

Chao Shao-an (1905-1998) and Yang Shanshen (1913-2004) were two masters of the Lingnan School of Painting, each attaining high achievement in his artistic career. They were also good friends who respected each other's talents. Being rarely seen, their joint paintings on paper and porcelain are lesser known and mainly found in private collections. Now with the generous support of Professor Chao's family and the Managers of Yuet Tung China Works, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum is presenting these works for public viewing for the first time. Spanning the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, these works tell the story of the two venerable artists' friendship, their artistic creations and the relationship between the Lingnan School and the *Guangcai* (Canton enamel) ceramic industry in Hong Kong.

### Evidence of Artistic Exchange

In ancient China, scholars gathered not only to socialise but also to share their literary and artistic accomplishments. They would write poems and prose, paint or do calligraphy. It was on occasions like these that many joint works in painting came about. They could be done by groups (Figure 1) or pairs of artists that agree on a subject, and whatever they might be, as long as each artist could deliver his forte, the finished work would be a fine demonstration of the collaborators' tacit understanding and comparable artistic skills.



(Figure 1) Joint painting by more than 10 artists from To-days Chinese Art Association

Artists of the Lingnan School have always been close. Teachers and students, and often fellow artists, would make joint paintings as an expression of their common artistic lineage. One such example was the close relationship between Gao Qifeng (1889-1933) and his students. Gao taught in his Tianfeng Studio in Guangzhou in the 1920s, and many of his students became accomplished artists in their own right. After Gao's death, these students held joint exhibitions of their works every year to commemorate their teacher.

Another impressive example was the joint exhibition of four artists of the second generation of the Lingnan School – Guan Shanyue (1912-2000), Chao Shao-an, Li Xiongcai (1910-2001) and Yang Shanshen – in the 1980s. The four had been working separately in Hong Kong or in Guangzhou for thirty years until they found a chance to meet up. At a gathering in Chao's studio, an idea came up that they should create some joint paintings to celebrate their reunion. As transport was not efficient in those days, they relied on the help of Mr Yang Qi, Chief Secretary of the Xinhua News Agency (Hong Kong Office) to circulate the unfinished works among the four artists. They finally completed approximately one hundred works which were exhibited in the University Museum and Art Gallery of the University of Hong Kong in 1983. The corpus of work is a fine demonstration of the artistic exchanges among the painters which went on to become a channel to consolidate the artistic style of the Lingnan School.

### Close Friendship and Brotherhood



(Figure 2) Interview of the artists in Rediffusion Television Hong Kong in 1969

were the two in Xinchang and Taishan, Guangdong, in 1945. Also in the same year, they formed the Today Painting Association with Gao Jianfu (1879-1951), Chen Shuren (1884-1948), Guan Shanyue and Li Gemin (1882-1978) in Guangzhou. In 1946, Chao and Yang held a joint exhibition at the St. Francis Hotel in Hong Kong. The following year, they displayed their paintings of roses in the *Zhongguo Jindai Shubua Hui* (Chinese Contemporary Painting and Calligraphy Showcase). In 1969, they appeared on an interview at Rediffusion Television Hong Kong to talk about their art (Figure 2). In 1983, they took part in the joint

Chao Shao-an and Yang Shanshen had known each other since the 1940s. From the 1950s to 1970s, they maintained a close friendship when they were both at the peak of their creative energy. They often held joint exhibitions, and early

examples



(Figure3) Catalogue of the joint exhibition *Chinese Painting: Works Painted in Co-operation by Four Masters of the Lingnan School: Zhao Shaoang, Li Xiongcai, Guan Shanyue and Yang Shanshen*

exhibition, 'Chinese Painting: Works Painted in Co-operation by Four Masters of the Lingnan School: Zhao Shaoang, Li Xiongcai, Guan Shanyue and Yang Shanshen', at the Fung Ping Shan Museum of the University of Hong Kong (Figure 3). These records stand testimony to the close partnership and continuous artistic exchange between Chao and Yang throughout their career.

