

Understanding and Appreciating the Art of Stephen Lowe

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IT IS AN HONOUR to describe the art of Stephen Lowe (1938–1975) for readers of *Arts of Asia*. I have admired his work for decades despite never having met him. Viewing his paintings, however, one can get the distinct feeling of knowing the artist personally. Stephen Lowe's painting style belongs to the renowned Lingnan School, an early 20th century movement which revolutionised Chinese painting. By synthesising and harmonising motifs and techniques from past and present, as well as from foreign sources (the West and Japan), it became one of China's most distinctive and influential schools of painting. The origins of Lingnan painting can be traced to pioneering Guangdong painters, Ju Chao (1811–1865) and Ju Lian (1828–1904), cousins from Geshan Village in Panyu, who practised the “boneless” application of colour washes used by noted Qing painter Yun Shouping (1633–1690). The pair altered this approach by introducing new subject matter and painting techniques.

Challenged by political and cultural changes during the Republican era in the early 20th century, three of the most prominent followers of Ju Lian and Ju Chao—Gao Jianfu (1879–1951), Gao Qifeng (1889–1933) and Chen Shuren (1884–1940)—embarked on further reforms in Chinese painting. Exploring concepts and techniques beyond traditional boundaries, the three studied in Japan and were influenced by the realism and bright colours prevalent in Japanese painting at the time. Returning to China, they developed a new Guangdong style of painting known as “Lingnan”, characterised by naturalism and realism. Lingnan literally means “South of the Ridges”, a region south of the Five Ridges in Guangdong. The trio, known as “The Three Masters of Lingnan”, quickly leapt to the forefront of art circles in southern China, as they struggled to preserve cultural continuity in their art while searching for creative expressions to reflect China's identity as an emerging nation. Their contribution to modern Chinese painting came through fusion of Western light, shadow and colour with classical Chinese painting styles.

The second generation of Lingnan artists was led by four important painting masters:

Guan Shanyue (1912–2000), Li Xiongcai (1910–2001), Yang Shanshen (1913–2004) and Zhao Shao'ang (1905–1998). Their breakthrough, in both subject matter and technique, culminated in the Lingnan School emerging as a major movement in modern Chinese art, incorporating appealing style and easily comprehensible images. They perpetuated the Lingnan philosophy of “balancing Chinese and foreign, and blending ancient and modern”.

Stephen Lowe was privileged to have Professor Zhao Shao'ang as his mentor. Zhao was once hailed by leading Chinese artist Xu Beihong (1885–1953) as the “Foremost Person (Artist) in China”. Under Zhao, Stephen studied fundamental Lingnan painting style at the Lingnan School of Art in Hong Kong and zealously copied his teacher's works of art, as set by stringent Chinese tradition. Stephen was also highly conscious of the need for an artist to develop and express his own personality. With a keen eye for detail, Stephen's works reflected Zhao's techniques, with new perspectives added through originality and imagination. Well trained in the open-minded philosophy of the Lingnan School, he lived up to its tenet of “taking nature as teacher and relying on one's own intelligence”. Moreover, he took heed of the school's aim to seek “spirituality” in appearance.

Stephen's paintings incorporated the “one stroke” concept of Chinese art theory—a cornerstone of Chinese aesthetics whereby the painter begins with a solitary brushstroke and, totally immersed in the process, creates a painting without any break in the flow of ideas and feelings until the brushstroke is finished. That single movement is the essence of Chinese painting: the “qi”, or “life force”, an artist aspires to capture and express, conveying vitality, sensitivity and contemplation. Power generated by this technique was harnessed by Stephen, who freely transmitted it to the tip of his brush.

Stephen reached extremely high standards of artistic proficiency in a relatively short time and was correspondingly prolific. This is clearly demonstrated by examples of his work in *Stephen Lowe—A Bridge Between Cultures* (recently published by Stephen Lowe



