

FONG Chung-Ray – A Pioneer of Contemporary Chinese Abstract Paintings

FONG Chung-Ray 馮鍾睿 (Pinyin: Feng Zhong-ruì), a distinguished Chinese American contemporary artist, is best known for his unique abstract paintings that combine elements of Chinese and Western art in new ways. In the late 1950s, shortly after he fled from Mainland China in the turmoil of civil war and foreign occupation, Fong joined forces with a progressive and influential group of avant-garde Chinese artists in Taiwan, called the Fifth Moon Painting Society 五月畫會, to create a distinctive visual language with Chinese sensibility that is modern in its presentation. Fong started abstract paintings of oil on canvas around 1956, a couple of years prior to the artists group's first exhibition in 1958. In 1966 Fong was selected as one of the six emerging artists outside Mainland China to participate in the traveling exhibition *The New Chinese Landscape* organized by Chinese art historian Professor Li Chu-tsing 李鑄晉 (Pinyin: Li Zhu-jin) and the internationally esteemed scholar and connoisseur of Chinese art Thomas Lawton with support from the American Federation of Arts. His unique abstract paintings were noticed by art historians and connoisseurs in the West including Avery Brundage, who in 1968 collected one of Fong's works for his extraordinary Asian treasures collection that is the foundation of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco's holdings. Today, Fong's art works are collected and exhibited in museums and galleries around the world including the U.S.A., France, Germany, Italy, Brazil, Australia, China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Fong has been invited to show his paintings in numerous traveling exhibitions in many Asian, European and African countries.

Born in Tanghe County, Henan Province in China 中國河南省唐河縣 in 1933 into a family of accomplished scholars and artists, Fong was cultivated and inspired in the learning and appreciation of fine arts since childhood and aspired to become an artist himself. The enormous destruction and the devastating social chaos of China caused by both civil war and Japanese invasion led Fong to join the military. After the Communists took over Mainland China he went to Taiwan at the tender age of 15. Fong's formal art training took place in the Department of Fine Arts at Fu Hsing Kang College (復興崗, "Renaissance Hill", also known as Political Warfare

Cadres Academy 政治作戰學校). He graduated in 1954 as a lieutenant art officer with a degree in fine arts and later in 1966 completed his studies with an Associate Degree in the Academy's Department of Applied Arts. He served as a military officer and created art works, many which are watercolors, for the Navy.

Feeling constrained in his artistic expression while in the military, Fong followed his creative urges and began an extraordinary journey of flowing imagination and visualization which soon became his own art. He and three other Navy colleagues pioneered the Four Seas Painting Association 四海畫會 in 1958. With his oil on canvas abstract paintings, Fong was chosen to represent Taiwan, Republic of China in the 5th Biennial de Sao Paulo Exhibition held in Brazil in 1959, and in the following year 1960 he won a Silver Medal in the 1st Hong Kong International Salon of Paintings.

In 1961, Fong was invited by Liu Kuo-sung 劉國松 (Pinyin: Liu Guo-song) to join the influential Fifth Moon Painting Society 五月畫會 whose members met regularly to critique one another's works. The Fifth Moon artists exhibited their paintings at their popular art show held in May of each year. This new generation of artists in Taiwan realized that in the search for modernity, innovative Chinese art could be developed not only with a Chinese identity, but with an awareness of and sensibility for Western art movements and theories as well. They believed that Chinese cultural uniqueness should not be supplanted at the cost of modernity. These artists emphasized the importance of personal expression and individual style in their creative work. They explored new subject matter, media, and techniques.

Fong's paintings of oil on canvas reveal him to be a textbook modernist of the 1960s. The compositions are rather simple but pulsate with energy. He prefers subdued shades of black, pale blue and light violet as primary choices of colors for his paintings. They convey serenity and quietude. The textured brush strokes are expressive and show movement. The non-representational shapes, forms, patterns, lines and space create an environment that evokes

universal feelings or reactions shared by viewers from various cultures. Fong's abstract paintings draw people in to explore and to discover the world that he created.

After experimenting with oil and plaster on canvas and later watercolor and oil on canvas, Fong turned back to using traditional Chinese media for his paintings in the early 1960s, i.e. water-based pigments and ink on paper, to further develop his abstract painting style. Sharing Liu Kuo-sung's belief and with a desire to create art that would better represent the traditional Chinese cultural identity, Fong began to use ink on paper as the preferred media for the next decade. Along with Liu, Fong is regarded as one of the earliest advocates and practitioners of modernist Chinese abstract painting.

Although ink on paper and oil on canvas are very different in terms of the tools used, techniques required, and characteristics in presentation, Fong made a fluid transition and was able to develop fully the potentials of brushwork in his presentation of the spiritual world through his abstract paintings. Utilizing water soluble ink and the absorbent quality of rice paper, Fong creates subtle but sophisticated color gradations with few powerful brush strokes. The white paper, devoid of colors, gives the illusions of space, light and depth. In addition to utilizing traditional Chinese brushes, he invented a unique painting implement using fibers from the trunk of palm trees to make broad, sweeping strokes that are textured without the thickness and crusty effect of oil or acrylic. These brush strokes are free and spontaneous. Fong's paintings were widely exhibited internationally in the 1960s, which included: the *Third Premiere Biennale de Paris, France* in 1963 (*Troisième Biennale de Paris, Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris*); the *First International Peace Art Exhibition, Florence, Italy* in 1965; and an exhibit at the *Kyoto Municipal Art Museum, Japan* in 1969. In recognition of his artistic creativity, Fong was awarded as one of the "Ten Outstanding Young Persons" by the Junior Chamber International of the Republic of China that same year.

