speed in different parts of the same picture are very difficult and altering what has already been painted can be extremely hazardous. A painter may create a good watercolour that does not rely on the painter's mastery of those various techniques, yet beginners can be deeply frustrated by the characteristics (difficulties) of watercolour. I believe the frustration can be alleviated or avoided if there are experienced painters demonstrating some basic techniques and helping beginners to grasp the tips faster in order to have wonderful experiences painting with watercolour. However, during the past decades, watercolour teachers in Taiwan seldom demonstrated the full process of completing a watercolour work from start to finish. They just oversaw students' pictures either in the middle or at the end of painting, which I



Laying off the Shore of Venice. 2012. 27 x 37 cm

don't regard as an efficient teaching method. I entered painting class at my high school age and I enjoyed watching other skilled hands painting, but I never had teachers revising my works. That's why I chose full demonstrations as my main method of teaching after I graduated from university and started to teach.

You now have your own classrooms with screens...

At first I was telling my students to gather around me to watch my demonstration and then go back to their seats to practice. But as more students joined the class, there were always some who couldn't see my demonstration when standing behind others. This problem made me consider using high-tech facilities to improve the effectiveness of my teaching. I started to use a video camera and high definition screens. It offers so many more possibilities, including letting me play an earlier recorded demonstration and explaining more clearly the meaning of my movements, and it also makes it possible for all the students in the classroom to practice simultaneously with the teacher's demonstration. With these high-



Assisi, Italy. 2012. 27 x 37 cm.



"Only the basics can and should be taught. I don't believe that any education system can perfectly produce an art master. Teaching you how to use fishing tackle does not guarantee that you will catch big fish."

tech facilities, I can even zoom in for a super close-up of how I work with the brushes and the various stroke effects, so that the students can get a clearer and more detailed observation from their seat, and it is like the teacher is doing a one-on-one demonstration in person just beside them.

According to you what is the most difficult thing for your students to understand?

Many students think that they do not make good watercolour paintings because their technique is not good enough. But I don't think so. I think their biggest problem is in painting too many meaningless details! Lack of technique can be one of the reasons for failure, yet in fact the most essential problem is that one does not have a clear idea of what one wants to express in the picture. In other words, as long as you have a definite idea of how to compose the picture, the techniques will more likely follow; the clearer the idea you have about the priorities of each element/part in the picture, then the more likely you are to succeed in maximizing the aesthetic effects with the minimum amount of details. The hardest

lesson is to leave out what is unnecessary: this is true for students and experts alike. Know what you want, figure out the sequence and direction and concentrate on doing it and acknowledge every trace and value left by your every movement: this is watercolour as well as life.

You have won many prizes and awards. Do you think they are important for an artist's career?

Indeed, when I was young, I won first prizes in several watercolour competitions as well as art events sponsored by private companies. But actually I did not win many nationwide competitions. At the age of 29, I participated in a big competition with my watercolour painting 'An Ancient Tale' which I considered at the time as one of my best works. And the painting received an honourable mention. I remember that day standing in front of my work and vowing to myself that I would never sell this piece and never again take part in any other competitions! At that moment, I felt particularly proud. Unlike sports or chess, there are no definite judging criteria for fine art. And I have doubts about the results of some national and international competitions. For me, it is extremely difficult to judge which painter's work is better or worse when all those paintings are actually expressions of the different visions of different artists. However, when evaluating your own work, you know perfectly well in your mind if it's good or bad! Ultimate happiness for an artist usually comes from the absolute self-realisation. I often say this: "Face yourself honestly and ask yourself if you're meeting your highest standards." By asking themselves this artists will continue discovering, absorbing, and learning, which will then inspire their talent and capacity unflinchingly.

From what you're saying one could surmise that the best critic of a painting is the actual artist who painted it...

No matter how many academic degrees you have, how many prizes you've won and how much money people are prepared to spend on your paintings... it doesn't really prove anything. It's not that I'm against taking part in competitions and winning awards and prizes – in fact I very much encourage my students to do so – but what I oppose is the idea of straining yourself in order to reach the judges' tastes. The point is to find the true motivation and drive within yourself and face the most severe critic: yourself. An artist should always bear in mind that a piece of art can't touch other people's heart if it doesn't touch his heart first. That way, regardless of how many awards the painting has or has not reaped, it will bring pleasure to the artist on his quest for excellence.