Stephen Lowe with his teacher
Zhao Shao'ang, 1969



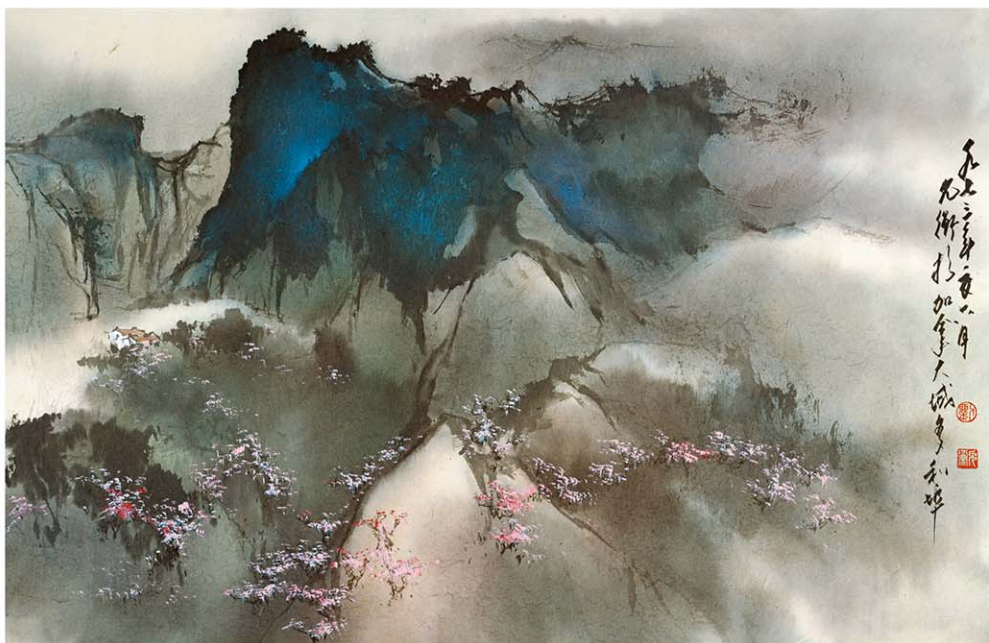
Kingfisher—Symbol of Wealth and
Nobility, 1963, 91 × 29 cm



Birds Greet Arrival of Spring, 1969, 95 × 184 cm



White Lotus and Water Spiders, 1972, 60 × 88 cm



Apricot Blossoms Honour Beloved Physician, 1973, 59 × 98 cm



East Wind Blows Ten Thousand Strands, 1971, 108 × 62 cm

Art Gallery), representing countless others in homes and galleries around the world. Stephen used strong supple brushstrokes in his painting and a variety of colour washes to create works with lifelike tone and atmosphere, showing great subtlety and richness of expression. By carefully observing and balancing light and shade, he created visual harmonies, with nature playing its part in a vibrant, rhythmic ensemble. His compositions are fresh, consistent and comply with the dictates of space. He transformed what he saw into personal emotion. His works, full of vitality and charm, combine realistic techniques, such as perspective and poignantly contrasted colours. His work is exuberant, visually engaging and must be contemplated to be fully experienced. Each masterful stroke shows diligence and creativity, using the traditional principles of “dry brush” and “broken ink”, harmonised with the imported technique of infusing water and pigment for the intended effect. Frequently, he resorted to the established Chinese concept of leaving out background to convey “emptiness” and “spirituality”.

Stephen achieved excellence in his landscapes, figures, flora and fauna. All are rendered as if lifted directly from reality and placed on the painting surface. His work, painted from sundry viewpoints with accuracy, reflects simplicity and quietude.



