

The Art and Life of Van I-pong

Tong Kam-tang

Translated by Lam Wei-yin Agnes

Since the dawn of the 20th century, the politics of China has undergone repeated and momentous transformations. Safe and peaceful in comparison, Hong Kong became a refuge for Mainland talent and capital resources, which acted as a catalyst for the development of the then colony and transformed it from a small fishing village to a major financial centre and an economic powerhouse. Similarly in the art and cultural sectors these Mainland transplants were instrumental in preserving and promoting traditional Chinese arts and culture, thus marking the coming of age of Hong Kong as a metropolis that wholeheartedly embraces both the Eastern and Western cultures. Drawing a large demographic of Cantonese natives due to geographical affinities, the earliest artists in Hong Kong belonged to a predominately Cantonese art community, while non-Cantonese natives faced greater problems in adapting to the host culture due to a series of difficulties such as language barriers and living habits. Studies of Cantonese artists, especially those hailing from the Lingnan School of Painting, have long enjoyed a large amount of attention and importance with landmark achievements to boot. However, not the same amount of significance was attached to artists hailing from Jiangnan (or the south of Yangtze River), traditionally the heartland of Chinese painting, beyond the boundary of Guangzhou, until relatively recently when there emerged studies devoted to northern artists such as Pang Jop-ming (1908–2002).¹ A close associate of Pang, Van I-pong (萬一鵬), whose life experiences and artistic achievements narrate an indispensable chapter of Hong Kong art history, demands to be reviewed comprehensively and in depth.

Beyond painting

Van I-pong, courtesy name Xiao Yun (嘯雲); secondary personal names Monk Duo(鐸和尚), Wuyin Laoren (無因老人, lit. Old Man of No Reason) and The Ink Hut (墨廬); owner of the Wan He Studio (萬壑草堂), the Sacred Room in a Multifarious World (頻中聖室) and Haide Tower (海德樓); born in 1917 in

¹ Related research and studies of the artist included: Kan Yim-fong, ed. *The Collected Essays of the Writings and Paintings of Pang Jop-ming* (彭襲明書畫論集), 3 vols. (Hong Kong: Buruxianshi, 2007); Pedith Chan: “Man and Nature as Models: The Landscapes of Peng Ximing”, in *Hong Kong Visual Arts Yearbook 2005*, Harold Mok, ed. (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2006), p.37–62; Wong Yin-fong Anita, ed. *Transcendental Vision: Paintings by Peng Ximing* (Hong Kong: The University Museum and Art Gallery, 2005); Lee Tsz-kwan: “The Art of Painting of Pang Jop-ming” (彭襲明的繪畫藝術) (Hong Kong: BA thesis for the Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2005); Kan Yim-fong, ed. *The Collected Painting of Pang Jop-ming* (彭襲明畫集) (Beijing: People’s Fine Arts Publishing House, 2003).

Jiading, Shanghai. A native of Jiading, a city renowned for the art of bamboo-carving, the artist has since young learned the art from his maternal grandfather Shen Zhuxiang (申竹香) and father Yatang (雅堂), both distinguished bamboo-carving maestros in their own right, but gave it up after deciding to pursue painting as his vocation. However, his profound practical experience and knowledge of the art compelled him to pen the article, “The Art of Bamboo-carving (竹刻藝術)”, which was published in the *Xinyashuyuan Xueshu Niankan* (新亞書院學術年刊, 1974). Containing the four short sections of “A short history of Bamboo-carving”, “The production”, “Appreciation of masterpieces” and “Bamboo markers”, the article offers a comprehensive overview of the art juxtaposed with bittersweet narratives of the writer. One paragraph of the article writes: “At 20, I employed the methods passed on by Zhou Jiantang to engrave the two faces of a fan bone. On one side is the preface to ‘The Prince of Teng’s Pavilion’; on the other is the illustration of the pavilion, the results of painstaking and meticulous craftsmanship. The fan is now collected by Dai Jitao.”² While this piece of art has not been preserved, the documentation alone stands as a testament to his early budding deftness as a bamboo carving artist. Among his surviving works are *Bamboo Fan Bone Carving – Essay of Orchid Pavilion* preserved by his descendants; *Carving of Pine Tree on the Bamboo Brush Holder* (Plate 1) collected by the Jiading Museum of Shanghai; *Bamboo Fan Bone Carving – Poem of Su Manshu*, *Bamboo Fan Bone Carving – Bronze Inscription* and *Bamboo Fan Bone Carving – Declaration of Campaign to the Central Plain of China* (Plate 2) collected by the Jiazi Studio, all of them representative of his repertoire from the 1940s.

Aside from bamboo carving, the artist also dabbled in the study of seal carving. *The Seal of Van I-pong* (Plate 3), which became his lifelong signature, was the handicraft of his own creation. The seal, finely carved in the tradition of “Man Bai Wan” (a technique of filling up the frame of the seal with the white strokes of the carved characters) with balanced measures of complexity and flexibility, exhibits the unadorned yet solid and tenacious touches of his chisel. While still dabbling occasionally in seal-carving and inscription of ink slab towards middle age, the artist was not prolific as earlier in his career and, similar to his attempts in bamboo carving, these endeavours were never honed further.

