BIOGRAPHY

Cheng-Khee Chee was born in 1934 in Fengting, Fujian Province, China. At age 14 he emigrated to live with his uncle Lim Cheng-Leong in Penang, Malaysia, because of the devastation of Chinese economy as a result of the Sino-Japanese War, the Civil War, and natural disasters. Malaysia was a British Colony at the time, and Chee learned from both Chinese and Western-trained teachers. In the equatorial beauty of Penang, among multi-cultural residents from China, India, Europe and Malaysia, Chee became very active within the Penang Art Society. A 1953 painting demonstration in Penang by Chinese-born American artist Dong Kingman confirmed his attraction to the watercolor medium.

At Nanyang University, Singapore (1957-60), Chee studied to become a teacher. On graduation, Chee was hired as a Teaching Assistant. With an outstanding academic record, he was transferred to an assistant librarian position, continuing to study and paint in his spare time. With a shortage of librarians in Malaysia, he pursued a master's degree in Library Science (MA, 1964), which brought him to the University of Minnesota Duluth in 1962. Though he had planned to return to Malaysia, the changing political and social conditions there, along with a job offer from the University of Minnesota Duluth, compelled him to stay in the U.S. He and Sing-Bee Ong, whom he had known at university in Singapore, were married in Duluth, where they have raised two sons and two daughters.
Inspired by annual travel exhibitions of the American Watercolor Society at the Tweed Museum of Art and by the many watercolors in its collection, Cheng-Khee Chee took up painting seriously after attending a workshop with Gaell Lindstrom in 1973. A 1978 workshop with Edgar Whitney inspired Chee to continue developing his unique East-West synthesis in watercolor. While he worked as a Librarian at the University of Minnesota Duluth, Chee began to exhibit his work in regional exhibitions and the juried exhibitions of regional and national watercolor societies. He also began to teach classes in watercolor painting, first as an Instructor (1968-81), and Assistant Professor (1981-88) and then as Associate Professor (1988-97).

Since 1983, Cheng-Khee Chee has had 14 solo exhibitions of his work in the U.S., Malaysia and China. His work has been featured in nearly 200 group exhibitions, and he has won top awards from watercolor societies across the U.S. In 1997, the Singapore National Art Museum organized a solo exhibition and a 208-page book about Cheng-Khee Chee. His art has been featured in numerous magazines, exhibition catalogues, and a six-part instructional film. Cheng-Khee Chee’s illustrations for Old Turtle (1991), written by Douglas Wood, won him national acclaim for his watercolor illustrations, as the book won many awards, including a 1993 ABBY.

An international ambassador for watercolor painting, Cheng-Khee Chee has led cultural tours to China and England, and in 2007, he curated a global exhibition of watermedia painting with 68 artists from 13 countries for the Jiangsu Watercolor Research Institute in Nanjing, China. He is an American Watercolor Society Dolphin Fellow, a member of the Watercolor USA Honor Society, and recipient of the 2008 Alumni Achievement Award from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has been honored by the University of Minnesota Duluth with a named Art Scholarship (1994); Distinguished Teaching Award (1994); and by the School of Fine Arts in recognition for outstanding artistic accomplishments, having been inducted into the Society of Prometheans (2009).