From the Conservators' Eyes: Examining Georgette Chen's Paintings

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Georgette Chen: At Home in the World presented an exceptional opportunity for the Heritage Conservation Centre's Paintings' Section to closely examine Georgette Chen's paintings prior to their display.[1] A total of 55 paintings were studied, unveiling the techniques Chen employed and her creative process.

An artist's creative process is unique to each individual and many factors will converge. For instance, the places an artist lived or travelled, the art movements they were involved in or their accessibility to materials and tools, among others.

Driven by her love for art, Chen's artistic journey started at an early age. The places she lived (such as Paris, New York, Hong Kong, and Shanghai) and the exceptional world events she was exposed to (both World War I and II) shaped her as an artist, and arguably influenced each and every one of her works.

Chen's practice spans a range of different art forms: drawing, painting, and ceramics. While working across a variety of media, she cultivated her practice over time, with patience and effort. In her 1988 interview with curator Constance Sheares, when asked about the development of her style, Chen stated "[a]nything like painting or other work that needs a lot of thinking and practice has to be developed slowly. But it can be done."[1]

EXAMINATION AND ANALYSIS

The works were analysed with technical photography and microscopy examination, techniques widely used to study and document works of art. In technical photography, digital images are produced using different sources of light and camera filters.[2] Normal light, raking light, and transmitted light are most commonly used by conservators to examine paintings. Each image provides unique information that helps the conservator further understand the structure and condition of the artwork. Normal light is used to assess the general condition of a painting. Raking light is achieved by placing a light source to one side of the painting at a low oblique angle to the surface so that the light glances across the painting. This lighting shows irregularities, such as lifting paint or undulations in the canvas. Transmitted light results from placing the light source behind the painting and viewing from the front. Light is transmitted through cracks, tears, paint losses and thinly painted areas, making them easier to detect.[3] Microscopy examination offers a closer, more "in-depth" look at the artwork, submerging the viewer deeper into the layers of the painting for information that would otherwise be difficult to perceive with the naked eye.

Chen's paintings were deconstructed by visual examination aided by the use of a microscope and these lighting techniques. Findings about the paintings' compositions and preparatory sketches, as well as the characteristic traits of her paint application from different decades, are presented here.

COMPOSITION AND PREPARATORY SKETCH

Creating a sketch before painting may be considered common practice, but not all artists do preparatory sketches. A preparatory sketch can be first executed on a piece of paper, then transferred onto canvas; or as in most of Chen's paintings, drawn directly onto the canvas. In a 1962 article in *Her World* magazine, Chen emphasised the importance of preparatory sketches to her process:

> My students tell me: "Madam Chen, we like modern art, it's so much quicker to learn to paint that way!" and I tell them that underneath my every painting lies a solid drawing. That is how I must paint.[4]

Different mediums such as charcoal and oil paint were identified to have been used by Chen for preparatory sketches throughout many of the paintings studied. The sketch is sometimes concealed by the application of paint. However, in many cases, it is part of the final composition. This outline is what delimitates the figures from the background and has become distinctive to Chen's style.

From microscopy examination on *Rohani* (1963) (pl. 55), we distinguished what is likely to be charcoal, used for the sketch (fig. 1).

Family Portrait (c. 1954–1955) (pl. 41) was identified as the sole instance of Chen preparing a sketch on paper prior to painting (fig. 2). Note how the final composition (fig. 3) varies from the original sketch, a substantial difference being the absence of the male figure, who appears on the left of the painting. Upon closer comparison, the dress pattern of the woman at the centre of the painting and other details on the furniture also differ.

Pl. 65 Georgette Chen, *Rohani*, 1963. Oil on canvas. 65 × 54 cm. Gift of the artist's estate.

