

By Dr Peter Lu with contributions from Dr Mark Lu and Dr Anette Jacobsen

A Tribute to Dr Earl Lu

(15 September 1925 to 2 September 2005)



The 1940s: A young Earl Lu (second from right) at home with his parents, grand aunt and two sisters.

*“So Krishna, as when he admonished Arjuna
On the field of battle.
Not fare well,
But fare forward, voyagers.”*

(From *Four Quartets*, by T S Elliot)

On 2 September 2005, my father, Dr Earl Lu passed away in Pisa, Italy, following a brief illness. He was two weeks short of his 80th birthday. I feel privileged to have been given this opportunity to pay tribute to his life’s work and achievements, and also hope to offer some personal insights into the man as I knew him.

My father was born in Hong Kong on 15 September 1925. He spent his formative years in a number of countries including Hong Kong, Malaysia (Klang), China (Shanghai), Singapore and India (Simla), before moving to Australia where he studied Medicine at the University of Sydney. It was in Sydney that he met his future wife, Norma. He finally settled in Singapore in 1958 to raise his young family and pursue his career as a general surgeon.

Professor Tommy Koh said in the eulogy that he delivered at my father’s memorial service that “it is easy to praise Earl because he was such an

accomplished and lovable man”. Indeed, he served as a member of the Singapore Medical Council for several years, and received the Public Service Star in 1995, and Commendation Medal (Military Gold) in 1985. He was appointed Justice of the Peace in 1990.

Dr Earl Lu will be remembered by his colleagues as one of the eminent general surgeons of his time. His calm and reassuring bedside manner made him popular among patients, while his honesty and integrity were admired by peers. He loved the practice of surgery so much that in his later years, he remarked to my brother Mark that he would gladly pay to have the privilege to operate.

My father loved art as much as he loved Medicine. I recall him telling me once that he felt completely at peace in two situations. First, when he was operating, and second, when he was painting. He inherited his love for Chinese painting and ceramics from his grandfather and father, who were both

Acknowledgement: Photographs of Dr Earl Lu's paintings are courtesy of Art Forum Pte Ltd.



Nude with Roses (2003)



Dark Red Roses in a White Vase (2000)



Ink Roses with Blue and Yellow Background (2004)



Wealth and Abundance (2004)



Rice Terraces, Sidemen, Bali II (2003)



Bathers (2003)



Still Life (2002)

Acknowledgement: Photographs of Dr. Earl Lu's paintings are courtesy of Art Forum Pte Ltd.

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avid collectors. As a young man, he had developed an unerring eye for good art and prided himself on being able to recognise the potential of great artists before they achieved fame. Two examples of artists that he ‘discovered’ early were Chi Pai Shih and Ting Yen Yung.



A proud moment as Dr Earl Lu receives an award from Singapore President S R Nathan.

He loved art purely for the pleasure it gave him and never judged a piece by its potential for profit. He donated many precious paintings and ceramics in his collection to museums. His philosophy on ownership can be summarised by what he told a journalist while discussing a piece from his collection, “Who really ever owns anything? This piece is over a thousand years old. We are only its custodians for a brief period of time.”

One incident which illustrated my father’s philosophy on material possessions occurred when I was 5 years old. I accidentally broke a valuable vase while playing. Instead of punishing me severely when he found out, he calmly told me not worry and advised me to be more careful in future. He later told me that our material possessions must never be more valuable to us than our loved ones.

True to his Cantonese roots, my father loved roast goose, shark’s fin and abalone. He also enjoyed good food from many other countries such as foie gras, Parma ham and prime beef. Nevertheless, he believed that over-indulgence of such sensual pleasures quickly caused one to become jaded. To him, it was the pleasures of the intellect that were infinitely stimulating. There was never a time when he did not read voraciously on a remarkably wide range of topics. He also loved poetry, his favourite poets being T S Elliot, Dylan Thomas and Tagore. Among the philosophers he admired were Plato, Bertrand Russell and William James.

No account of Dr Lu can be complete without mentioning his kindness. I have never heard him speak a harsh word against anyone, whether to the most junior nurse or doctor, or even against his detractors. He was always a perfect gentleman.

Prof Feng Pao Hsui recounted recently how after a very stressful bedside presentation during Grand Ward Rounds on his first day of housemanship, my father sought him out, put a hand on his shoulder and told him, “You did well, Dr Feng.” It was typical of my father to have shown such consideration to his juniors, always ready with a kind word or gesture to cheer up the downtrodden.

After his death, my family was struck by how many people told us how grateful they were for the help they have received from him in the past. He was generous to a fault, generous not only with his wealth and possessions, but also his time. He never turned away a request for help, and was a strong supporter of the National Arthritis Foundation and St Andrew’s Mission Hospital for many years. He also made many contributions to the development of the Singapore Art Museum and the La Salle SIA College of Fine Arts.

At home with family: Dr Earl Lu with his wife, sons, daughters-in-law and beloved grandchildren.



Finally, although Dr Earl Lu was never a very religious man, from an intellectual point of view, he was a strong admirer of Hinduism. In particular, the verse from the Bhagavad Gita, which describes Krishna’s exhortation to Arjuna not to be concerned about victory or defeat but to fight the best fight he could, made a deep impression on him. My father lived his life guided by this philosophy, and his legacy will benefit others for years to come.

Farewell, Dad. You have fought the good fight. Now rest in peace, content. ■