

From the Artist who gave us the Cover & Art in this issue**JACKI BORTOFT**

About three years ago I saw a notice in the newsagent's window for a Chinese painting class stating "Beginners Welcome" and so joined about 7 other ladies in a small bright kitchen annex in a Norfolk village.

The teacher, **Kit Nicol**, struck me as a quiet, neat lady in her 80s. With little preamble, she showed me how to hold the brush using different fingers and in a more upright manner than is usual in watercolour painting. Then she set me to work painting bamboo leaves with black ink ground on a slate bed from a solid stick. The rice paper we used was quite absorbent, so it took several weeks to gauge the amount of paint, water and pressure changes to produce a bold, but delicate tapering form. She gave me a few pages she had prepared on the tools and philosophy of the art and that opened the door to the wider history. It appealed to me that the tools: ink sticks, grinding stone, brushes and paper were called "The Four Treasures", and that the skills were first acquired by practising the basic forms of bamboo, rose, chrysanthemum, orchid and wisteria. The traditional intrinsic value of the plant and the outer expression ideally should manifest in its image, for example, the evergreen bamboo represents strength, energy and vitality, but also modesty, nobility and gentleness.

Then I was encouraged to copy simple designs, often of animals and nature from the portfolio of past teaching works and from Kit's accumulated library.

During the following months I was shown how to paste and mount the paper on card for durability, and had explained the role of the chop as a final seal to an at least satisfactory piece. Chinese chops are stamps carved originally from stone (now often rubber) to finish and balance an image with a cinnabar mark, which may signify the artist or another expression such as "still learning", "good luck" or "painting brings peace". Many traditional works also have calligraphy as comment and balance to complete the image.

When I was comfortable with black and water, from which many shades of grey can be produced, a style called Sumi-e, I was allowed to work with colour but only the three primary ones, from which a whole spectrum could be generated by mixing and blending. Chinese painting may place several colours on the brush and water to produce delicate or sumptuous colour blends in one brush stroke.

Naturally the gap between aspiration and achievement often left a sense of frustration; but there was always the possibility of a new start. A happy accidental mark could bring a touch of spontaneity to a piece as often as a mistaken stroke could ruin an otherwise reasonable image. The aim of Chinese painting is to express the essence of an image rather than an exact replication which can look hard and un-alive. Very occasionally Kit would repaint a line over someone's piece of work, usually to emphasise an aesthetic dimension; the value of asymmetry and space seems greater than in western art, which tends to prefer symmetry and to fill in space.

From the start we were encouraged to produce pieces to celebrate special occasions, so we all made Christmas cards, Easter cards, birthday cards for family and enjoyed seeing and receiving each others gifts. The atmosphere in the group was collaborative and encouraging and although not everyone came every week, a sense of endeavour and cohesion soon developed. Gradually I noticed each person seemed to have their own 'style', pace of working, preference for the type of image they were attracted to, and this evolved according to some inner inclination or outer target. I have found the process very organic and fascinating to be involved with; the more I learn the more the subject opens, there is never a lack of small challenges.