

POETRY IN MOTION

The horse as muse for Malaysian artist Lim Ah Cheng

by LYDIA SOH

Horses have always been symbols of grace and power, and known to be loyal companions of humankind for centuries. Blessed with intelligence and speed, these magnificent creatures are the animal kingdom's equivalent of 'beauty and brains'. In several ancient civilizations and cultures, horses bore spiritual meaning as well. In the art world, they have been immortalized in paintings and drawings since prehistoric times and have been reverently illustrated through the ages, from the great Roman, Macedonian and Persian empires, as well as many of history's most lauded civilizations, such as the Greek, Assyrian, Chinese and Indian civilizations.

Fast-forward to the future. Though horses are still featured in modern artworks, only a few artists singularly focus on creatively depicting them in all their wild, stunning glory. Think mighty gallops through vast plains, manes blowing in the wind, hooves kicking up swirls of dust. But then again, it could also be just one solitary green horse wearing a red gas mask, which was what Malaysian artist Lim Ah Cheng once painted to highlight the hazardous nature of the haze that sweeps the Southeast Asian countries yearly due to the burning of forests in Indonesia. His brand of abstract equestrian art is gaining prominence in the region and beyond. His love affair with the aristocratic beast started over 10 years ago, and the horse remains his eternal muse and mainstay subject of his works.

Despite his admiration for these stately creatures, Ah Cheng confesses he is no avid horseman. But a sense of inspiration overcomes him every time he looks at them. Also, being an expressionist painter who primarily uses brushstrokes to express himself, horses seem to fit the bill with their fluid movement and winsome aura. He shares, "Horses appeal to me because of their strength and beauty, their speed and movement. They have been a longstanding subject in Chinese painting, and I've had many years of traditional Chinese ink training, whereby brushstrokes can express galloping horses and a lot of movement." As to why he favours oil paint to other mediums, he explains, "The texture of oil paint is brilliant: it can show off the layers of colours and richness of texture. Depth and perspective can be reached easily when I master it. It also can be laid on top of water-based paint mediums to create a combination of mixed media harmoniously."

Cheng also commented on the differences between how the Western world appraises the horse, as compared to their Eastern counterparts. "Westerners appreciate horses in bodily form, the beauty of torso from head to toe, full stocky horse standing or trotting on the field whereas Asians mostly prefer horses galloping in groups to show the powerful strength of speed and their gracefulness." That being said, Cheng's pieces meld Oriental and Western styles of art. "I like to combine Oriental and Western influences in oil showing depth and layering with a contemporary touch, while infusing elements of Chinese art in terms of



MOMENTOUSARTS.COM



Artworks by LIM AH CHENG are available locally at MOMENTOUS ARTS

brushstrokes, atmosphere, space and imagination of empty space, with a philosophy of simplicity."

Though he doesn't get to ride horses often, Cheng has had many opportunities to view the animals on his travels. He journeyed along the Silk Road in North-western China and has gone riding ala the way of the nomad. He also visits the saddle club in Kuala Lumpur for leisure. As for his most memorable artwork to date, it is the painting titled "The Mask", which comprises a standing green horse muzzled by a red gas mask. He rues, "The haze is always a sensitive issue in this region, as it is air pollution originating from Indonesia. The green colour represents our environment, while the mask painted in red is akin to a danger sign to mankind. This 5x5 feet painting will be showcased in the annual show for NGO WWF 2013."

Mindful of how fickle and fast-paced the world is today, Cheng stresses that artists need to put in effort to stay relevant. "As modern artists, we need to gather all the latest information at our fingertips. I travel frequently to widen my views and broaden my art journey, and surf the Internet to stay in touch with the world." Will he ever put down his brush? "I will stop painting when I feel empty," states the veteran artist succinctly. He continues, "I will never tire of painting horses. Travelling lets in new ideas to refresh my mind and soul. Attending art exhibitions also helps me to reload my power and energy to re-create this single animal again."

His biggest fans are collectors who have faithfully followed him from his first collection, all of whom admire his style of expression. They also keep him on his toes to churn out more innovative pieces. On the other hand, his harshest critics are art buyers who think his paintings are related to fengshui. He begs to differ. "I am not a fengshui horse painter. I enjoy the animal world so much that when I paint them, it brings endless happiness to my art process."