

# Marine Watercolors of Cheng-Khee Chee

Award-winning watercolorist Cheng-Khee Chee came to Minnesota in 1962 to pursue a graduate degree at the University of Minnesota, settling in Duluth in 1965. Over the years, he has experimented with ways to synthesize the concepts and processes of traditions from both his native China and his adopted country, and his paintings are the product of his ability to blend technique and style from both Eastern and Western influences. This duality results in ambitious artworks of many styles, from traditional to nonobjective. A strong believer in the meaningful connections made between artist, artwork, and viewer, Chee explains, “My ultimate goal in painting is to achieve the essence of Tao, the state of effortless creation, and I hope the end results are the visual realization of my inner being that will communicate on a universal and timeless level.”

An associate professor emeritus of the University of Minnesota-Duluth, Chee is a natural as a teacher as well as an artist. His graduate studies at UM were in library science, however, not art. While he worked in the UM-D library by day, he honed his artistic skills and technique by night. In 1979, he began teaching watercolor painting, first at workshops and in time through the art department. When he left the university in 1994 to pursue his own art full time, he retired from both the library and the art department. That year, he was the recipient of the 1994 University of Minnesota system-wide University College Distinguished Teaching Award and the University of Minnesota-Duluth Campus Chancellor’s Distinguished Services Award. While teaching was something he could officially retire from—on campus, at least—he was never able to walk away from it entirely. Since his university retirement, in addition to his work as an artist, he has also produced instructional DVDs and books for aspiring watercolorists. His works have been exhibited in numerous national juried exhibitions and captured more than 200 honors. Solo exhibitions have taken him across the country and back to his native China and former home-country, Singapore. Currently, visitors to the Minnesota Marine Art Museum can catch his latest show, *Retrospective Marine Watercolors by Cheng-Khee Chee*, on exhibit through 15 January 2012. The exhibition features forty paintings of different periods and places, as well as Mr. Chee’s book illustrations from *The Old Turtle* by Douglas Wood, the 1990 best-selling children’s book and winner of the International Reading Association’s Children’s Book Award (1993).

—Jon Swanson, Curator, Minnesota Marine Art Museum

**Morning Harbor—Meizhou, China, 30 x 40 inches (1995)**





**Ore Carriers**  
*25 x 40 inches*  
(1980)

**Duluth Harbor**, *22 x 30 inches* (2009)



“I was born in Fengting, a picturesque coastal town in Fujian Province in southern China. At age thirteen, I immigrated to Penang, Malaysia, a beautiful island praised as the “Pearl of the East.” I attended Nanyang University in Singapore, a prosperous island nation with one of the world’s largest and busiest seaports. I ultimately settled in Duluth, Minnesota, an inland port on Lake Superior. All my life, I have been associated with water. Oceans, seas, lakes, rivers, boats, harbors, coastlines, surfs, and creatures living in the water have become the inspiration for many of my paintings.”



"I believe artists should not be content with the specific subject matter in which they excel, or established style. I feel artists should be sensitive to changes around them and, like scientists, ideas, and ways of expression. Picasso found inspirations in African Art. Matisse underwent interpenetration and integration of art forms of various cultures. As watercolorists, we should

### Improvisational Splash Color Approach

I discovered that when a broad brush charged with color is swept over the glossy gel-medium-coated high-surfaced illustration board, the paint is immediately repelled, and creates exciting textures resembling rocks and mountains. Since the board is very smooth, it is also easy to make changes. I utilize these qualities and take an improvisational approach to paint subjects such as rocks, mountains, and canyons. I start the painting with strong emotion and great speed. I work at white heat for about twenty minutes, trying to cover the entire surface of the board. Gradually, through the act of painting, I discover the subject matter and exert more conscious control to guide the painting to its finishing stage. The painting develops in the very process of painting.

**Homer, Alaska, Impression.**  
22 x 30 inches (2008)



### Saturated Wet Process

The saturated wet paper allows easy lifting. Therefore, I can paint the negative background first, and then lift out shapes of any subject I choose to paint, maintaining soft edges and a unified background. I use this method for painting subjects such as koi and flowers. Their shapes are generally lighter in value than the negative background, and they have soft edges. When painting fish I try to get the feeling that fish are *in* the water and that the two are inseparable.

**Koi 2008 No. 6, 22 x 30 inches (2008)**

with the specific process they have mastered, merely to repeat themselves within an be constantly exploring, experimenting, discovering, and developing new concepts, the influence of the Orient. In light of the shrinking time and space, there will be more be aware of the rich East Asian watermedia traditions.” —Cheng-Khee Chee



### Traditional Approach

The traditional approach is to pre-select a subject, and then work toward achieving the result. Although striving for innovation, I have never overlooked the importance of traditional/academic approaches to watercolor painting. It is imperative to master drawing skills and techniques of handling the inherent qualities of watermedia such as controlling paint and washes. It is also crucial to have a thorough understanding of design. Before starting a painting, I would analyze its design elements and then orchestrate these abstract elements into a cohesive painting by applying design principles. I use this approach for painting subjects with concrete forms and complex perspective, such as boats, buildings and streets.

**Lakers**, 22 x 30 inches (1998)

*The Minnesota Marine Art Museum, located on the Mississippi River, is dedicated to exhibiting and educating the public about contemporary art inspired by water. MMAM, 800 Riverview Drive, Winona, MN 55987; Ph. 507 474-6626; [www.minnesotamarineart.org](http://www.minnesotamarineart.org). Information on the artist is available online at [www.chengkheechee.com](http://www.chengkheechee.com).*