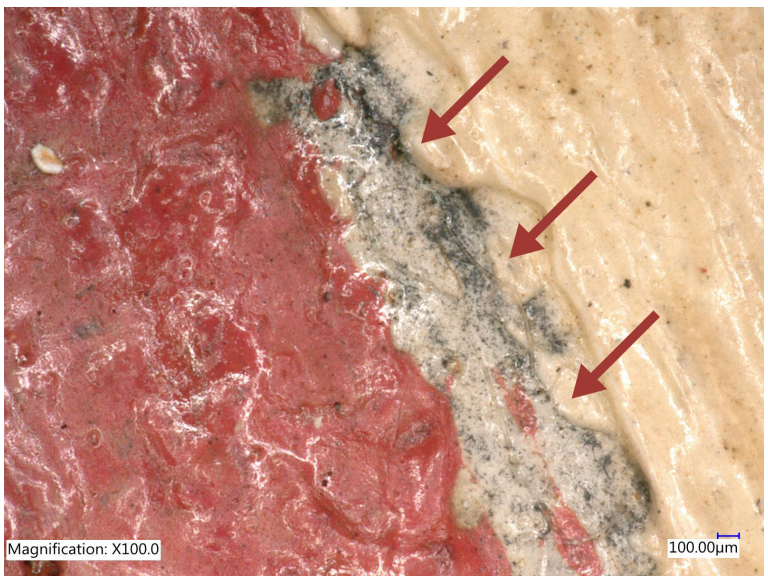
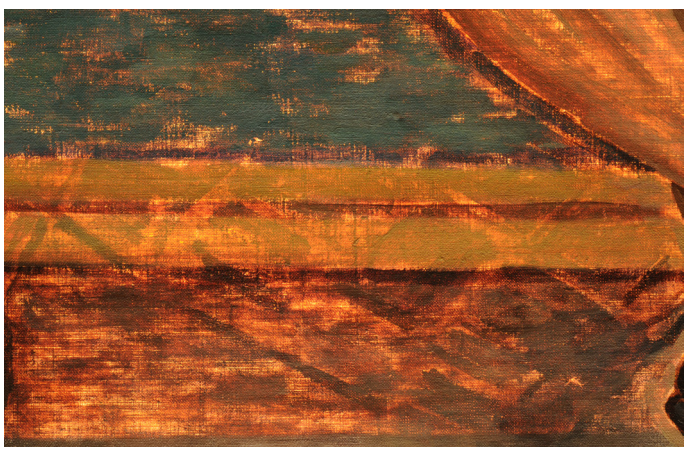


Fig.1 Detail of microscopy image at 100x magnification. Arrows point to the trace of charcoal.



Besides the clear differences between the preparatory sketch and the painting, there is also evidence of changes made to the composition of the final image, technically referred to as pentimenti. Chen had initially painted a decorative pattern on the sofa, which was then painted over (figs. 4, 5).

Fig. 2 (top row, left) Photo of the sketch done by Chen for *Family Portrait*. Collection of National Gallery Singapore Library & Archives.

Fig. 3 (top row, right) Yellow rectangle indicates area of pentimenti for completed *Family Portrait* (c. 1954–1955) (pl. 41).

Fig. 4 (bottom row, left) Close-up of covered decorative pattern in *Family Portrait* under normal light.

Fig. 5 (bottom row, right) Close-up of covered decorative pattern in *Family Portrait* under transmitted light.

APPLICATION OF THE PAINT

Chen's determination and sense of purpose drove her to paint consistently throughout her life, despite the tumultuous events she had to live through. She experimented with several mediums, including watercolors, pastels, and oil paint. However, the medium most representative of her work, as

Fig. 6 Close-up of top area of Eugene Chen's face in *Portrait of Eugene Chen* (c. 1939–1944) (pl. 12) under normal light.

Fig. 7 Under raking light.

Fig. 8 Under transmitted light.

well as the one she loved the most, is oil paint. In the 1988 interview with Sheares, Chen stated, "I like oil painting. I think it's a very complete medium."[5] In examining the traces of her brushstrokes, we found that she developed a personal painting language to construct colour composition and spatial distribution. We were also able to identify changes in her method of application of the paint along the decades.

During the mid-1930s and 1940s, Chen portrayed her beloved husband Eugene Chen using quick, gestural brushstrokes. She applied the paint directly onto the canvas, blending colours optically rather than on the palette. She juxtaposed complementary colours to add vibrancy to the image. These fast and precise brushstrokes captured the immediacy of the moment.

Portrait of Eugene Chen (c. 1939–1944) (pl. 12) was examined under normal light, raking light and transmitted light (figs. 6, 7, 8). Under raking light (fig. 7), we observed areas of high impasto where Chen painted with precise and quick gestures. You can almost picture how she would have moved the tip of her brush, carefully constructing the profile of the nose and areas of light in the forehead.