Yang often visited Chao in his Lingnan Art Studio on Prince Edward Road to discuss matters of art or to spend leisure time together. Chao would invite Yang to add to his work, or let Yang begin a painting and he would add to it. They loved to play mah-jong in their leisure time, with regular participants to make up the four-in-a-game including Chen Jinghong, Zhang Shiu Shek, He Jingyong and Tso Wing-shui. Such was the background of companionship for the joint paintings of Chao and Yang.

Chao had the idea of developing painting on porcelain—this actually was first begun by the founders of the Lingnan School, Gao Jianfu and Gao Qifeng. The two had produced paintings on porcelain ware for the *Guangdong Bowu Shanghui* (Art Object Traders' Association of Guangdong) in an attempt to find a new medium for ink painting, and also to preserve the works by kiln firing. Chao had written a letter to Yang inviting him to paint on some porcelain dishes and exhibit them. Yang did some painting on porcelain when he stayed in Guangzhou, but exhibiting the works did not materialise. This letter, published in the *Anthology of Letters Collected in the Chunfeng Caotang*, also shows how close the two artists were:

*'... I would always hold you in high regard and assist you in any way I can, especially when it would benefit art education. I am sure you would think the same... Do come to my studio, not just for the Qingming festival, and you can stay at my place (we are like brothers, so don't stand on ceremony). We can do paintings on porcelain dishes. Say if each of us can paint fifty, and jointly we paint ten more, they can all be completed in ten days' time. An exhibition on painted dishes would be the first ever in Hong Kong. The response will be good, and it does not take too much time. It will be a pioneering act and a very good contribution to the porcelain industry of China. But please have some works ready as reference in order to show them the best. Please do not tell anyone about this. The trip to Taishan can wait until autumn or later. It depends on your*

*tell anyone about this. The trip to Taisban can wait until autumn or later. It depends on your decision. All expenses [while you are] in Guangdong will be on me of course.*<sup>1</sup>

Chao's invitation to Yang to visit his Lingnan Art Studio to paint on porcelain dishes describes their close friendship as "we are like brothers" and promises that "all expenses" would be on him. He had also said that while he may not be able to help other artists of the Lingnan School, where Yang was concerned, he was always ready to chip in a part. It was definitely a very close, almost sibling-like relationship between them.

### Close Partners with Tacit Understanding

Mutual understanding between the two artists played a very important role in the creation of their joint paintings. The viewers can understand the way Chao and Yang worked by reading the inscriptions. For example, in the inscription for *Apples and White Ginger Lily* (Figure 4), Chao writes:

*I stayed in Chengdu in Sichuan for a year. There were many kinds of flowers and plants in the garden; in particular, I loved to draw the abundant apples. That was over ten years ago, and recently, when I flipped through my sketchbook, I picked one for painting. It so happened that Shanshen was visiting, so I invited him to add the white ginger lily.*

They did not have any plans or any pre-set subjects for the joint paintings. It was just that, when one of them was struck with an inspiration, he would invite the other to join in. The invited artist had to look at what was already painted and develop his ideas from there.

The subjects of these works mainly featured flowers, birds and insects. Yang was known to plant flowers in order to draw them. Similarly, Chao studied the plants closely and painted each with its distinctive characteristics. Their joint works, therefore, combined their strengths to produce interesting results. There are joint works that feature classical subjects, too, such as the pine, bamboo and plum. Others are paintings of animals and plants commonly seen in Hong Kong, for example *Plantain Tree and Mantis, Pomegranates and Daylily, Rose and Evergreen, Vegetables, Taro and Vine, Cat and Butterfly* (Figure 5) and *Crab and Prawn* (Figure 6).

1. Letter in Chinese, published in Tang Wai Hung (ed.), *Anthology of Letters Collected in the Chunfeng Caotang*. Hong Kong: Chunfeng Caotang, 1999, pp. 115-117.

**Apples and White Ginger Lily**

**Chao Shao-an and Yang Shanshen**

1954

Ink and colour on paper

120 x 57.5 cm

Private Collection



Figure 4

## Cat and Butterfly

Chao Shao-an and Yang Shanshen

1954

Ink and colour on paper

120 x 28.5 cm

Private Collection



Figure 5

## Crab and Prawn

Chao Shao-an and Yang Shanshen

1954

Ink and colour on paper

120.5 x 29 cm

Private Collection



Figure 6

The ink and brush styles of these works display complementary qualities, often contrasting boldness with suppleness, and strength with subtlety. These become the main features of their joint works. Their techniques included the use of wash for atmospheric effect (Figure 7), the use of white powder for tonal gradation (Figure 8) and the typical ink and line techniques employed by the two artists. These elements blended together in a harmonious fashion.

