

As a teenager in secondary (high) school in Hong Kong (Wah Yan College, Kowloon) I was very fortunate to have a truly exceptional art teacher (Mr. Laurence Tam) who instilled great inspirations to my fellow students and me. In 2006, he uncovered a long-forgotten collection of paintings done by us students back in the 1960s/1970s. This collection of paintings is unusual in that it chronicles Mr. Tam's highly original and effective style of teaching in art that was a radical departure from the norm up to that time. With the help of a group of Wah Yan alumni, a public exhibition of those paintings was held at Hong Kong City Hall in Dec. 2006. Between 2006 and 2009, this collection of paintings went on an exhibition tour at a dozen venues in cities in China and N. America including Beijing, Shanghai, Canton, Shenzhen, Vancouver and Toronto, before being acquired in its entirety by the Hong Kong Museum of Art in 2010 as part of its permanent collection.

Mr. Tam's approach to teaching in Chinese ink painting (or any painting, for that matter) was revolutionary at the time in that he totally discarded the traditional practice of imitating or copying classic masterpieces by the students. Instead he emphasized at the very outset the premise of originality as a requirement for any form of art, including painting. This must be coupled with a solid mastery of use of the medium as the foundation of building a piece of good art. In this spirit, he had us experiment with the elements of a painting - dots, lines, shades, using specific properties of the ink/brush/paper. For traditional Chinese ink painting, there are a variety of Chinese paint papers, each of which has a unique characteristic for the diffusion of ink and water that produces strikingly diverse visual effects. These dots, lines and shades form the basis of building up the structure of the painting.

As for theme, that is up to the artist's imagination. Mr. Tam considered traditional categorizations of Chinese ink paintings such as trees, flowers or landscape to be too restrictive for a true freedom of expression of art. In fact, as it often happened, a painting begins with nothing more than a mere exercise in experimentation with unrelated dots, lines and shades on a piece of paint paper, followed by an artistic interpretation of the possibilities of imageries formed by these otherwise uncorrelated dots and lines.

Once an overall pictorial concept is conceived, it is often necessary to refine the painting by further, deliberate brush strokes to produce a theme and an overall coherent visual effect, thus converting the original, seemingly random exercise piece to a finished product. This "bottom-up" approach often results in themes and visual effects more striking and interesting than those arising from preconceived notions at the outset of creating the painting.

Shown here are a few of Prof. Lau's paintings conceived and composed largely by the method described above. (those labeled exhibited at the exhibition at City Hall in Hong Kong in Dec. 2006. Others are digitally processed versions of the original ink paintings as follow -

1. "**Cave**": original ink painting
2. "**Volcano**": original ink painting
3. "**Volcano, high pass**": digitally processed version of "volcano.jpg" by two dimensional (2-D) spatial high pass filtering of "**volcano**", this operation highlights all sharp edges in the picture;
4. "**Wavy Branches**": original ink painting,
5. "**Wavy Branches, high pass**": 2-D spatial high pass filtered version of original;
6. "**Wavy Leaf Branches**" - wavy_branches_original.jpg with pixels lying within a certain range of brightness value, replaced by green pigments.

For a clue to the actual size of the original painting, see "**Kao & Lian**" where Profs. Charles K. Kao and Lian K. Chen posted in front of Prof. Lau's "**Volcano**" painting at the Hong Kong City Hall exhibition.