Although her paintings are generally characterised by having minimal amount of paint, she employed impasto brush strokes during this decade. This feature can be observed with transmitted light (fig. 8), where the thinner the paint layer, the more translucent the painted image.

With this illumination technique, we can better appreciate the shape of Chen's brushstrokes. It allows us to perceive how she constructed the image using decisive and modulated strokes that enabled her to bring the image to life. The saturated brushstrokes drew the image, leaving the colour component a secondary feature which simply served as an additional tool to achieve the final result.

In comparison to paintings from the mid-1930s and 1940s, paintings from the 1960s and 1970s are identifiably different. *Portrait (Mrs Sum)* (1972) presents a good example of the technical changes in Chen's painting technique (fig. 7). With the different illumination techniques, the smooth texture of the paint layer is revealed. She resolved the portrait using blended brushstrokes, granting it, like in the previous decades, a sense of life and emotion, but with a different technical execution.

The tones on her palette became brighter after she moved to Penang and Singapore. The light of the tropics and the new subject matter, such as tropical fruits and fabric patterns, may have influenced this change (fig. 8, pl. 47).

To construct her spatial compositions, Chen used what is known as the hatching technique, which consists of building up tone and texture with parallel lines. This technique is often used in linear media such as drawing, etching or engraving, and painting. It allows the artist to create a vibrant texture and give the illusion of form and light. The outcome depends on the length of the lines as well as the angle and their closeness. Chen used hatching to blend the subjects of her representations with their backgrounds, creating a unique atmosphere in each painting.

The following examples demonstrate her use of a combination of assorted brushstrokes, a stylistic trait she retained through the years.

In *Portrait of Eugene Chen* (c. 1939–1944) (pl. 13), Chen used vertical and fast brushstrokes that are separated, not blending with each other (fig. 9). A signature mark of Chen's is the use of a stronger and thicker line to highlight or reinforce the profile of the figures and other elements (fig. 10).

In some cases, the use of modulated strokes in the background adds a sense of movement to the overall scene (fig. 11).

