Koi No. 1, 1992, displays Cheng-Khee Chee’s distinctive style.

In Cheng-Khee Chee, East Meets West


Born in 1934 in Fengting, southeastern China, the artist emigrated to British-colonized Malaysia at the age of 14. As a self-taught artist, with both Eastern and Western mentors, Chee incorporates the processes of Chinese brushwork with Western painting styles. He is influenced by Confucianism and Buddhism.

Chee came to Duluth in 1962 to obtain a master’s degree in Library Science and was offered a job at UMD. He and Sing-Bee Ong, whom he had known at university in Singapore, were married in Duluth, where they have raised two sons and two daughters. He began painting seriously in 1973. A 1978 workshop with Edgar Whitney inspired him to continue developing his unique East-West synthesis in watercolor. He began exhibiting regionally and in juried exhibitions of regional and national watercolor societies while working as a librarian at UMD.

Since 1983, Chee has had 14 solo exhibitions of his work in the U.S., Malaysia and China. In 1997, the Singapore National Art Museum organized a solo exhibition and a 208-page book about Cheng-Khee Chee. His art has been featured in numerous magazines, exhibition catalogues, and a six-part instructional film. His illustrations for “Old Turtle” (1991), written by Douglas Wood, won him national acclaim for his watercolor illustration. The book won numerous awards, including a 1993 ABBY. —Shawn Pench

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