### **Mallard Duck in Pond with Bamboo Fence**

**Chao Shao-an and Yang Shanshen**

1954

Ink and colour on paper

120 x 29 cm

Private Collection



Figure 7



Yang is well known for his excellent line contours, as seen in his depictions of flowers and plants. The contours of the flower stems are executed with deft control of weight, with continuous lines at places so thin that they seem to break but not quite, and thicken and wane with a life of their own. The mixed use of wet and dry brush techniques in painting plantain, pine and tree trunks is vivid and lively. Chao's bird subjects are usually depicted as lifelike and alert, whether perching on branches or in flight.

### Rose and Bird

**Chao Shao-an and Yang Shanshen**

1954

Ink and colour on paper

118.5 x 28.5 cm

Private Collection



Figure 8

In *Mynah and Persimmon*, the body of the bird is represented with a few quick strokes of the brush, with an assuredness that can only be the result of long years of close observation and practice. This exquisite control of the brush is most evident in his depiction of flowers. In *Coconut and Vine*, the hard, round shell of the coconut and its husk, with the two leaves sprouting from the top are executed with precision and fluid control. By its side, Yang's delicate outlines of the vines and translucent petals make an interesting contrast. In *White Ginger Lily and Gladiolus* (Figure 9), Yang depicts the white ginger lily using the *shuanggou* (outline) method, while Chao paints the red gladiolus using colour ink only and no outlines – the latter known as the *mogu* (boneless method) in Chinese painting. This strong juxtaposition of colour and texture highlights the character of each artist and, at the same time, adds visual interest to one work.

### **White Ginger Lily and Gladiolus**

**Chao Shao-an and Yang Shanshen**

1954

Ink and colour on paper

66.5 x 30 cm

Private Collection



Figure 9

On the pictorial composition of the joint paintings, both masters had some important points to make. Yang taught his students that:

*'It is best to let the other artist begin the work. Then you can just add in a few strokes on the side. For example, if the first artist paints a waterfall, you can add in some pine branches among the rocks. If he paints an old pine tree, you can add some fresh green climbing vines. The idea is to make the whole work a seamless entity, and not some incongruous or superfluous additions.'*<sup>2</sup>

Chao believed that artists should paint the subjects they like and do best. If the joint painting is a landscape, then one can make complementary additions depending on the subject matter, such as rocks, birds, flowers or plants, or simply choose to paint what one excels most.<sup>3</sup>

Chao and Yang did not have fixed rules as to who would paint first, and would only follow their heart and inspiration. When by chance one came upon a highly satisfying work, he would invite the other to fill in to enhance it for more interesting results. One example is *Bamboo Shoot and Leaves* (Figure 10), on which Chao writes:

*'Year of Jiawu (1954), early autumn. I woke early to paint for fun, and did a young bamboo shoot that I found pleasing. Yang just arrived at my studio, so I invited him to add in the bamboo.'*

In fact, the one that paints last actually has the hardest task, because he had to unify all the elements done by the previous artists. While respecting the characteristics of each person, he had to connect them up to form the whole. He was the one to decide on the final composition and structure, and his input determined the artistic level of the final work. Since both Chao and Yang were very experienced and on a similar artistic level, it did not matter who painted first, the other could always add to and enhance the work significantly.

2. Chen Qinfeng, *The Artistic World of Yang Shaoshen*, Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 2012, p. 86.