How do you choose your subjects?

Actually I don't have a particular preference for any kind of subject – apart from absolutely-abstract and surrealistic subjects. Almost anything that can be found in our world and in nature can become a subject for my painting: still lifes, landscapes, portraits etc. Well, there is actually one prerequisite: the subject has to be 'fun'. Usually, the fun does not come from the content nor the subject itself, but rather from the contrast between light and shadows, cold and warm colours, as well as from the variation, transformation,

Three paintings to explain three different watercolour approaches

When I graduated from university, I researched and copied the techniques of some of the early 19th century watercolorists, such as William Henry Hunt, Myles Birket Foster, James Hardy II, etc. They used little water, delicate brushstrokes, transparent Van Dyke brown and Burnt Sienna washes and added opaque paints to create multiple glazes in the bright areas of the picture. This was different to the modern watercolour techniques I was familiar with: large puddles of water and multiple glazes with transparent paints. The exquisite skills of these artists made their watercolours look like classical oil paintings. At the age of 20, I was stunned! For the next ten years, I became really fascinated with these classical watercolour techniques comparable to oil paintings and I applied them to my own creations (such as 'Still Life'). Later on, in my watercolour classes, I added several opaque paints (acrylics) to my palette so that I could basically paint with the same method used in classical oil paintings: first use the transparent paints to create the dark area, then use the opaque paints to create multiple layers in the bright area and finally glaze the dark area (such as 'The Open-Air Café in San Gimignano'). Of course we can also apply the oil technique in modern oil painting (such as 'Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama'). I call this 'semi-transparent technique' or 'semi-oil-painting technique.' In fact, this technique is not very different from acrylic painting and the reason why I don't use acrylics is just that they hurt the painting brushes when I forget to wash the paints off. With this technique and solid drawing ability, you can make good watercolour works that look just like oil paintings.



and arrangement of shapes within the subject. My desire for creation is only triggered when I see a realistic subject giving an interesting 'shape'.

Would you consider yourself more of a tonal painter than a colourist?

Yes, I admit that I am more a tonal painter and draughtsman. I've always believed that it is the tonal values that create a picture's magical power. A painting can be a good one as long as the composition/arrangement of the tonal values strikes an equilibrium in the picture even without the aid of colours



The Open-Air Café in San Gimignano.
2012. 18 x 27 cm.



Still Life, 2000 51 x 36 cm



Historic Villages
of Shirakawa-go
and Gokayama.
2012. 18 x 27 cm.

— just like a beautiful girl does not need luxurious clothes to make her shine. But when, the other way around, if the colours lack support from the tonal values, they will be like a man without soul or like a zombie wearing gorgeous apparel. I usually analyse a picture with three main components, including black, grey, and white areas. Each of the three can be further divided into 2 to 3 different shades. Then I put warm and cold colours into these areas with different tonal values; the halftone area usually being the most colourful one (I sometimes like to call it 'the rainbow area'). In planning the composition of the picture, including tones and colours, one should always

The Green. 2012. 18 x 27 cm



PLEIN AIR OR IN THE STUDIO? HARDLY ANY DIFFERENCE!

I almost always paint in my studio. For me, painting on-site is more a leisure activity. There seems to be a growing recent trend in Chinese and Taiwanese painting circles suggesting that all the painters should throw away their cameras and walk outdoors to paint because it is the only correct and truly valuable path for successful art. Well, I personally think that is not necessarily true. For me both painting plein air and in the studio require solid drawing abilities and deep aesthetic feelings in order to keep the pictures from getting messy.

Based on twenty years plus experience painting and teaching, I'd say there isn't that much of a difference between on-site painting and painting from photographs, nor between personal painting and teaching. The ultimate goal is always the same: try to make a good painting. This really is a mental process of choosing and judging in order to refine and simplify the subject and then make it into a painting that will successfully communicate the beauty and the fun that the painter received from the subject.



The Rural Scenery. 2012. 18 x 27 cm.

pay attention to designing an 'asymmetrical balance' (to avoid concentrating similar elements in a certain area) so as to strengthen the completeness of the whole picture.

What are according to you the advantages and disadvantages of working from photographs?