While giving the young Van I-pong son to a privileged background, father Yatang realised from early on that it’s a combination of professional skills as well as intellectual cultivation and scholarship that makes an accomplished artist. At age 12, Van I-pong began learning history and classic literature from Professor Yao Minghui (姚明輝) and calligraphy from Tong Xinglü (童星彙). Unlike his dabbings in bamboo and seal-carving, calligraphy became his life-long pursuit. Never acclaiming to be a master calligrapher, Van had only a limited body of work in circulation. Despite the best efforts of the researchers, only six of his calligraphic works (Plates 4–5) could be amassed for the publication of the collected works of the artist last year. It therefore came as a delightful surprise that a sizable collection of over 100 calligraphic works was

² See Van I-pong: “The Art of Bamboo Carving” in *Xinyashuyuan Xueshu Niankan* (No. 16, 1974), p.379 (in Chinese).

unearthed by the Van family when they were sorting through the personal effects of the deceased artist. A mix of traced/copied and original calligraphy, these works were mainly written in the clerical, standard and running cursive scripts. The emphasis the artist placed on calligraphy is the application of the old, deep-rooted principles that Chinese painting and calligraphy come from the same origin and that the brush and ink are the soul of painting, the quality of which is intricately tied with the calibre of the calligraphy.³ For this, Van was known to have practised calligraphy every day, his fastidious diligence aptly reflected in the quality of his ink and brushwork. Likewise, underscoring the geometric formations and the proximity of the lines on canvas, his calligraphic works are realisations of the aesthetics of painting. With an undergoing systematic cataloguing of these new gems, a more comprehensive insight into the artistic achievement of the artist in calligraphy still awaits discovery.

The art of painting

It was the art of painting where his dedication to excellence was instilled into. Inspired by his father's rich assemblage of books, paintings and stone rubbings, the young artist worked tirelessly rubbing, daubing and copying, producing his first large-scale landscape painting at the tender age of 10, though it wasn't until two years later that he was taken under the tutelage of Zhao Dingkui (趙鼎奎, 1869-?)⁴, also a Jiading native, to learn painting comprehensively and systematically. Zhao Dingkui practised in calligraphy, painting, seal-engraving and bamboo-carving, his landscape painting of luxuriant foliage is at once archaic and elegant, elegant and lush. Relating the experience of learning the art in his own words, Van said:

With my brush saturated with water and my wrist raised, I practised the *seal and zhou* scripts on the Go board, came rain or shine, just as my teacher told me to... it wasn't until more than six months later that he began teaching me ink and brush techniques and took out the original paintings in his collection for me to behold, an exercise which he called "painting reading". Then he would instruct me to pick my favourite painting and create an imitation of it repetitively until I was close to getting the form right. Then I would pick a new painting and try to recreate it from memory, the entire process lasting for five long years.⁵

³ The same view was shared by Wu Hufan (1984–1968) and Lu Yanshao (1909–1993), who insisted that calligraphy but not painting has to be practised every day.

⁴ Zhao Dingkui (1869–?), courtesy names Mengsu (夢蘇) and Zhuosun (卓孫), secondary personal name Zhiyuan (止園), owner of the studio named Farewell to the Secular World (息塵館). A native of Jiading, Shanghai, he excelled in landscape painting, calligraphy, Chinese seal engraving. Renowned for his elegant and relaxed brushwork, he treasured ink as gold and distinguished himself by painting with minimalism and elegance in mind.

⁵ Van I-pong: *Van I-pong Landscape Painting Album* (萬一鵬山水畫說) (Hong Kong: Tai Yip, 1986), p.2

These five, six years were a critical formative period that provided Van with a systematic education in the traditions of Chinese art. In the words of his teacher: “Studying and tracing/copying calligraphy only lay the groundwork. To carve out creativity, you’ll first have to acquire the techniques handed down by the masters. Then you should explore different landscapes and sceneries and soak up the wonders of the natural world and attempt to represent them with your brush; an air and charm will naturally come with it...”⁶ Following his teacher’s advice, Van and Shen Yiqian (沈逸千, 1908–1944), together with a few friends, embarked on a still-life drawing tour in 1935, which took them to different corners of China, including a crossing of the Yellow River, scaling Mount Hua and Mount Wutai and exploring the wilderness of the regions north of the Great Wall. The following year, 1936, saw the launch of his debut solo exhibition in Nanjing and the publication of *A Sketchbook of the Regions North of the Great Wall* (塞北寫生集). When the Sino–Japanese war broke out in 1937, Van fled into the hinterland of Zhejiang, Jiangxi and nearby provinces and took time to visit Mount Tianmu, Mount Bian and Mount Mao while making sketches of the landscape. Taking nature as his teacher and feelings as his guide, the artist scoured the land in search of scenic landscapes for his sketching in a mind-broadening experience.

The year 1949 not marked the founding of New China but also a new chapter of Van I-pong’s life. Among the many southern transplants hailing from the Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces and adopting Hong Kong as their own were the lone artist⁷, who tagged along with Wang Sengliang (汪松亮), the proprietor of the cotton mill, on the voyage and took up the position of general manager at Johnson Tailors (造寸時裝公司).⁸ The stay at the company quarters near the Lai Chi Kok Amusement Park afforded the artist the stability and space to continue his pursuit of painting after working hours. Following his resignation from the factory, he moved to a new place at 1/F, 2 Kimberley Street, where he set up a studio and ran a cottage business of designing woollen wear and bead embroidery. The clothing patterns of flowers, birds, dragons and phoenixes on the woollen wear and *qipaos* were the handiwork of the artist. In fact, there’s more than one facet to the subjects of his painting.⁹ As well as landscape, his drawings of people, flowers, birds, insects and fish were sophisticated and delicately rendered, if less prolifically, eschewing loose, carefree

(in Chinese).