3. Interview of the artists in the programme 'Good Morning Hong Kong' of Television Broadcasts Limited on 19 March 1983.

**Bamboo Shoot and Leaves**  
**Chao Shao-an and Yang Shanshen**

1954

Ink and colour on paper

57 x 60 cm

Private Collection



Figure 10

Yang spoke about the spirit or attitude of making joint paintings: '*Collaboration is working together, and you do not dominate others.*'<sup>4</sup> It is important to maintain a modest attitude in creating a team spirit. One should be just as happy to take up a supporting as much as a major role. Chao also noted that '*Joint works are very interesting because they consist of different personalities and ways of thinking.*' Artists making joint paintings want to relate and have a dialogue, aiming to complement and enhance each other's talents. This actually comes from a person's accommodating spirit and wisdom, and whether he is able to work with others in harmony and avoid self-centredness. Instead of placing one's subject as the central focus, one must leave ample space for the others to express themselves.

### Interest in Porcelain Painting

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From 1908 to 1911, the last years of the Qing dynasty, the founders of the Lingnan School, Gao Jianfu and Gao Qifeng, established the Art Object Traders' Association in Guangzhou in an area south of the Pearl River. Their apparent aim was to 'promote Chinese ceramic production for the salvation of the country' and study and produce porcelain ware with painted decoration (enamelled ware)<sup>5</sup> to sell. Under this cover, they made gunpowder in the kiln factory and raised money for the revolutionary activities led by Sun Yat-sen and the *Tongmenghui*, his Alliance for Democracy.

Typical Canton enamel ware, popularly known as *Guangcai*, includes rich and glamorous decorations. The Lingnan artists who produced paintings on porcelain injected a fresh painterly style into the products, since they transferred their eclectic, East-West style of working on paper directly onto the porcelain. This style was derived directly from the Lingnan School of painting which included both Western and Chinese elements, as well as some elements of Japanese styles. It won the praise of the contemporaries and these products were exported. However, very few examples survived in Mainland museums.

4. Chen Qinfeng, *The Artistic World of Yang Shanshen*. Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 2012, p. 83 and p. 85.

5. *Guangcai* is the popular term for enameled and gilded porcelain produced in Guangzhou. The biscuits were imported from Jingdezhen while painted decoration were hand painted and kiln-fired a second time. These were the main type of Chinese export wares for over three hundred years, and highly sought after in the West.

**Dish with Mantises Design in *Fencai* Enamels**

**Painted by Gao Jianfu**

*Circa 1909*

Mark of “*Guangdong Bowu Shanghui Zhi*”

Collection of Hong Kong Museum of Art



Figure 11

On display is a work by Gao Jianfu, *Dish with Mantises Design in Fencai Enamels* (Figure 11), which bears the mark of the Art Object Traders' Association of Guangdong. The other, a vase painted with peonies in *fencai* enamels (Figure 12), has no mark, but was probably a work that Gao created in the same period.<sup>6</sup>

### Vase with Peony Design in *Fencai* Enamels

*Circa* 1909

Collection of

Hong Kong Museum of Art



Figure 12

6. Kao Mayching, 'Gao Jianfu and Modern Chinese Ceramic Industry' published in Wong Wingyin, Wendy (ed.), *Footsteps of the Master: In Commemoration of the 120th Birthday of Gao Jianfu*, (Hong Kong: Far East Culture & Arts Exchange Centre, 2000), pp. 26-35.

Apart from the two early works of painted porcelain described above, the rest of the porcelain wares on display in this exhibition were painted by Chao and Yang in the Yuet Tung China Works in Hong Kong. Some of the works were presented as gifts to the manager of the Works, Tso Wing-shui, while others were kept by the artists. The Yuet Tung China Works was founded in Guangzhou by Tso Lu-song, father of Tso Wing-shui, in the early Republican period (turn of the 20th century). The white porcelain bodies were imported from Jiangxi Province and hand-painted in Guangzhou for sale to the affluent locals and for export. Threatened by political instability, Tso Lu-song moved to Hong Kong in 1928 with his team of skilled decorators and established the first ceramic factory on Kak Hang Tsun Road in Kowloon City. After relocating a number of times during the Sino-Japanese War, the factory finally moved to Kowloon Bay Industrial Centre, its current address. In the 1960s and 1970s, many workshops producing ceramics mushroomed in Hong Kong due to the high demand. The 1980s and 1990s saw the height of the industry, when royalty and large families from overseas came to Hong Kong to order tableware with their names or emblems.

