

Flying Colours — The Art of Kwan Wai-nung

Scene 1:

The master painter Kwan Wai-nung was burning the midnight oil hurrying up to finish a commissioned work: the December painting for next year's calendar. The calendar girl that Kwan was painting came to life and had a chat with him. Through the dialogue, Kwan's artistic tradition and how calendar girl painting came to prominence were explained. Covered also were the original uses of lithographic printing and how it evolved through the times.

Scene 1

Time: A late night in the 1920s

Location: Painting studio

Characters: Kwan Wai-nung, gorgeous lady

Kwan Wai-nung: Crap, I'm gonna burn the midnight oil again to get this painting done by tomorrow! I know exactly what it should look like: the face of my wife, the mouth of Mei-ha, sporting the pose of my daughter-in-law, and the eyes... What beautiful eyes, but of whom? I gotta breathe life into the figure by painting these lively eyes.

Gorgeous lady: You really can't recall?

Kwan Wai-nung: Oh dear, how come you can speak?

Gorgeous lady: Mr Kwan, you've been painting me for many months, insisting to "breathe life". How could I not come to life?

Kwan Wai-nung: Seriously?

Gorgeous lady: Why did you paint me with slender eyes. Aren't the big round eyes of those Western girls more pretty?

Kwan Wai-nung: Chinese ladies are most gorgeous with slender eyes. That said, though you look Chinese, you're actually a mix.

Gorgeous lady: I'm half Western?

Kwan Wai-nung: Indeed. Despite me being a student of the Chinese master painter Ju Lian, my dad, my grandpa..., who are all painters; they all learned their trades from Western painters. I combined the overall artistic style of Chinese paintings with Western realist painting techniques, so you got the best of both worlds.

Gorgeous lady: Have you not come across an ideal woman for modeling before?

Kwan Wai-nung: The ideal woman doesn't exist in real life.

Gorgeous lady: Why not?

Kwan Wai-nung: It takes some serious craftsmanship to produce quality advertisement prints that could do justice to my creations. A great deal of posters these days, for perfumes, telephones, pianos, even over-the-counter drugs, feature gorgeous ladies like yourself. It's just the fashionable thing to do. The ad series for "Two Girls Florida Water", and my masterpiece "Filial Lady Breastfeeds Her Mother-in-Law" are prime examples of these hugely popular ad posters.

Gorgeous lady: Your painting style has been imitated by many. How come you're honoured as the undisputed master of the art?

Kwan Wai-nung: I have great market sense. Plus, I run my own printing company. Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press was founded in 1915 when I quit my job at *South China Morning Post*. Inspired by the *Dianshizhai Pictorial* in Shanghai, famous for its full-size illustrations, I knew printed pictures would take the world by storm. Lithographic printing was first introduced into China during the 1830s. The earliest prints were literature books and cheat sheets for public exams. Nowadays, a lot more stuff gets printed: other than books, there are illustrated newspapers, posters, etc. Chromolithographic posters demand skilled hands to print: say for colour separation are meticulously done, by hand, in a specific order.

Gorgeous lady: Oh so you profit from women!

Kwan Wai-nung: (giggle) Not entirely...

Gorgeous lady: So you really couldn't tell where my eyes came from?

Kwan Wai-nung: Beats me!

Scene 2:

In modern day, graphics designer Simon was reading a book about the calendar posters in the 1920s–30s. Through his monologue, Simon explained how lithographic printing evolved into offset printing, and lamented how the newer technology of offset printing is lackluster.

Scene 2

Time: A late night in 2020

Location: Studio of painter Simon

Character: Simon

(Music from vinyl player.)

Simon: Crap, I'm gonna burn the midnight oil again to get this movie poster done by tomorrow! None of the dozen prints looks right. I've worked on this image in the exact style of Kwan Wai-nung's calendar-girl ads, down to minute details. It looks perfect on my computer screen, yet when I print it out, it just lacks that... substantial feel. Offset printing is supposed to be an upgrade from classic lithographic printing, but the outputs carry none of the warmth of prints executed by hand.

Gorgeous lady: (sigh)

Simon: Where did that woman's sigh come from? I've played this vinyl a thousand times over and never noticed that before. They say the more you listen to a vinyl, the more nuances you'd discover. I guess classic litho printing is like vinyls, the warmth they carry can never be replaced by advanced technologies.

(Sound of gorgeous lady humming song.)

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