⁶ Tang Wai-hung and Lester Van Fook-kee (co-eds): *The Spirit of the Roc*, Vol 1 of *The Art World of Van I-pong* (Hong Kong: Art Museum, Institute of Chinese Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; Jao Tsung-I Petite Ecole, the University of Hong Kong; Wan He Studio, 2010), p.5 (in Chinese).

⁷ The wife and children of Van I-pong in Shanghai re-joined the artist in Hong Kong in 1958.

⁸ Acclaimed for its bespoke and finely tailored suits and *qipao*, Johnson Tailors was among the most famous and earliest fashion houses in Hong Kong, boasting a top celebrity clientele which includes celebrities and film stars.

⁹ For further information on his business venture, see Wah Sui-kwan Lucia: “In Memory of My Teacher Van I-pong (憶萬一鵬老師)” in *Department of Fine Arts at 50 (I)* (Hong Kong: Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2007), p.93–95 (in Chinese).

brush strokes and ink play for precision and accuracy in construction and composition (Plates 6–9). It's also worth mentioning that the dragon is another of Van's cherished motif, making him one of the few painters through the ages who dedicated themselves to the motif in the footsteps of Chen Rong (active between 1235 and 1262) of the late Southern Song dynasty. While embracing Chen's fine legacy, Van also invested his drawings with the sentiments and merriments of the ink and brush that characterise the painters of the Yuan dynasty, creating an aesthetic appeal and style all his own (Plate 10).

The thought of giving up painting never once occurred to the southern transplant endeavoured to reconcile the making art with making a hard living. While devoted wholeheartedly to landscape painting, the artist sought self-betterment through perseverance and self-discipline by practising fastidiously as well as reading widely and delving deep in ancient painting philosophies. Published in 1958, *Van I-pong Landscape Painting Album* (萬一鵬山水畫冊) reflects the extensive scope of his traditional learning.¹⁰ A collection of 10 paintings, either copies or imitations of the works of famed painters, including two renditions of Ju Ran (active between 960–986) and Ni Zan (1301–1374), and one rendition each of Dong Yuan (?–circa 962), Gao Kegong (1248–1310), Wang Hui (1362–1717). The artist followed its publication with a debut Hong Kong exhibition held at the side hall of St John's Cathedral in 1959, a showcase of the fruits of his efforts and achievements in the art to the public.

Aside from individual creation and reading, Van also made the acquaintance of literati and scholars with whom he bounced off ideas, particularly since renting the units on the 2nd and 4th floors and turning the space into a hangout for such friends in the art scene as Pang Jop-ming, Guan Hui, Sie Hui-shan, Chang Pik-hon (1909–1995), Low Chuck-tiew (1911–1993), Zeng Keduan (1990–1975), Jao Tsung-i (1917–), Xiao Lisheng (1919–1983) and Lin Qianshi (1918–1990), *et al.*¹¹ There were gatherings every Saturday and Sunday,¹² and outings further afield every month or twice every quarter, taking the group to every corner of the New Territories and outlying islands (Plate 12). Though a city made up of islands surrounded by waters is short on grandeur landscape that the Mainland can offer, Hong Kong is endowed with landscape at once scenic and whimsical. Among the closest associates of Van, Pang Jop-ming used to stay over at the artist's every Friday to save him from travelling back and forth his residence in Hung Shui Kiu in the New Territories for his teaching commitments in the city and participation in the artists' gatherings. As well as stating his admiration for Pang's artistry and learning well from his senior, Van even entrusted his second

¹⁰ Van I-pong: *Van I-pong Landscape Painting Album* (Hong Kong: unknown publisher, 1958), book title written in calligraphy by Qian Mu and preface penned by Lin Qianshi.

¹¹ Van's gatherings of artists were run on a relative small scale. Larger meetings for poetry, drawing, *qin* and chess were held the Chi Lin Nunnery, with Van often in the audience. For details, see Chow Su-sing Johnson: *A Record of Chow Su-sing Discussions on Art* (周士心談藝錄) (Hong Kong: The Commercial Press, 2000), p.202–240 (in Chinese).

¹² Since the repossession of the property – the 2nd and 4th floors of the premises – by the landlord, gatherings of the association had been moved to the 3rd floor of 22 Cameroon Road, Tsim Sha Tsui. The association remained in operation until mid-1970s.

daughter Agnes Van and third son Lester Van Fook-kee to the master's mentorship. Van also shared a close friendship with Jao Tsung-i, who taught his eldest son Van Fook-yuen the art of "Four Gentlemen Painting".