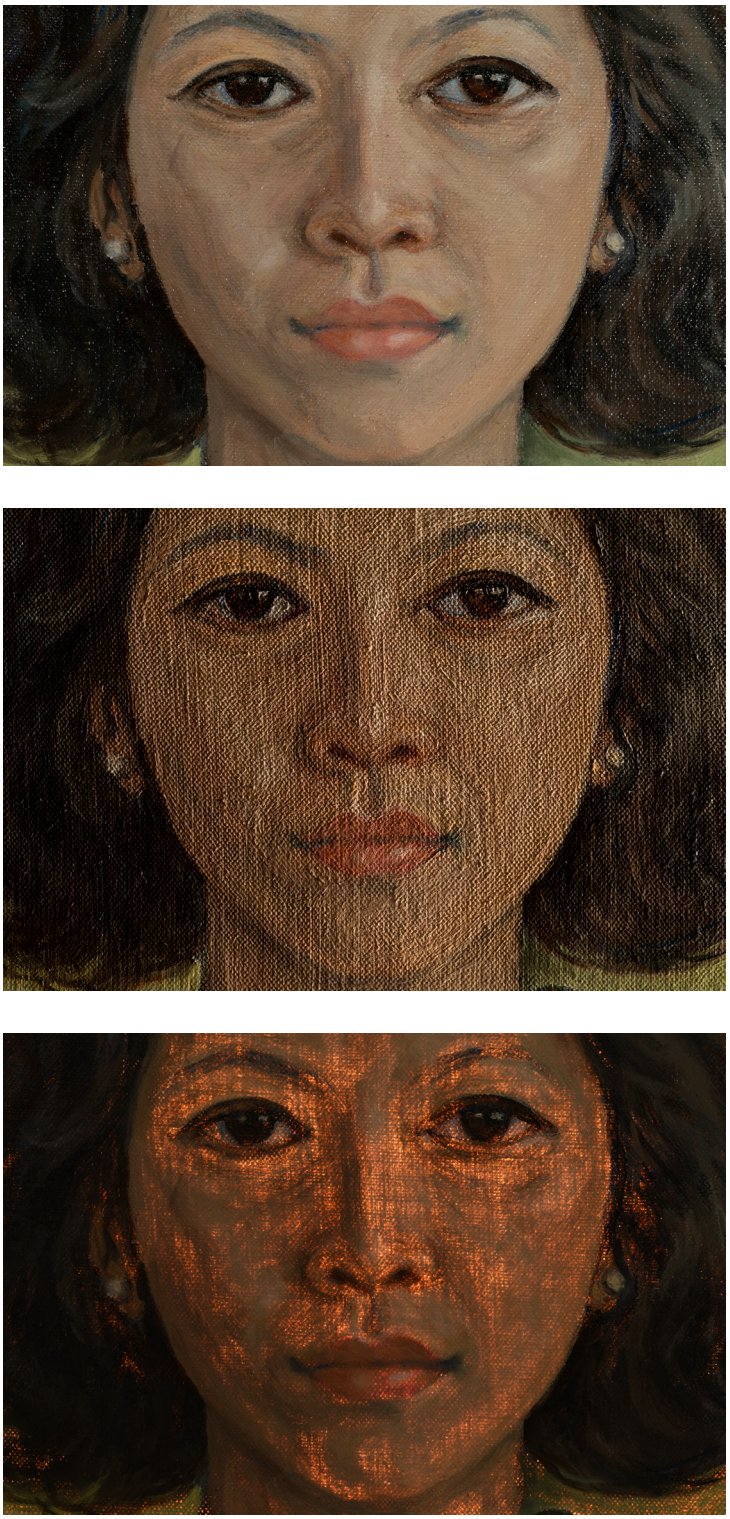
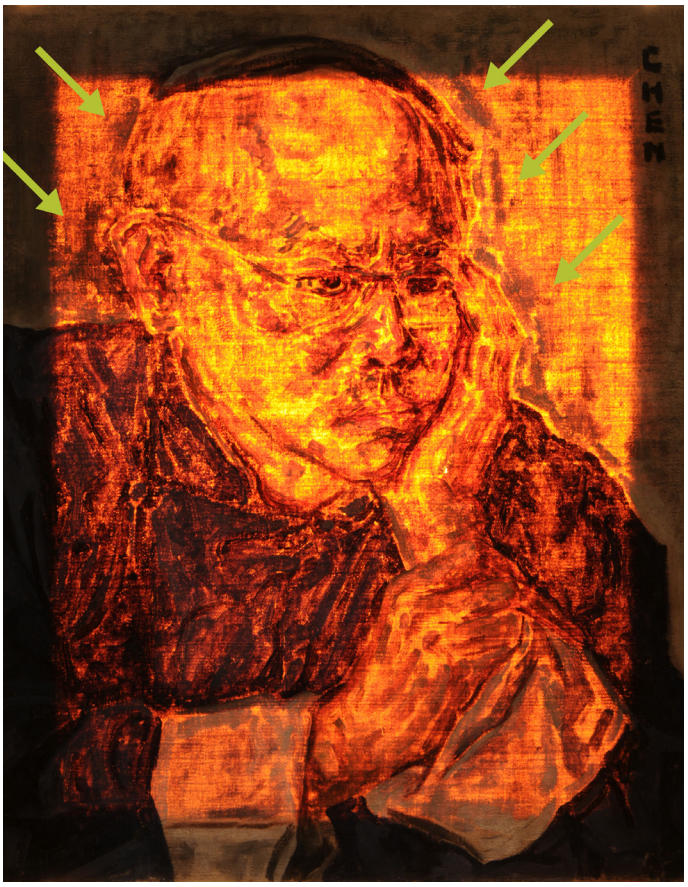


Fig. 7 From top to bottom, close-ups of Mrs Sum's face in *Portrait (Mrs Sum)* (1972) under normal, raking, and transmitted light.

Fig. 8 Georgette Chen, *Portrait (Mrs Sum)*, 1972. Oil on canvas, 81 × 65 cm. Gift of the artist's estate.

Pl. 47 Georgette Chen, *Satay Boy*, 1964–1965. Oil on canvas, 134.7 × 161.5 cm. Collection of National Museum of Singapore.


