Duluth Chinese watercolorist exhibit opens

By Elaine Dunn

The Tweed Museum of Art (TMA) at the University of Minnesota Duluth will feature the art of internationally celebrated watercolorist Cheng-Khee Chee from May 12 through Sept. 20, 2015. Forty watercolors painted by Chee from 1974 - 2014, including Duluth Depot” of 1974, the first painting Chee exhibited with the American Watercolor Society, as well as the monumental “100 Koi” completed in late 2014, will be on display.

Born in 1934 in Fentong, southeastern China, the artist emigrated to Malaysia (still under British rule then) at age 14. A self-taught artist with both Eastern and Western mentors, Chee developed and adapted a repertoire of techniques from both East and West that clearly identified his work and influenced countless students. For the philosophical underpinnings of his creative practice, the artist cites Confucianism and Buddhism as powerful influences.

Over his six-decade artistic career, he has faithfully adhered to the following principles:

- Paint only subjects of which he has knowledge
- Have strong feelings toward the subject matter
- Possess a thorough understanding of design elements to compose an abstract structure for his paintings
- Be competent handling specific media and in expressing the subject matter in a natural way

“After many years of practice, I have concluded that the watercolor medium is closer to Tao than any other medium. The very flowing movement of washes has a strong evocative power. The interpenetration of colors creates mysterious precipitations and nuances. In watercolor, the artist can let the medium obey its own laws and create wonders in the same way that nature creates her own works,” said Chee.

Why did he choose watercolor? “Painting in watercolor I feel that feelings and energy from my heart are most directly transmitted through the brush and medium to the sensitive paper surface, transforming into the most direct, honest, and true visual marks,” Chee replied.

Chee also credited Edgar Whitney, possibly one of the greatest and most charismatic watercolor instructors of all time, for having “the most direct and profound influence” on his art. Whitney was at UMD in 1978 to judge the Second Annual Midwest Watercolor Society (now Transparent Watercolor Society of America) Exhibition and to conduct a weeklong workshop. During the workshop, two of his statements stuck in Chee’s mind: “...substances obeying their own laws do beautiful things,” and “Wet method is the most forthright subscription to the nature of watercolor. It gives the medium a greater chance to obey its own laws, achieving lovelier effects than you can paint.”

Those two statements helped Chee connect the creative process to the Tao philosophy and to the innovative painting methods practiced by the early Chinese masters. “I was inspired to formulate my own goal in painting: to pursue the essence of Tao, the state of effortless creation beyond craftsmanship and artistry,” he said.

Chee’s passionate commitment to the medium is seen through his tireless efforts to engage new audiences through teaching workshops, leading cultural tours and organizing international exhibitions.

Peter Spooner, the exhibit’s guest curator, said, “In Chee’s art, the interplay between Taoist philosophy, Chinese brush painting and Western art forms - from realism to complete abstraction - offers us an expanded way to look at watercolor painting. He offers viewers multiple ways to approach his art. Each path yields an enriching opportunity to perceive the world through his eyes. A focus on technique is one path; attention to spiritual influences is another. This exhibition gives everyone - local fans, watercolor aficionados and students alike - several means to appreciate his work.”

Asked whether any of the exhibited works would be for sale, Chee said without hesitation, “No, these are for my children.”

“The Way of Cheng-Khee Chee: Paintings 1974-2014” is the first exhibition by the artist at TMA since 1992, and will be accompanied by a publication with essays by artist and writer Ann KLEFSTAD and guest curator Peter Spooner.

A number of free public programs also have been planned throughout the exhibit, including:

Members exclusive cocktail hour with the artist
May 14, 5-6 p.m.
Opening reception for general public
May 14, 6-8 p.m.
Artist painting demonstration
June 11, 6-8 p.m.
Gallery talk by essayist Ann Klefstad
July 19, 2-4 p.m.
Curator’s gallery talk by Peter Spooner
Aug. 23, 2-4 p.m.

A rare three-day workshop (June 12-14) for practitioners and novices alike, led by Chee himself, is open to Tweed Museum members only. Registration and fee are required for this event. Details are available at www.d.umn.edu/tma.

About TMA
The Tweed Museum of Art is a collecting art museum that holds in trust a historical and contemporary art collection of over 8,000 artworks on behalf of the University of Minnesota and the people of Duluth and the outlying regions. The museum is located on the campus of the University of Minnesota. Hours and directions can be found at www.d.umn.edu/tma or by calling 218-726-8222.