The exhibition, "Recent Chinese Paintings of Van I-pong" (萬一鵬近作國畫展覽) was held in July 1971 at the Taiwan Provincial Museum at the invitation of the Museum and Dr. Chien Szu-liang of the Academia Sinica. Jointly invited by six academic institutions, the exhibition toured to the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry (SCCCI) in the winter of the same year. A landmark show of Van's career, it not only featured a sizable collection of the artist's work but also a fine specimen of his highly stylised work, marking an important watershed in his painting career. If the decades before Van's southern migration marked the learning phase and the 1950s and 60s the all-embracing, in-depth consolidation phase for the artist, the 1970s was the maturity stage where the artist reaped the harvest of his artistic excellence.¹³ It's a similar path treaded by his predecessors, one that reflects a tradition of comprehensive learning in all areas of art as foundation training before an artist chooses to specialise in one or several disciplines close to heart or temperament and integrates them with his talents, temperament and natural endowment. When adopted as an artist's own style, this amalgamation will morph into his signature ink and brush, a personal style, so to speak. It goes without saying that this is a progressive process, the length of which depending on the aptitude of the artist.

In the essay "Entitling the Painting Exhibition of Van I-pong" (題萬一鵬畫展), Jao Tsung-i made a succinct comment on the artistic achievements and erudition of Van: "He painted with the precariousness of Fan Kuan's brushwork, the substance and mellowness of Wu Zhen; the one who find the right path to tread also find the way to excellence."¹⁴ Although Van borrowed influences from a diverse range of master artists, his brushwork is most akin to that of Fan Kuan (active between 990 and 1030) and Wu Zhen (1280–1354), melding together the perilous nature of Fan and the poised, smooth poetry of Wu into an amazingly distinguished personal style. While his work oozes vitality and projects an imposing presence, his brush and ink are at once profound and graceful, the colours serene and majestic, his composition meticulously arranged and yet dynamic, embodying both the astuteness of the craftsman's painting (the common group) and the beauty of nature and otherworldliness of literati painting (the elite group), the two main painting

¹³ Following the decline and eventual closure of his bead embroidery business in the early 1970s, Van spent the majority of his time teaching and making art while helping friends with their business endeavours on the side.

¹⁴ Pang Jop-ming described Van's the achievements as surpassing "masters Wen Zhengmang and Shen Zhou, and as ancient as Wu Zhen, measuring up to Dong Yuan and Ju Ran, absorbing the strengths of the famous painters of Song and Yuan dynasties and making his own." While Pang's comment is true and just, that of Jao Tsung-i appears to be more concise. See Tang Wai-hung and Lester Van Fook-kee (co-eds): *The World Emerged under the Finger*, Vol II of *The Art Work of Van I-pong* (Hong Kong: Art Museum, Institute of Chinese Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; Jao Tsung-I Petite Ecole, The University of Hong Kong; Wan He Studio, 2010), p.149 (in Chinese).

schools of the Song dynasty. A painting is as much the direct reflection of an artist's personality as the personality of a painting, a proposition supported by Van's closest associates Pu Hsin-yu (1896–1963), Zhang Daqian (1899–1983), Lin Qianshi (1918–1990), Xu Fuguan (1903–1982),¹⁵ Weng Yihe, Xue Huishan, Xie Yan (1936–?), who unanimously agreed that Van's ink and brush are intricately tied with his talents, character and temperament.¹⁶ In this regard, Pu Hsin-yu has nothing but high praises for the artist, crediting him with "breadth of mind and a temperament akin to Fan Kuan as known in the history of painting, an air both vast and imponderable that permeates expansively his canvas. This sheer 'vastness' of the artist's personality and his work, I believe, would alone emblazon his name for perpetuity" in a fine footnote to the artist's artistic excellence.¹⁷

Unlike the works by artists who frolic in ink play, Van I-pong sought to give expression to his sentiments and feelings, reflecting an unconditional passion for his country during a most difficult time (Plates 13–14).¹⁸ In fact, works steeped in realism emerged early in his career. Embarking on a still-life painting outing in 1935 when the country was ravaged by the savage incursion of the Japanese invaders outside the northern border, the artist sought to unleash a torrent of emotional intensity in *Savage Action of a Herd of Wolves in Northern China* (橫行塞北之狼群). Organising his solo exhibition in 1971, the year when the country was torn apart by the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, the artist produced *In the Same Storm-tossed Boat* (風雨同舟), *The Tower of Strength* (中流砥柱), *Preservation of Chastity and Purity Till the End* (晚節堅貞), *Living in the Midst of a Country in Calamity* (多難興邦)¹⁹ and similar works "rich and profound in imagery reflecting deep concerns about the society"²⁰. Although leading a mindful, simple life, Van had always liked his drink, creating fluid and spontaneous calligraphic works with a gestural quality of unrestrained, great eloquence ink-splash in a drunken stupor, as exemplified by *Pine* (Plate 15). Self-titling his work, Van wrote: "With a boldness that escaped the Badashanren and a state of ecstasy that eludes the Green Vine (sobriquet of Qi Baishi) I paint a thousand canvases, with ink as my witness for eternity." Building on the strength of a solid foundation in ink painting, the artist achieved a higher form of artistic representation with "drunken ink" (Plates 16–20).

In 1973, Van took up a teaching post of Chinese landscape at the Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Since its establishment in 1957, the Department has boasted a strong teaching staff recognised for their outstanding contributions to the preservation of Chinese painting

¹⁵ See *The World Emerged under the Finger*, p.149 (in Chinese).

¹⁶ Van's family has edited a collection of 13 comments by distinguished scholars, including Weng Yihe, Sie Hui-shan and Xie Yan, *et al.*

¹⁷ See *The World Emerged under the Finger*, p.149 (in Chinese).

¹⁸ Plate 14 *Dragon* completed in 1971 when Hong Kong was hit by a drought.