Tso Wing-shui, the second generation manager of the Works, originally worked in the rice trade in Guangzhou prior to 1954. He was a generous man and organised gatherings for a cultured circle, making friends with artists who later became very famous. When he came to Hong Kong to attend to the business of the Yuet Tung China Works, he was frequently in communication with C. K. Tang's Department Store in Singapore; this led to his making friends with artists there and the start of his collection of their art, many being presents to him.

Chao and Yang made their acquaintance with Tso during this period, and it was at this time that the Yuet Tung factory had to be relocated, on the slope of Tai Wo Ping on Lung Cheung Road in Shum Shui Po. The two artists would bring their students there to paint on porcelain. Tso said that he reserved 12-inch porcelain dishes and rectangular plaques imported from Japan for them to paint, rather than the more commonly used porcelain from Jiangxi Province. These white Japanese porcelain wares of the 1960s and 1970s were produced in Nagoya, and the white ware carried a greyish tinge. After firing, the porcelain became very hard and of such a fine texture that it would clink when tapped. Tso Wing-shui's son, Tso Chi-hung, succeeded him as the third generation manager. The latter recalls seeing Chao painting on porcelain at the Works:



*'Chao tested a few times, and he understood that the glossy surface of the porcelain is non-absorbent, and that the colour enamels with certain water content would flow on the surface of the dish. On mastering the characteristics of the colour enamels, he was soon painting on the dishes. He used a large brush with black to outline the branches, and the 'water and powder infusion technique' to make gradations, using a goat-hair brush saturated with water to achieve effects of wash in the blank areas, and a fine wolf-hair brush to paint fine details such as flowers (roses), magpie, beetle, praying mantis, cicada, lychee and pomegranate in rich colours. When the painting was completed, he usually signed his name in ink, and drew in the seal mark using red pigment. Students and friends who came with him would urge him to do a painting for them and inscribe their names on each of the works. Chao would keep some good ones for himself, and each time he would give one or two to my father as a souvenir.'*<sup>7</sup>

Exhibits *The Scent of Peony* (Figure 13), *Pomegranate* (Figure 14), *Mantis and Cicada in Autumn* are examples of works that Chao gave to Tso Wing-shui and his wife as souvenirs.

## **The Scent of Peony**

**Painted by Chao Shao-an**

Not dated

Dish, enamels on porcelain

Diam 31.2cm

Collection of

Hong Kong Heritage Museum



Figure 13

7. Tso Chi Hung, 'A Concise History of Enamelled Wares in Hong Kong', published in Guangdong Folk Arts Museum, *A Century of Change - Guangcai wares since the 19th century from Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao* (Guangzhou: Lingnan Meishu Chubanshe, 2008), pp. 36-37.

## Pomegranate

Painted by Chao Shao-an

1970

Dish, enamels on porcelain

Diam 31.2cm ; H 2.8cm

Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum



Figure 14

'When Yang came to paint for the first time, he was not accustomed to the runniness of the pigments on the porcelain. After several attempts, he came to understand the method. First, he painted a bamboo leaf in red, and then added a black beetle. It took only a few brushstrokes, but it had a natural appeal. Then, there were a number of plaques and round dishes which were joint works of the two masters. Yang would usually depict the branches and flowers in outlines, while Chao would add the insects and inscriptions. These rare works are mostly in private collections. Currently two works are displayed in the Hong Kong Heritage Museum, inside the Chao Shao-an Gallery, and these are replicas of two works in 1962. The originals are in the Yuet Tung China Works'.<sup>8</sup>

Examples of joint works of Chao and Yang include *Insect in Moonlight* (Figure 15), *Cicada and Bamboo* and *Bamboo and Insect*, while *Red Bamboo* is painted by Yang and inscribed by Chao. In addition, Yang made gifts of his painted porcelain dishes to Chao Shao-an and his wife, including *Prawn, Two Goldfishes* (Figure 16) and *Fish*. These works have been kept in the Chao family collection all these years, a testament to their deep friendship.

