

Zen painting

see DVD for additional material

禪
Zen
meditation

靜
jing
stillness

悟
wu
awakening

Kim Hoa Tram (Shen Jinhe 沈金和 in Chinese) was born in Vietnam and has been living in Melbourne, Australia since 1984. His parents were originally from Fujian province in China. For nearly twenty years, Kim has immersed himself in Zen Buddhism, which began in China in the sixth century.¹

Kim is inspired by the wisdom of Zen Buddhism and the Chinese tradition of painting and calligraphy. He paints or 'writes' with calligraphic brushstrokes. Black ink is preferred over colour, which is considered distracting. The subtle tonalities of ink suggest the five colours of the universe.

Calligraphy and ink painting are Kim's vehicles for expressing his inner thoughts and emotions. With suggestive brushstrokes, he captures the essence of his images; essentials are achieved with great economy of means.

His works are poetic, evocative of an aesthetic and spiritual experience. Beguilingly simple and seemingly unassuming, they are imbued with spiritual meaning.

Kim's method of working is derived from his immersion in Zen. Before taking up the brush, he sits quietly and meditates to clear his mind. When he attains the state of 'no mind' *wuxin* 無心 (empty of thought) and totally at ease, he writes his images of the 'mind' with total freedom and spontaneity.

The artist speaks of his creative process in the following words: 'In the awakened state of stillness (*jing* 靜), the mind and body becomes one. At that moment, the mind is boundless and beyond imagination. Images emerge naturally in spontaneous brushwork'.²

When Kim paints, his hand and brush move in quick rhythms. His brush dances on the paper. The images are imbued with vital energies (*qi* 氣), which appear animated and revolving in his pictures. An attuned viewer will naturally reverberate with the 'spirit resonance' (*qiyun* 氣韻) of his pictures, just as a musical instrument resonates in harmony with an equally tuned instrument.

Awakening (Wu 悟) is a powerful work. It deals with the Buddhist concept of spiritual awakening to the impermanence of life – death itself.

The painting consists of four panels and is read from right to left in a sequence of events. The bird is the recurring motif, repeated in each panel to tell a story. The artist's signature, Jinhe, and his seal are at the top of each panel.

A living bird and a dead bird are repeated in a sequence as the narrative unfolds. It progresses upward in crescendo from a baby bird crying helplessly beside a dead bird; a young bird shouting or screaming in shock; an older bird staring at the dead bird, as if coming to some kind of realisation. Finally in the last panel, a wise old bird is perched on a branch near the top of the painting, with an enigmatic expression of acceptance. The silence conveyed by the void in the fourth panel is as emotionally intense as the scream in the second panel.

The artist has made use of the traditional format of four seasons in Chinese painting to show the different stages in the passage of life: childhood, youth, middle age and old age, connected in the sequence of events. According to the artist, the upward movement of the birds signifies the rise in the higher levels of spiritual attainment.

The bird serves as a vehicle for expressing human emotion in confrontation of death, which is not a common theme in Chinese painting. This highly original work also reflects the artist's inner world, his thoughts and his emotions. The images express what is beyond words. As in the Zen saying, 'borrowing the finger to point at the moon', these images are the finger pointing to the moon, spiritual enlightenment.

For an attuned viewer, it is not so much to rise to a higher realm of spirituality but to go within, to purify one's mind and attain spiritual enlightenment.

Kim Hoa TRAM
Chinese born Vietnam 1959, worked
in Australia 1984–
Awakening (Wu 悟) 2002
(viewed from right to left)
ink and watercolour on paper
89.9 x 21.6 cm (image and sheet each)
Lillian Ernestine Lobb Bequest, 2002
(2002.421.1-4)
© Kim Hoa Tram

¹ Zen, usually translated as 'meditation', is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese character 禪, pronounced Chan in Chinese, which entered the Chinese vocabulary as an abbreviated form of the Indian Sanskrit word Dhyana. Chan (Zen) Buddhism began in China in the sixth century and then spread south to Vietnam and east to Korea and Japan. Zen teaching was transmitted from mind to mind, not through words. Zen emphasises the practice of meditation as key to awakening one's true nature and uncovering one's innate wisdom and compassion.

² From 'The art of stillness', Moon in Reflection, the Art of Kim Hoa Tram, DVD, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 2008.