¹⁹ Weng Yihe describes these four paintings as Van I-pong's attempt to "use painting to instigate and trigger resurgence". See Weng Yihe: "Preface to the Painting Exhibition of Van I-pong" (萬一鵬畫展序) (publication details unknown) (in Chinese).

²⁰ Words of Jao Tsung-i, see Jao Tsung-i: "Entitling the Painting Exhibition of Van I-pong" (publication details unknown), p.25 (in Chinese).

traditions fast disappearing on the Mainland. Many of these academics hailed from Jiangnan (the region south of the Yangtze River), Shanghai in particular, including Wang Jiqian (1906–2003), Chang Pik-hon, Zhao Heqin (1894–1971), Gu Qingyao (1896–1978), Chou Shih-hsin (1923–) and Rong Zhuoya (1903–?). The artist was given an affirmative nod for his cultivation and achievement in traditional Chinese landscape painting with his appointment to the rank of faculty teaching staff. During his tenure, the New Asia College of the University joined forces with its close ally, Yale University, to organise “Introduction of Famous Artists of Today”(當代名畫介紹), featuring the works of Van I-pong (Plate 21), among others, during a one-year tour of ten universities in the US that began in March 1974.²¹

Quitting his tenure in 1976, Van poured the early part of his retirement years into teaching at the Department of Extramural Studies of The Chinese University of Hong Kong and giving private painting lessons. The bumper harvest reaped from these retirement years were showcased at the Hong Kong City Hall in 1982. The following year, the artist travelled the US and Canada extensively before making a sojourn to Canada, firstly to Edmonton and later to Toronto. In 1990 Van finally settled down in Vancouver, his last abode. As a practising landscape painter, Van attached great importance to drawing from life and on location, trekking across China during his early years and later the countryside and outlying islands of his adopted home of Hong Kong to soak up the scenic vistas the two places have to offer. Since settling down in Canada, the artist has journeyed to the heart of the Rocky Mountains, a landscape that bears close resemblance to the familiar terrains of the northern border and Jiangnan, the region south of the Yangtze River, absorbing in the depth of the mountains and waters. Further trips also took him to both the east and west coasts of the US, to San Francisco and Los Angeles, the summits on the West coast, Lake Tahoe, Death Valley and the “Castle amidst the Cloud” in Mont Blanc.

The art of finger painting

The peaceful, quiet retirement life in Canada enabled Van to take up reading and practise calligraphy in solitude. Leading a life of retreat in a quiet, tranquil environment, coupled with a spacious studio, ignited in the artist an urge and spark to create even more prolifically and competently in finger painting in addition to his continuous and regular pursuit of traditional Chinese painting. Since his debut solo exhibition in 1958, Van has exhibited his works and achievements in art every ten years or so, and though he moved abroad in 1984, he returned to his native home in 1990 for a comeback show at the High Block of Hong Kong City Hall. Rather different from his previous expositions, the heart of the exhibition was devoted to the display of his finger painting works, representing another pinnacle of the later years of his life.

²¹ Other exhibiting artists included: Ding Yanyong, Zeng Keduan, Xiao Lisheng, Sheng Zonghao and Liu Guosong, who also jointly published a painting catalogue: *Contemporary Chinese Painting and Calligraphy – An Exhibition by the Fine Arts Faculty of New Asia College/The Chinese University of Hong Kong*, 1974.

Finger painting (*zhihua*), or fingertip painting (*zhitouhua*) and fingering ink (*zhimo*), is the Chinese painting genre of using fingers as a brush. Records of the art date back to the Tang dynasty, with Zhang Yanyuan's *Famous Paintings through the Ages* (張彥遠《歷代名畫記》) relating an account of Zhang Zao painting "using his hands to nudge on silk"²², and Zhu Jingxuan's *Famous Tang Paintings* (朱景玄《唐朝名畫錄》)²³ documenting Wang Mo working with "knitted feet and nudging hands, brandishing or sweeping". But because the works were partial finger paintings at best, they are often referred to as the antecedents of finger painting. The first full-fledged finger painting didn't come into being until Gao Qipei (1672–1734) of the Kangxi period. Not only did the artist leave behind a handsome legacy of finger painting, his grandson Gao Bing also published one of the earliest anthologies, *On Finger Painting* (高秉《指頭畫說》)²⁴. Gao Qipei was succeeded by a number of fine contemporary finger painting artists, including Qian Songyan (1899–1995) and Pan Tianshou (1897–1971), the latter also penning *On Finger Painting* (潘天壽《指頭畫談》).²⁵

The wielding of the brush is intricately tied to the physical movements of the fingers, with elements of stability in the former and malleability in the latter. Virtuoso brush techniques are prerequisites for acquiring dexterous finger movements in painting. It explains why an artist seldom takes up the art of finger painting until much later in their career. Despite having many traits in common, brushwork and finger work differ vastly in the sentiments and pleasures they evoke. It requires much finesse to manoeuvre fingers on paper, the failure of which often results in broken, uneven lines, impacted by the velocity of the ink at the first point of contact, or leaving the paper parched where void spaces are to be fluid filled. That said, with ample control and deft touches, a solemn, staunch, albeit botched, aura will flow and permeate the paper, creating effects beyond the scope of the brush. Rendered on a viscous, rounded base tone and assimilated with the distinctive effects of fingered ink, his renowned mellow, glabrous ink and brushwork produced a painting that is defined by its moral integrity and transcendental artistic mood. The artist even did away with the brush in inscribing scriptures and signatures on the painting, using only his fingers. In describing the skills in the use of the fingers and the palm (Plate 22), one of his students offers a detailed analysis:

Finger painting is the work of the fingers and the palm in full force. With the thumb propping against the knuckle of the ring finger and a backbone drawn by the ring

²² Zhang Yanyuan: *Famous Paintings through the Ages*, see *Zhongguo meishu lunzhu congkan* (中國美術論著叢刊) (Beijing: People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1963), p.198 (in Chinese).