Tree Peony—Queen of all Flowers, 1974, 90 × 60 cm



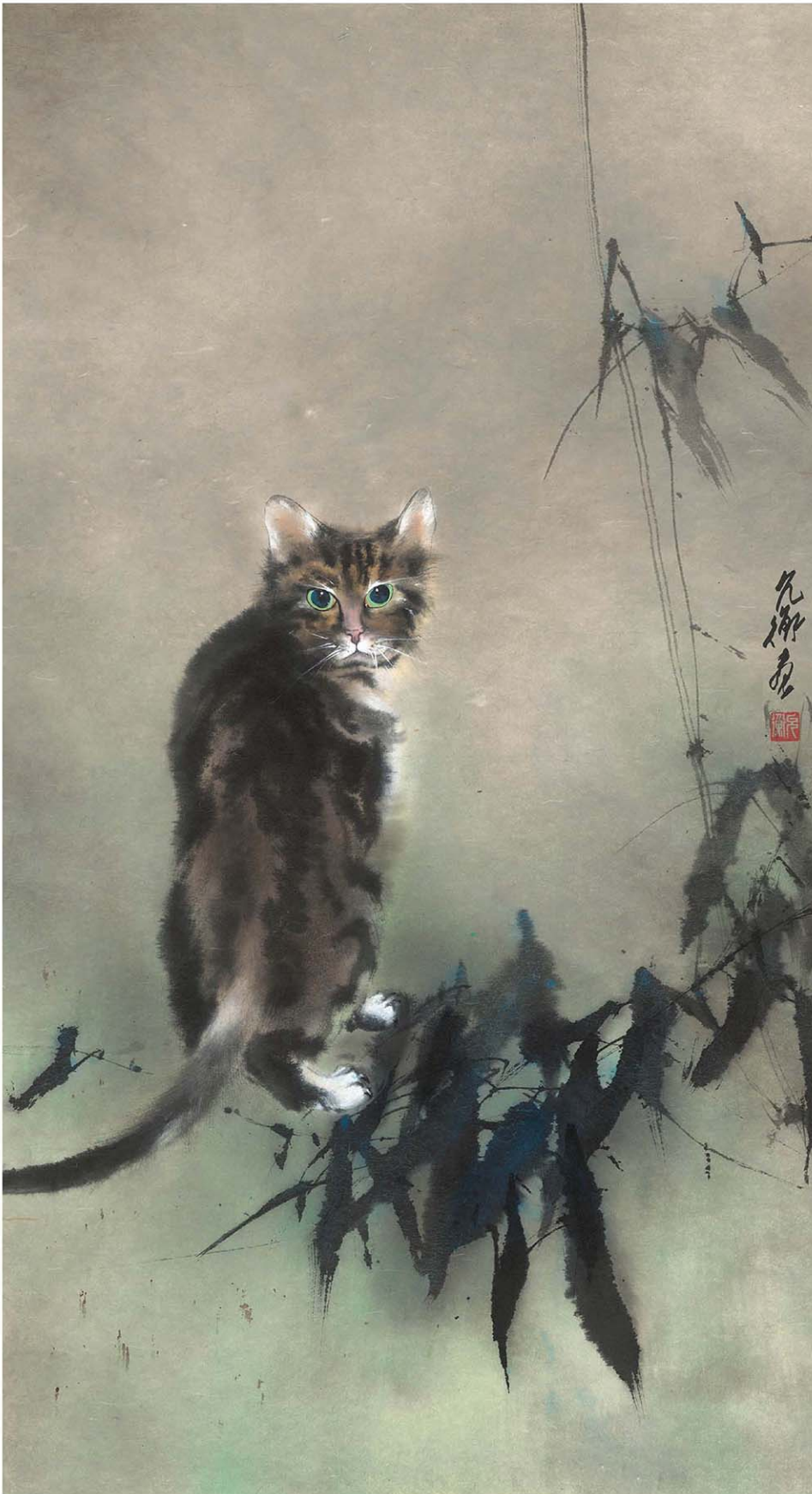
Cliffs of the Yangtze Gorge, 1974, 82 × 59 cm

The paintings in *Stephen Lowe—A Bridge Between Cultures* are distinctively strong with elements of brilliant colour, showing he was a master of the “boneless” technique. The flowing, self-confident brushstrokes seem utterly spontaneous in paintings that affirm life and freedom.

Landscape, foremost in Chinese painting, is paramount in Stephen’s subjects. His mountains are portrayed through contours, implying definite shape and jagged beauty. Grandeur is well expressed in panoramas distinguished by a milder palette and realistic depiction. Full of life and movement, they convey a sense of tremendous scale and monumentality through the inclusion of meticulously rendered minute figures and buildings. His works are the refinement of beauty he sought to realise rather than copy, thus showing its inner poetic reality. By reducing the proportions of man, he showed the environment’s vastness, and with sparing use of outline achieved astonishing effects of dimension and distance. He attained a sense of depth using graduated



Snow Transforms Mountain and Village, 1974, 56 × 77 cm



Surprise, 1975, 97 × 54 cm



My Prayer (Last work of Stephen Lowe), 1975, 94 × 29 cm

washes resulting in the fading out of distant mountains to give an amorphous effect. This spatial recession is achieved without compositional fragmentation. Perfect balance is accomplished with the strength and placement of Stephen's fluid calligraphy and seals. These final inscriptions, ranging from a simple signature to the recounting of legends,

are as much an art as the painting itself. Overall, his work evokes a sentiment of tranquility, peace and harmony.

As a young yet brilliant artist, one can only imagine what further status and recognition he would have reached had his life not been cut short at the age of just thirty-seven.

Barry Till, Curator of Asian Art at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria since 1981, received a MA in Far Eastern Studies from the University of Saskatchewan. From 1976–1980, he studied at the University of Oxford and the University of Nanjing in China. In 2008, he was awarded for his distinguished service by the Canadian Museums Association.