The real problem for a painter is not whether he paints from photographs, but whether he relies on the photographs too much and ends up passively copying the image. The key issues for a painter should include, first, the pre-thinking: how to discover, gather and organise the images before he actually shoots them and ideas on how to enhance, simplify, and transform the images in the process of painting. Painting on-site and painting from photographs are the same in that they are both processes of catching the imagery information with the eye, processing the information in the brain, and then re-interpreting the information with painting media and techniques. This process should be active thinking instead of passive copying. Without thought and mature techniques, a painter may make awkward, dull, and messy pictures even if they paint on-site.

You have studied Western art. What was the greatest lesson you learnt from past masters?

I think we should actively learn from masterpieces. What I

often do in class is first introduce the works of a master in art history, then ask the students to imitate his masterpieces with me and then pick one realistic photograph and ask the students to interpret the subject with the master's style. For example, I can ask the students to 'interpret Venice (from a photograph) in the style of Edward Seago'. This is a very interesting practice to discover how a master translated his ideas into brushstrokes, colour, lights (and shadows), shapes, and composition. With this practice, painters will become more and more familiar with the paint medium and techniques and then naturally further seek for or discover their own interpretations. The learning curve depends on the ability to imitate cleverly, and creativity is inspired by quick associations. Skills can be learned by imitation, but the uniqueness of one's art only comes from one's experience of life. The real uniqueness of one's art can never be 'copied' because one's life can never be completely shared or understood by other people. In the field of art, we all inherit from those masters. If you are extremely talented, your creations and innovative ideas may also be passed on to later generations.

And who exactly are these painters you learned from?

J.M.W. Turner, Thomas Girtin, John Sell Cotman, Winslow Homer, and Edward Seago for example. Turner challenged the limits and possibilities of the 'beauty in form' during his

Impressions of Venice

This 'Venice' looks very realistic, but actually it wasn't technically difficult to paint: just key details added to correctly-organised shading layers; whether in big light areas or small dark areas, there are no more than 3 or 4 layers. The most difficult part is the arrangement, composition, and transformation in the picture at the very beginning (a part which I call the 'conception'), which is followed by the requirement of natural and abstract strokes created by the brushes.



1. I use a 2B pencil to draw the re-organised composition of the subject; I draw varied lines (light and heavy, slow and fast) to suggest different degrees of completeness for the watercolour areas and strokes in later steps.



2. First I lay down a light cold grey wash on the dark area of the bright sky and the house in the focal point. I also highlight the brightest areas of the wall.



3. I then work on the mid-tone areas with washes of warm greys in the dark areas of the wall in the foreground painted in with large strokes. Just before the painting is completely dry, I spatter heavy and thick paint into the darker parts in both the focal and surrounding areas.



4. On the two main basic colour patches – bright and dark – I build up the house and details in the focal area with multiple layers.



5. I continue layering with the same principle; I start from big light areas before moving on to the small dark areas, and then gradually add some dry brush details to complete the picture.

Impressions of Hua-Zhong Bridge

As opposed to the way I painted in watercolour more than ten years ago, I now no longer use delicate brushes and special techniques, but prefer daily-life subjects and concise composition. This picture represents the landscape that unfolds from my balcony: a true and simple subject. What grabbed my eye in this case was the pattern of shades in the composition, the abstraction and simplification of the tempo of the city, the crisscross lines in the dark clouds, the efficient arrangement of colour patches. . . This beauty and fun in extracting shapes and forms from natural subjects and re-creating them in a picture is my central idea for a painting. In my future journeys of 'watercolour exploration', I want to strive to come back to the original status of the 'simple watercolour'.



1. I draw smooth lines and shapes with a 2B pencil before painting the lightest tone. With a clean brush I wash out the clouds on the horizon just as the first layer is about to dry.



2. With a broad brush, I paint the dark clouds in the first layer, as well as the neutral light grey in the lower part of the river and the city. This grey acts as the underlying base colour.



3. Once the first layer is completely dry, I paint the second layer of the dark clouds while paying attention to the variation of the edges in the clouds. Then I paint simple clean colour blocks starting from the farthest building in the distance.



4. I then proceed to paint the buildings from far to near with multiple layers one on top of each other – just like I painted the sky and the clouds before – I set my mind to expressing the tempo in the up-and-down outline of the buildings. I then paint the base colour for the road and the bridge in the foreground.