²³ Zhu Jingxuan: *Famous Tang Paintings*, see Huang Binhong and Deng Shi (eds): *Meishucongkan* (美術叢刊), no. 2, series 6 (Taipei: Yee Wen Publishing Company, 1975), p37 (in Chinese).

²⁴ Gao Bing, *On Finger Painting*. See *Meishucongkan*, no. 1, series 8 (Taipei: Yee Wen Publishing Company, 1975), p.37–64 (in Chinese).

²⁵ Pan Tianshou, *On Finger Painting*. See *Tingtiange hautan suibi* (《聽天閣畫談隨筆》) (Shanghai: Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1980), p.59–87 (in Chinese).

finger well coated with ink, striving to be flexible and adaptive in applying techniques demanded by the scenery in hooked or slanted strokes, sometimes working with few fingers in unison, the artist produces lines of isostatic density and the fluidity like the serpentine motion of a dragon; when applying ink-wash (*xuan ran*), the left hand would be holding a large palette filled with ink while the right hand would grasp and splash ink onto the paper with the ferocity of thunder and the speed of lightning. With each rising and falling, and the friction of the nail and flesh, the form of a painting is fleshed out.²⁶

According to Chow Su-sung Johnson, “As well as studying and practice, [Van] has since young used his fingers for the brush²⁷; but it wasn’t until 1976 that he began to immerse himself into the art and plunged into the study. *Buddha of Longevity* (Plate 23) completed in 1978 is one of his earlier surviving finger painting works. Alongside his traditional paintings, the solo exhibition in 1982 put on public display for the first time the finger painting works of the artist, who kept churning out quality finger painting works over the course of the following ten years, taking on a variety of subjects which included landscape, people (Plate 24), flowers and birds (Plates 25–26), fruits and vegetables (Plate 27). Many of his earlier works were small-scale landscape and floral paintings of relatively simple composition and structure (Plate 28). Due to the special properties of the painting tools and materials, finger painting particularly favours such topics as flowers and birds, which accordingly form a large portion of finger painting works in existence to this day. Van, however, embraced landscape and excelled in it. His finger landscape painting reached a summit of perfection in late 1980s, marked by the high quality of his repertoire (Plates 29–32), the most significant of which is undoubtedly *Magnificent Scenery of China* (Plate 33) completed in Toronto in 1989. In fact the artist first attempted the same topic in as early as the beginning of 1974 (Plate 34), a traditional landscape masterpiece which has since become his magnum opus. The six-panel finger painting, *Magnificent Scenery of China (Yuyu Yaotian)*, represents a massive undertaking by the artist. Measuring 126cm in height and 384cm in width, *Yuyu* means China and *Yaotian* carries the connotation of the global utopia of world peace. Expressing the artist’s wishes for all lives in his motherland, an inscription on the painting reads: “It’s the start of a new year and I have the hankering to put my fingers and wrist to work. By doing this painting, I pray to the heaven to bless the world and that all lives gain Heaven after life on this earth.” Creating a poetic realm boldly expansive, a composition meticulously crafted and layers of textures rich and complex, he brought the breathtaking vistas of verdant mountain ranges, misty springs and

²⁶ Huang Yi, “The World under Van I-pong’s Fingers”(萬一鵬的指下世界) in *Ming Pao*, 14 January 1990 (in Chinese).

²⁷ Chow Su-sung Johnson, “Scores of the Heart Composed in Van I-pong’s Drunken Ink”(萬一鵬醉墨譜心曲), an original manuscript collected by the family of Van I-pong (in Chinese).

roaring waterfalls to life on paper, which come complete with storied houses and terrace halls interspersed with people, horses and boats, thereby giving artistic portrait of the “heaven on earth” “where one can walk, look around, travel and reside in.”²⁸ A tour de force of stylistic and artistic virtuosity, this finger landscape painting is an unprecedented achievement by any ink painting artist. “The Finger Painting Works of Van I-pong” (萬一鵬指畫作品展) held in Hong Kong in 1990 and a subsequent exhibition of his finger painting works held at the Taiwan Heroes Memorial Hall marked the swansong of a master painter, the culmination of his lifelong dedication to art and the pinnacle of excellence.