CHEN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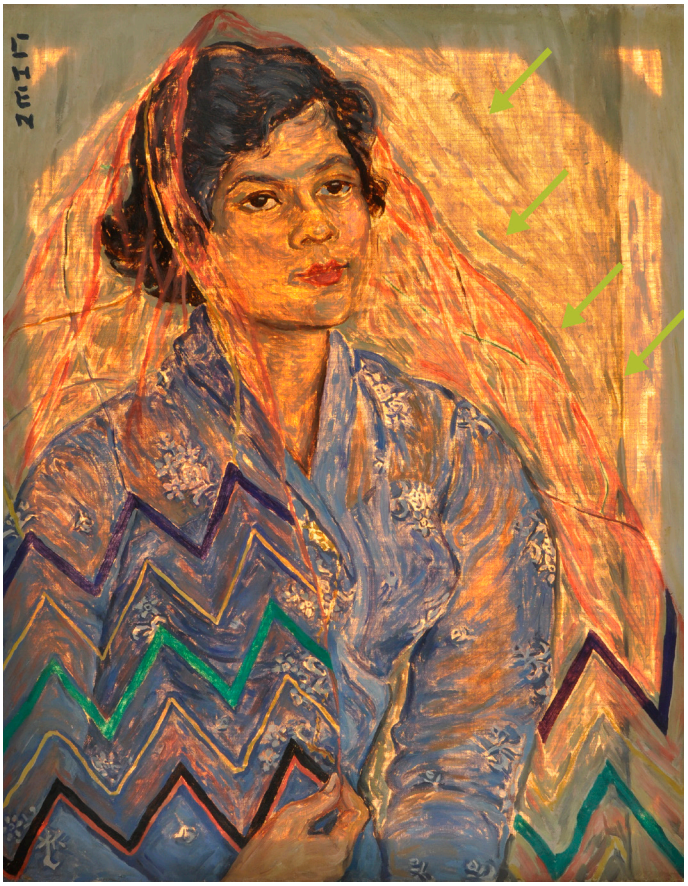

CONCLUSION

These findings from our initial study using non-invasive analysis have identified interesting characteristics in Chen's process of execution.

From here, we can surmise her approach to a blank canvas: Chen constructed her composition with an initial drawing, then applied paint to fill in areas that had been delimited with charcoal lines while leaving other areas of the sketch and ground layer uncovered. Her expressive brush marks added depth and movement, especially to the backgrounds of her paintings and specific elements in the composition. We observed an evolution of her painting technique over time, from a rather spontaneous and immediate application of paint to a more processed execution. Relatedly, our study of Chen's gestural brushstrokes over time facilitated their classification into categories such as size, shape, direction, and saturation.

This research is still in progress as we move towards invasive analysis, which aims to identify canvas type, composition of the ground, paint, and varnish layers. This will allow us to gain a better understanding of Chen's artistic practice and, from a broader perspective, a better understanding of Singapore's art history.

Fig. 9 (opposite, top left) Arrows on *Portrait of Eugene Chen* (c. 1939–1944) (pl. 13) point to the vertical brushstrokes, seen under normal light.

Fig. 10 (opposite, top right) Arrows on *Portrait of Eugene Chen* (c. 1939–1944) point to brushstrokes applied to enhance the figure, seen under transmitted light.

Fig. 11 (opposite, bottom left to right) *Malay Maiden* (1961) (pl. 53) under normal and transmitted light. Arrows point to modulated brushstrokes in the background.

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ENDNOTES

1 Interview with Georgette Chen by Constance Sheares at Gleneagles Hospital Singapore, 2 November 1988, transcribed by Roger Khong, 17 February 1989. Collection of National Archives of Singapore.

2 "Technical Photography (TP)," Cultural Heritage Science Open Source (CHSOS), accessed October 30, 2020, https://chsopensource.org/1-technical-photography-tp/

3 "Condition Reporting—Paintings. Part II: Examination Techniques and a Checklist Notes 10/7," Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) accessed October 30, 2020, https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/conservation-preservation-publications/canadian-conservation-institute-notes/condition-reporting-paintings-examination-techniques.html.

4 J.M, "The Art of Georgette," *Her World*, August, 1962. 36–37.

5 Interview with Chen by Sheares, 1988.