

# Saturday Dance Class

By Choy Su-Ling

Photographs courtesy of Quek Kiat Sing

Figure painting in Chinese ink traditions has a long history. From court maidens, portraits of officials, religious and mythological figures of the dynastic periods, to contemporary Chinese Opera figures and peasants during the Revolution as well as the cynical pop figures and exaggerated erotica that are rushing into the market, it has evolved in terms of subject and technique.

Singaporean Quek Kiat Sing, a young artist who has gained much recognition from winning awards such as the United Overseas Bank Painting of the Year Competition and the Dr Tan Tze Chor Art Award, took it upon herself to practise the Chinese ink medium.

According to Quek, Chinese ink painting is a unique Asian medium because the material is special and has its own set of aesthetic criteria. The materials used are the Chinese brush, a round brush, while the art is painted on rice paper with Chinese ink. The practice emphasizes the creative variation of ink quality and brush strokes of the lines.

Although Quek is trained in ink painting, she has never learned traditional figure painting. Intrigued by the works of the legendary artist Qi Bai Shi 齐白石, she learned Chinese ink portrait and figure painting through a self-taught process.

The skill she acquired from her ink training is visible in her paintings of ballerinas in



Saturday Dance Class. Quek said that her training in western figure and portrait drawing has helped her, in a way, in her Chinese ink painting. She feels that the same principles of ink can be applied to illustrate any subject.

"Ink artists should not let themselves be contained by self-imposed boundaries in terms of their choice of subject matter," said Quek.

"Chinese ink painting has an aesthetic sense that has evolved over a long period of time. The Japanese and Koreans have also carried on the tradition in their own cultures. However, Chinese ink can be used merely as a medium regardless of its original aesthetic concept. In that event, a 'western' painting can be obtained despite the use of the unique materials."

According to Quek, the hint of Asian-ness in her ballerina paintings is probably due to the use of Chinese ink with its interesting line work and the use of white space in the composition.

Other than her ballerinas in Chinese ink, Quek has seen paintings of opera performances by other artists, such as the works of Guan Liang 关良, but other than that she has not seen any other Chinese ink work on western performing arts subjects.

"I had always wanted to venture into ink figure paintings and I took this collaboration with The Genée International Ballet Competition and the National Arts Council as an opportunity to look at figures in motion, in particular young ballerina students from the Singapore Ballet Academy. The energy of a body in movement is very different from the usual figure drawing sessions with stationary nudes. This was most intriguing to me. The changing form of the ballerinas, moving in synergy with great discipline to the rhythm, was robust, stunning and admirable. It dawned on me that all great arts, including ballet and ink painting, require a firm basic foundation that calls for diligence and perseverance, upon which a platform of creativity will eventually emerge."

"As Degas painted the many French Impressionist ballerina paintings from his

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numerous sketches before working in his studios, I too visited the Saturday Dance Classes for preliminary drawings of the little dancers before transforming them into ink works. I am attempting to employ the medium of traditional ink to realize western concepts and I hope that it would be a refreshing visual experience for the audience."

When asked what she plans to do next, Quek tells us of rehearsals of *Ramayana*, a dance performance by some Indian dance groups which she has attended. She hopes to reinterpret the grand epic in ink sometime. She says that she is thrilled by

how modern ballet choreography has worked well with a Chinese calligrapher. She also looks forward to a chance whereby she can be involved in a real dance performance with her ink painting.

With her open mind and willingness to experiment, we are sure Quek will tell us great performing art tales with her ink journeys. Her approach is one that truly reflects the contemporary Singaporean, one who is at once an Asian and a global citizen. ♪

More information on the artist and her work can be found at [www.quekkdatsing.com](http://www.quekkdatsing.com)