Passing on and inheritance of teaching

As well as distinguished by his artistic excellence, Van is also recognised for his contributions to arts education. As well as taking tenure at the Department of Extramural Studies of The Chinese University of Hong Kong and establishing the Wan He Studio, the artist has also mentored a host of students to preserve, pass down and promote the fundamentals and principles of Chinese painting by adopting the traditional master–apprentice model.²⁹ Remembering learning the art from his master, a student described his approach as “kind and approachable”, always giving positive encouragement and commending areas of strength before addressing areas of weakness and demonstrating the amendments to be made.³⁰ When distributing manuscripts to students as a copying exercise, the teacher adapted the workload and the level of difficulty according to individual progress.³¹ He spared no efforts and selfless devotion in critiquing students’ works, pointing out areas that need improvements and passing on useful and detailed comments on the use of the brush down to such details as drawing blank and colours.³² Besides coaching students in traditional skills and techniques, the thoughtful teacher also shot and amassed a collection of scenic pictures and demonstrated the techniques for making the transition from traditional technique to painting from still

²⁸ In “Preface to *Lofty Scenery of the Spring in the Woods*” (《林泉高致》序) penned by Guo Xi and Guo Si of Northern Song, the two artists proposed the depictions of the different realms of landscape painting where people can walk, look around, travel and reside in it. See *Meishu congkan*, no 2, series 7 (Taipei: Yee Wen Publishing Company, 1975), p.6 (in Chinese).

²⁹ A Van I-pong Student–Teacher Art Exhibition was held in 1984 and 1986 respectively, complemented by the publication of the *Collected Paintings by Friends of the Wan He Studio*.

³⁰ Cheung Kai-pui: “A Collection of Reflections on Learning Art: A Bond with Chinese Art” (張繼沛〈習藝心影錄：與中國藝術結緣〉)

<http://members.optusnet.com.au/ckp1000/03Art%20Learning/index.htm>

(Retrieved 13 May 2011 from the World Wide Web).

³¹ According to the family of Van I-pong, the artist left behind a catalogue of more than four hundred painting and manuscripts

³² The words of Liu Dachao, taken from an unpublished manuscript of the artist collected by his family.

life on location by rendering the images in Chinese ink, an exercise which immensely benefited the students in their future endeavours in art. Indeed, one of the merits of this traditional master–apprentice model is that fosters a bond between the teacher and the student. Another student recalled how the teacher enlightened his students in the ways of art as well as ways of life.³³ High praise was unanimously heaped by his peer, exalting his “upright character”³⁴, “decorous conduct, trustworthy and reliable”³⁵, his “stoic disregard for worldly pursuits of fame and fortune” and “staunch righteousness that matches the gentlemen of ancient times”³⁶. Backing up his words with his actions, Van had garnered utmost respect from his students.

While teaching and mentoring the next generation of artists is a good way of passing on the traditions of Chinese painting and taking them to a greater height, writings and publications can exert an even more powerful, compelling influence. Recognising this, Van published a set of painting teaching manuscripts (課徒畫稿) entitled *Theories of Chinese Landscape Painting* (萬一鵬山水畫說) in 1996. As in his words, the book is “a chronicle and a systematic deduction of a 60-year journey in painting, an epitome of an artist who inherited from the predecessors and inspired the posterity.”³⁷ A special form of the study of Chinese art, painting teaching manuscripts are an artist’s own interpretation of an array of painting techniques and compositions of famous artists through the ages. Blended with the artist’s individual style of ink and wash, these manuscripts are as valid an analysis and imitation of the techniques of ancient artists as they are a semi-creative work. Indeed any reference to the painting teaching manuscripts of Gong Banqian (1618–1689)³⁸, Xiao Junxian (1865–1949)³⁹, Huang Qiuyuan (1914–1979)⁴⁰, Zhang Daqian⁴¹, Lu Yanshao (1909–1993)⁴² would reveal both sides of the artistic coin – the ancient artists and the artist himself – of a fine piece of art. A comprehensive, content-rich read, *Theories of Chinese Landscape Painting* covers a tremendous range of traditional landscape painting techniques and compositions, a testament to the artist’s mastery of traditional painting and realisation of a highly stylised ink and brush art.

³³ See note 32.

³⁴ The words of Weng Yihe; see the collection of 13 comments by distinguished scholars (in Chinese).

³⁵ The words of Pang Jop-ming; see *The World Emerged under the Finger*, p.149 (in Chinese).

³⁶ The words of Lin Qianshi, see *The World Emerged under the Finger*, p.149 (in Chinese).

³⁷ Van I-pong: *Theories of Chinese Landscape Painting*, p.4 (in Chinese).

³⁸ Gong Xian: *Painting Teaching Manuscripts of Gong Banqian* (龔半千授徒畫稿) (Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1935) (in Chinese).

³⁹ Zhong Shouzhi *et al* (co-eds), *Teaching Manuscripts of Xiao Zhiquan’s Landscape Paintings* (蕭屋泉山水畫課稿) (Changsha: Hu’nan Fine Arts Publishing House, 1981) (in Chinese).

⁴⁰ Qu Guanjie, ed. *The Landscape Painting Manuals of Huang Qiuyuan* (黃秋園山水畫譜) (Beijing: Guangming Daily Publishing House, 1998) (in Chinese).

⁴¹ Gao Lingmei, ed. *The Painting of Zhang Daqian* (張大千畫) (Hong Kong: Oriental Arts City Ltd, 1961) (in Chinese).

⁴² Lu Yanshao: *Landscape Teaching Manuals of Lu Yanshao* (陸儼少課徒山水畫稿) (Shanghai: Shuhua Publishing House, 1985) (in Chinese).

