

CHEN WEN HSI'S HERONS

AVANT-GARDE ARTIST

BY HIRANMAYII AWLI MOHANAN



Hérons
Ink on paper 65 x 68 cm
SOLD RM 61,600
KLAS Art Auction 1 March, 2020

Known for his avant-garde Chinese-style paintings, Chen Wen Hsi was born in 1906 in Guangdong, China. He was a highly regarded first-generation artist, who was at the forefront of the Chinese revolutionary movement in Singapore during the 1950's. Chen was among a group of five prominent artists that founded the Nanyang style, a landmark in the art history of Southeast Asia. The artist was also a highly esteemed art educator who played a significant role in developing the art community in Singapore.

Heavily influenced by traditional Chinese paintings and early Cubist works of Pablo Picasso and Paul Klee, Chen created his own repertoire and identity, which later became his trademark. In the span of 1923 to 1992, Chen had partaken in 38 one-man exhibitions within Singapore and internationally, including countries such as China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong.

In 1926, the artist moved to Shanghai to enrol in the Shanghai College of Fine Arts. Due to growing dissatisfaction with the quality of education at the college, Chen along with a few others transferred

to Xinhua College of Art where he studied under the tutelage of renowned artists such as Pan Tianshou. It was also at Xinhua that he met his fellow peers, Chen Hen Hao, Chen Chong Swee and Liu Kang who all later became Singapore's Nanyang pioneer artists and art educationists.

In 1929, Chen graduated from Xinhua College of Art and returned to his hometown, Baigong. For approximately a decade, Chen taught art to students in primary and secondary schools in both Shantou and Jieyang, China. It was also

in 1929, when Chen went to Swatow at the age of 21 and displayed his works for exhibitions in Shanghai (1931 and 1933) and Guangzhou (1932 and 1936). It was not until 1937 that he was acknowledged for his talent and received praises from Chinese painter, Xu Beihong, at the second Chinese National Art Exhibition in Nanjing. He was even elected as one of China's contemporary 10 greatest artists by an English art magazine in that same year.

Seeking a new adventure and fortune, the artist planned a three-month trip to Nanyang. Then, in 1948, together with his paintings, Chen journeyed from China to Cholon, Vietnam via an oil tanker, to start what became a tour of exhibitions across Asia — Hong Kong (1949), Bangkok-Kuala Lumpur (1949), and Bangkok-Singapore (1950). Chen arrived in Singapore in 1950 without any intention of staying. However, the expiry of his visa and with the coaxing of fellow artist Liu Kang, and then Commissioner-General Malcolm MacDonald, the artist stayed. At the invitation of its then principal Cheng Anlun, Chen started teaching at the Chinese High School in Singapore, where he remained as a teacher until 1968. Learning of Chen's growing name and talent, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA)'s then principal Lim Hak Tai, invited the artist to teach at its hallowed grounds. He taught NAFA until 1959.

Clearly influenced by Cubism and Fauvism, Chen produced various masterful renditions of the heron — paintings that encapsulate the artist's fascination with the form and figuration of this particular bird. This favourite subject of his was deeply inspired by the tropical scenery of Singapore, which was perhaps the main reason for him moving there in 1948. With the large array of birds in Southeast Asia, Chen found a profound interest in the heron and had featured this bird in many of his paintings. The heron holds a special meaning in Chinese culture as it resembles the word 'path' in spoken Mandarin. The underlying meaning of the heron paintings could be interpreted as an ever flowing and opportune path.

Using sharp and angular brushstrokes, Chen created bold, elongated bird-like figures, which were then simplified into abstract shapes and patterns. In some of the artist's works, the beaks and bodies overlap one another, suggesting dynamism and movements in the depicted scene. Chen then paired them with carefully selected shades of colours to create an illusion of depth, as the darker colours naturally assume the background, while the limelight is shed on the white-hued herons. Chen loved leaving a thin white space between each heron to intentionally highlight the interplay of light and shadows, a key aspect that evokes a certain mood and time to his paintings.

Chen's works were truly variegated, melding the different elements of Western styles of art and traditional Chinese painting techniques with a Southeast Asian subject matter. The exploration of space is a definite quality that Chen imposed upon his viewers through his oeuvre which produced very unique pieces. His ability to create three-dimensional forms on a two-dimensional plane illustrates his proficiency in this style of painting.



Hérons
Watercolour on paper 43 x 29 cm
SOLD RM 29,680
KLAS Art Auction 1 February, 2019

ARTWORK REFERENCES:

- 1. Sotheby's Breathless — Southeast Asian Art**
Chen Wen Hsi
Hérons
Estimate: 80,000 - 180,000 HKD
Sold: 214,200 HKD
- 2. Sotheby's Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art, 1 April 2019, Hong Kong**
Chen Wen Hsi
Hérons
Estimate: 160,000 - 250,000 HKD
Sold: 250,000 HKD
- 3. Christie's 20th Century & Contemporary Art, 26 May 2019, Hong Kong**
Chen Wen Hsi
Hérons in the Reed
Estimate: 150,000 - 250,000 HKD
Sold: 275,000 HKD