

*Chinese art using the medium of oil,
not Chinese painting done in oil*

From Fresco to Oil

Zhou paints in oil, without sketching, without modeling and without outlining, and completes each work in one session, usually outdoors painting life in nature.

He started painting first year in elementary school, received his Masters at the Central Academy of Art's School of Fresco Painting, where he was mentored by Professor Du Dakai of Chinghua University of Art. He began life as an artist with a thorough training in fresco-style painting in colour, and prolific works produced, in the traditional Dunhuang Zhongcai technique, using layering of masking colours on delineated objects.

Then he started to feel the limitation of both this technique and the method of expression of Chinese traditional painting. In 1996, he started to paint in oil, immersing himself for 10 years evolving his Zhongcai Oil technique, producing hundreds of paintings, in a journey all his own.

The training in fresco-style painting makes him both aware of what the elegant flowing lines, rich colour and composition, and transcendence of time and space this medium convey as essence to Chinese painting. But he was unhappy about the nature of this style as basically rendering colour to black and grey expression on a white medium, portraying forms only in two dimensions.

He needed the bright, unadulterated saturation of colour oil could bring to his vivid expression of life in nature, the unadorned beauty with rhyme and rhythm, in the pursuit of his passion for a "glorious musical movement in colour". On the other hand, the realism and form delineation of traditional western oil painting does not reflect the ethereal and suggestive nature of his view on nature and his expression of it, in the spirit of Chinese painting.

Zhou Changxin

The journey ended in 1996 when he emerged from his isolation with his Zhongcai Oil style and technique fully evolved, and with his huge collection of works to show for it. The suggestions of form in these works reveal themselves as subtle to bold lines, using oil tools in Chinese ink brushstrokes. The wholes are complete compositions, the details in flowing broad strokes, defying form. Each of these compositions finished in one unbroken session, preserving the integrity of his excitement and imagination of the moment, a fleeting moment in time, in the field, when he conceived his vision.

“I cannot reproduce any of the work I have done, and they defy reproduction by anyone else. My aesthetic sense is my own. I have imbued the spirit of Chinese calligraphy, poetry, folk art and music, wood-block, fresco, even Thangka, in each stroke, and the uninterrupted free flow of the work as a whole. This to me is Chinese art, using the medium of oil, not Chinese painting done in oil. There is no key-light, no obvious perspective or lack of perspective, yet the colours depict details in bright, solid, lively highlights, with the tensile force and density which painting in oil allows me. My brushstrokes form bold to subtle lines without deliberately delineating objects. That’s why I don’t sketch. I put oil on canvass only after rendering in my mind the composition in detail, sometime on the spot, sometimes taking days; but once I have that, the work flows through non-stop.”

In the depth of winter of 2005, Zhou sat at an outcrop at the convergence basin of the Yellow River where the thundering falls plunge perilously past him. This time he made oil sketches. For 3 days he made 16 of them. Back in his studio he stared at those sketches for days. Then one day in mid-morning he picked up his brush, and started to work on a 3 by 8 metre canvas, and continued for 6 hours until he finished, completely worn out.

This work, named “Chinese Soul”, was auctioned for US\$1.4 million the next year.

Zhongcai painting

A tradition of painting in colour dating back to the fresco-painting in Dunhuang, the tempera based technique, which is finely delineated, with colour applied in successive layers. The Chinese phrase Zhongcai could be interpreted as either layered colour or heavy colour, portraying both the technique of applying paint and the contrast between fresco painting and the delicate nature of ink-brush colouring. The delineation is a constraint on the free-flowing of line and Zhocai painting

Exhibitions

An exhibition of Zhou's work was held during the Beijing Olympics as a designated Olympics key event by The Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

Zhou held his first outside exhibition in Hong Kong in 2007, showing 270 works.



Right after that he prepared his Taiwan exhibition by clocking nearly 10,000 km around that island in a little over 100 days, and finished 114 original works for the show, 5 of those 1.5 by 3 metre canvasses.

He wants to continue to do this, one country every six months, around the world.

On the evolution of oil painting

*I'm following on the path
of evolution of 6 art-
ists, each a landmark of
innovation in the progress
of oil painting, redefin-
ing the point, line and
plane of expression:*

*1. Paul Cezanne:
Post-Impressionism
on the essential geomet-
ric shapes of elements
of objects, or polygons*

*2. Georges-Pierre Seurat:
Neo-Impressionism
on the primary points
of colour, or pixels*

*3. Claude Monet:
Impressionism
on the changing of
colour with light*

*4. Pablo Picasso:
Cubism
on multiple viewpoint
of depiction of objects*

*5. Henri Rousseau:
Naïve Art
on the use of patterns
and unrefined colour*

*6. Wassily Kandinsky:
Abstract Art
on the perception
of point and line to
plane of paintings*

*Zhou's contribution is
the creation of lines
without delineation.*

On traditional Chinese painting

*With all the ethereal suggestive
qualities and inherent roman-
ticism, traditional Chinese
painting is not an expression
of real life, but emulation of
traditional vision, and without
unique suggestions of feelings
and passion. The ink brush
cannot be as free-flowing, and
cannot apply layers of paint;
the resulting two-dimensional
surface does not come alive
with its own character, mak-
ing it eminently reproducible.*