Two chapters of the book, “A special feature on the art of structure” and “Techniques for scenery construction”, are particularly outstanding. While the average painting teaching manuscripts tend to focus on the drawing of the woods and forests, the mountains and rocks, the clouds and water and scenic spots, cutting back on or even omitting discussions of composition, a probable result of fragmentary and conjectural accounts on structuring techniques and compositions now in existence, the book “gathers and sums up the masterpieces of famous artists through the ages into 16 ways of composition”⁴³ to illustrate the approaches of “central standing”, “bottom solid”, “top heavy”, “bottom slanted”, “top leaning”, “left heavy”, “right solid”, “stand-off”, “bottom corner”, “top corner”, “crisscross”, “top and bottom heavy”, “centre solid”, “double slanted left”, “double slanted right” and “fretwork”. Each composition individually illustrated, the chapter expounds details of details of structuring techniques. Containing 20 illustrations, the chapter on “Techniques for Scenery Construction” discusses scenery images that depict the seasons of spring, summer, autumn and winter; an array of weather types such as wind, sun, rain and snow; and flowers and trees including willow, pine, bamboo and plum blossom. The artist’s rendition of *The Tale of the Peach Blossom Spring, Visiting Peach Orchard on a Ferry* (桃源問津) is an exemplar of re-adapting literature to art. In addition, there are three paintings of the Chinese landscapes of Putuo, Huangshan Mountain and the Three Gorges; the fourth scroll is dedicated to the theme of overseas travels to places including Vancouver and Edmonton in Canada, the Niagara Falls and Rocky Mountains. While the chapters of “A Special Feature on the Art of Structure” and “The Painting of Scenery” exemplify the quality and integrity of course design, they also demonstrate the versatility of his skills and artistic virtuosity. In as early as 1973 when he was teaching at the Fine Arts Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, he drew up the “The progressive implementation of the traditional landscape painting curriculum”(傳統山水授畫進程), which outlines the learning and teaching progress of a 20-week course designed for year 1 to year 4 students. The content of the curriculum was later expanded and published in *Theories of Chinese Landscape Painting*. And yet there are areas not covered by the book: “Painting techniques of famous painters of the Song Dynasty”, “The brushwork of Jing Hao and protégé Quan Tong”, “The brushwork of Li Cheng”, “Painting techniques of Fan Kuan, Dong Yuan and Ju Ran”, “Painting techniques of the famous painters of the Yuan Dynasty”, “The art of ink of Wu Zhen”, “The art of ink of Huang Gongwang”, “The painting techniques of Wang Meng and Ni Zen”, “The painting techniques of Dong Qichang”, “The painting techniques of Shen Zhou”, “The painting techniques of the Four Monks”, “An outline of Gouxuan techniques”, “Still life and selection of subject matters”, “Tailoring and cutting techniques and secret painting formulas”, “On the traditions of inheritance and succession of famed painters and their innovations and creations”, “An outline of the text on a painting”, “The importance of seal and signature”, alongside theories and discussions on Chinese painting such as “On the significance of nature and man as one”,

⁴³ *Theories of Chinese Landscape Painting*, p.90 (in Chinese)

“Identification and analytical review of Three Ancients”, “An analysis of the personality of paintings”, “The common sense and dogmas of things and paintings”, “The dynamics of emphatic fun” and “A brief description of six essentials and six malaises”, among others. Addressing important issues pertaining to the learning of Chinese painting, these essays would have formed a much-anticipated sequel to *Theories of Chinese Landscape Painting* if not thwarted by the artist’s death from an illness in Vancouver in 1994.

It is also regrettable that his passing indelibly took away a comprehensive and systematic collation of an artist’s decades of dedicated practice and teaching of traditional Chinese art. That the name of artist is not better known among the younger generation was due to the fact that many of his paintings and related materials had been dispersed before his family could salvage them. Jointly organised by the Art Museum of the Institute of Chinese Studies and the Department of Fine Arts of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Jao Tsung-I Petite Ecole of the University of Hong Kong and the Wan He Studio, the exhibition “The Art Works of Van I-pong” held at the Art Museum in 2010 was a due tribute to the late master. Other activities running concurrently with the exhibition were a seminar⁴⁴ and the publication of two collected volumes of the master’s fine paintings: the first volume, *The Spirit of Roc*, collects a total of 149 writings, paintings and collaborative works; the second volume, *The World Emerged under the Finger*, prints a stockpile of 92 finger paintings and bamboo-carving works. Together, this exhibition and publication series offer a comprehensive retrospective and a fitting posthumous tribute to a master whose work and artistry in landscape painting will be remembered for generations to come.

Illustrations of artist’s works taken from Tang Wai-hung and Lester Van Fook-kee (co-eds): *The Art Works of Van I-pong* (in two volumes, *The Spirit of Roc* and *The World Emerged under the Finger*) (Hong Kong: Art Museum, the Institute of Chinese Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong; Jao Tsung-I Petite Ecole, The University of Hong Kong; and Wan He Studio, 2010)

Tong Kam-tang is Associate Professor at the Department of Fine Arts, the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

44 “The Art Works of Van I-pong”, held at the Art Museum Gallery I, Institute of Chinese Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, between 24 July 2010 and 16 January 2011. The seminar of the exhibition was held on 24 July 2010, hosted by Lam Yip-keung Peter and featuring Tong Kam-tang, Thomas Tang and Liu Dazhao on the speakers’ panel. The seminar ran from 2:30pm to 4pm at Room L1, the Institute of Chinese Studies, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.