## **Insect in Moonlight**

**Painted by Chao Shao-an and Yang Shanshen**

Not dated

Dish, enamels on porcelain

Diam 31.2cm ; H 3.5cm

Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum

8. Tso Chi Hung, 'A Concise History of Enamelled Wares in Hong Kong', published in Guangdong Folk Arts Museum, *A Century of Change - Guangcai wares since the 19th century from Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao* (Guangzhou: Lingnan Meishu Chubanshe, 2008), p. 37.



Figure 15

## Two Goldfishes

Painted by Yang Shanshen

1963

Dish, enamels on porcelain

Diam 30.8cm ; H 3.4cm

Private Collection



Figure 16

Mr Tso Chi-hung further described the activities of Chao and Yang thus:

*'Professor Chao came to paint on porcelain every two to three years, very often together with Yang. Master Yang also visited every two years. He would walk up the hill, bringing his students and practicing his painting on porcelain. Yang usually gave all his works to students and friends, and hardly kept any for himself. His works in his later artistic period included goldfishes, flowers and calligraphy written in small characters. His students' favourite was a rooster in white feathers in the 1980s. His painting made use of the negative space of the dish as the fluffy feathers of the rooster. With a few strokes of red for the comb, black for the feet, round eyes and the pointed beak, the white rooster comes alive. Sadly, there were no photographs to record these works, and it's all in my memory. The majority of Yang's works were simple and concise compositions but very effective.'*<sup>9</sup> (Figure 17-19)



(Figure 17) Chao Shao-an painting at Yuet Tung China Works in October, 1985



(Figure 18) Yang Shanshen painting at the present Yuet Tung China Works in 2003



(Figure 19) Tso Wing-shui visiting Yang Shanshen's studio in 1990s. (Images of Figure 17-19 provided by Tso Chi-hung of Yuet Tung China Works)

9. Tso Chi Hung, 'A Concise History of Enamelled Wares in Hong Kong', published in Guangdong Folk Arts Museum, *A Century of Change - Guangcai wares since the 19th century from Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao* (Guangzhou: Lingnan Meishu Chubanshe, 2008), p. 37.

*Rooster* (Figure 20) is one of the souvenirs that Yang gave to Chao; it is depicted with a red comb, white feathers and a black tail. It is an example of those swift and concise compositions that Tso described as very effective. Other porcelain works include *Dragonflies in the Grass* (Figure 21) and *The Court Lady*, which are also evidence of the superb command of line used for various subjects.

From a technical perspective, painting on porcelain is very different from painting on paper. The white porcelain ground, whether dishes or brush holders, are three-dimensional with some degree of curvature. More importantly, they offer a glossy surface which does not absorb water as Chinese *xuan* paper does. This makes it imperative that the painter adjust the weight of the brushstrokes and control the amount of water when painting on porcelain. The colour pigments used consist of minerals, silica (glass) and copper ground down to powder form and then mixed with water. The proportion of each is determined by a specific formula. In painting on paper, the colour pigments are mainly derived from plants. There is also a difference in the application of the colours. In painting on a porcelain surface, the colours cannot overlap. The thickness of pigment matters greatly: if it is applied too thinly, it will peel off after firing; and if it is applied too thickly, it will crackle when fired.

## Rooster

Painted by Yang Shanshen

Not dated

Dish, enamels on porcelain

Diam 30.5cm ; H 3.4cm

Private Collection



Figure 20

These works were entirely different in subject and in style from the usual *Guangcai* Canton enamel ware produced by the Works. Those traditional products employed rich colours and gilding and were densely packed with decorative designs to give the sense of glamorous beauty. They incorporated subjects from historical episodes and popular customs. The decorative motifs were often densely packed, such as *A Hundred Butterflies around a Flower*, *Dragon and Phoenix* and the *All Birds Design*. In contrast, the porcelain wares painted by Chao and Yang were pure works of artistic expression, with subjects such as birds, flowers, animals, other creatures and historical figures. The style was similar to ink paintings on paper; being sparse and spacious, they were created for artistic appreciation rather than any functional purpose.

### **Dragonflies in the Grass**

**Painted by Yang Shanshen**

Not dated

Fan-shaped plaque, enamels on porcelain

L 26cm ; W 45.6cm ; H 2.5cm

Collection of Hong Kong Heritage Museum



Figure 21