5. Finally I add more details in the focal area. My main concern is not in representing the actual buildings, but more about expressing the impression of this riverbank city with beautiful abstract colour patches and lines.



"Skills can be learned by imitation, but the uniqueness of one's art only comes from one's experience of life."

whole life, which can be evidenced by the differences between the delicate and classical techniques at his young age and the majestic washes and wild brushwork after his middle age. In my mind, Turner is the Beethoven of watercolour. Girtin and Cotman (sometimes I just put them together and call them 'the G.C. style') made powerful light and dark patches with additional layers of small patches, which showed me how to maximise the power of a painting with a minimal amount of details and also made me realise that the multiple layering of colour patches is the real soul of watercolour. Homer's plain subjects and techniques proved to me that you don't really need high-level technique to accomplish world-class masterpieces. And Seago's works taught me about 'the noble and controlled elegance' in a picture.

What advice could you give to our readers keen on outdoor painting?

Besides the adverse weather conditions the painter has to face – heat and rain – the hardest part is of course trying to catch the fast-changing light, which often makes painters feel like they are running against time. Indeed, painting on-site allows one to more closely observe the delicate changes in nature and to feel the environment 'in the flesh', both of which can't be experienced with flat photographs. So yes, painting on-site is definitely a good way of training your eye to sharpen your sensitivity in painting. However, there can be some other challenging situations which draw a lot on a painter's professional experience and skills in order to discover the beauty in the environment and express it. These challenging situations include painting still lifes in a room with a chaotic light source or painting landscapes outdoors in severe weather conditions. For beginners, these situations are hard to deal with due to a lack of experience, let alone painting in these situations with watercolour, a medium which

is highly demanding from a technical point of view, if the painter wants to avoid messy pictures. Thus, before stepping outside to paint outdoors, why don't we first take photographs as reference material and focus on the practice of changes in tone and colour, the composition, the creation of light-shadow effects, the simplification and interpretation of forms, and the sequences of completing a picture? This will make you learn much more efficiently. When we paint outdoors, we do not have enough time to draw the details carefully. But this actually trains our eye to be sharper and to search for forms faster, as it forces us to depict the scene with simplified expression, thus providing the best chance to practice that final and hardest stage in watercolour painting: 'knowing when to stop.'

And how do you know yourself when a painting is finished?

The answer is simple: when I reach a complete richness and a satisfactory 'shape' in a picture with a minimum amount of strokes, then that's the moment I should stop. However, it is really difficult in actual practice for both students and professional painters. Watercolour is like playing chess: you can't take back what you have done. Usually it is already too late when you realise that you may have overpainted a picture. Let us analyse the time for completing one watercolour work and the completeness of the picture in terms of percentage: during the first stage one should accomplish 70% of the picture with 30% of the total time with bold strokes and strong rhythms and then, in the second stage, use the following 70% of your time to embellish the 20% details. You'll be asking: what about the other 10% to complete the picture? Well the final 10% is to remind yourself 'not to overdo it,' which is actually the most important and also the hardest 10%.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF PAPER

Watercolour is a painting technique that relies a lot on the paper. Whether the painting succeeds or not actually mainly depends on the paper used. What I usually do is to buy samples of all the available imported brands and try each of them in order to find the best effect. Over ten years ago, I even experimented with watercolour on print-making paper, which was surprisingly good. Now if I am painting with modern watercolour techniques, I use Arches (rough) paper from France, which is good at absorbing water, controlling paint and having responsive pigments. This is also the most popular watercolour paper among Taiwanese watercolorists. I use the 185 g for class, and

300 g for personal creations. If I am painting in a more traditional way – meaning less water and more delicate brushwork – I use Fontenay instead because it is smoother. As for opaque watercolour, you can easily enjoy it on any thick paper as long as it is not too rough!

MY PALETTE

I teach my students to try mixing colours with as few kinds of paints as possible, so in class we only use 11 Cotman pigments from Winsor Newton: Cadmium Yellow, Alizarin Crimson, Cerulean Blue, Intense Blue, Ivory Black, Cobalt Blue, Ultramarine, Burnt Sienna, Sap Green, Cadmium Orange, Van Dyke Brown. As for my personal creations, I use many more paints than in

class and I also use Holbein paints from Japan. Otherwise for opaque watercolour painting, I just add red, yellow and blue acrylic paints into the palette mentioned above.

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