At first glance, Fong's oil paintings of the 1960s appear to be in accord with the spirit of the postwar Abstract Expressionism in the U.S. The revolutionary aesthetic of abstract

expressionistic paintings in the 1960s exposed the anxieties of this traumatic time and proposed individualistic modes of liberation that challenged conformity. This art attempted to evoke universal emotions. However, the artistic expression seen in Fong's oil on canvas paintings is very much his own because he had not been abroad and did not have direct observations of American art. His initial exposure to artworks of Abstract Expressionism came from a few magazine reproductions of the New York School of Abstract Expressionist paintings in the 1960s.

At an art exhibition in 1975, Fong made the following statement about his paintings and the Fifth Moon artists:

Fifth Moon artists have borrowed the fire from abstractionism to light the lamp of modern Chinese Painting. The quality of their work has surpassed the New Yorkers who reached their peak after the Second World War. Fifth Moon artists also reveal deep self-examination toward tradition in their work Painting is a pure and independent art; it is not a description of material world, and it is not literature. The group aims to further pioneer the spirit of non-realism and to revive the spirit of non-reality and fantasy which was the basis of much traditional Chinese art. (Mowry, p. 36)

Fong's best-known works that have achieved both national and international recognition are his abstract ink paintings, developed in a unique style that blends together the essence of the Chinese literati painting tradition and the spirit of modern Western art. These are his early signature works. The vigor of his expressive brushwork and the melodious ink washes give volume and form to his paintings. Without representational images, the delicate balance of color, form and line creates fascinating compositions that are underscored with vitality. The contrasts of positive and negative space, dark and light gradations, sweeping strokes and misty ink washes are woven together in a manner that invites contemplation and evokes universal sentiments beyond cultural boundaries. The infusion of subdued colors – light blue, grey, black and a touch of ochre or yellow – bring forth a sense of harmony and serenity to viewers. In these paintings, one may see distant hills or lofty peaks obscured in the mist, yet at other times

sense an illusion enveloped by nature. In this way, his paintings are similar in spirit to that of traditional Chinese paintings from the Yuan and Ming literati masters. A viewer's imagination and participation in the paintings enhance the dynamism of natural phenomena in Fong's works. To view his paintings is like traveling into a landscape where one enjoys the quietude and pervasive beauty of nature.

After retiring from the Navy in 1970, Fong studied stage design at the University of Hawaii with a scholarship from the East-West Center. Upon completion of these studies in the summer of 1971, Fong toured Europe and the U.S with a fellowship grant from the John D. Rockefeller III Foundation to enrich his artistic experience by observing and studying the works of the great masters of the West.

Fong's artistic creativities never ceased to evolve, and he began using acrylics to paint in 1967. Acrylics were expensive and rarely used for artwork at this time in Taiwan. Since 1971 Fong completely abandoned ink on paper, and used acrylics diluted with water to increase viscosity on paper for his paintings. He came to realize that contemporary paintings of Chinese artists should not be limited or restrained by the type of medium. Art, especially abstract art, is a visual mode to express the artist's character, spirituality, emotion, life experience, and worldview. Art critics, galleries, and museums took notice of Fong's paintings. He was invited to participate in many exhibitions, which included the *New Direction in Chinese Painting: 11 Contemporary Chinese Artists* at the Spencer Museum of Art, Lawrence, Kansas in 1972 and the *Inaugural Exhibition* at the Heinz Galleries, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh in 1975.

Fong began to paint using acrylics on canvas exclusively after he and his family relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1975. His brush strokes became more impulsive, the compositions bolder, and the scale larger. There are also sharper contrasts of color. This, in part, can be attributed to his study of Buddhism in the 1980s. Contemporary art critic and curator Collette Chattopadhyay made these observations:

. . . Fong's works entered into a second major phase of development defined by an increased interest in calligraphic gesture. Conjoining landscape and calligraphic themes, he began to explore the dynamics of marks rendered with speed, vigor, and precision often setting these against softer and more diffuse passages. Central to these works are the Buddhist interests in an immediate experience of knowledge that distinguishes itself from the types of knowledge attained through reason and rationality. (Beyond Abstract. p. 7)

Experimenting briefly in the 1976, Fong moved in a new direction in 1986 by introducing collage into his abstract ink paintings with enhanced surface effect. Instead of layers of oil paint built one upon the other, Fong painted pictorials – some are abstracts, others are calligraphic Chinese writings or recognizable images – on textured hand-made paper layered one over the other. Preeminent scholar, author and curator of Asian art Robert D. Mowry wrote that Fong's "unusual application techniques had precedent in Chinese tradition, but his assertion of the plane of the picture was in tune with abstract painters of the United States and Europe and resonated with ideas in Western art criticism." (Mowry, p. 28) Contrast of colors of both paper and the paint, irregular and asymmetric shapes of the paper, and interplay of opaque and light-toned areas all contribute to creating a delightful visual pleasure in viewing these art works. The most striking ones are those with collaged elements woven into abstract landscapes that draw the viewer in for a closer look. Some of these collaged paintings are imbued with seasonal or traditional festive flavors resembling folk art and offer viewers a direct experience of Chinese culture.

After decades of intense flirtation with abstraction, around 1990, Fong ventured into another mode of creating art by incorporating Chinese writing into the pictorial design for his abstract paintings. The artistically stylized Chinese characters and the fragmented passages become an integral part of the compositional schemes in his paintings. Viewers do not need a reading knowledge of Chinese writing to appreciate these art works. The rhythmic lines and enigmatic forms of Chinese characters, along with other non-representational elements in Fong's abstract

paintings, present a world that is mystic and spiritual. The characters themselves in the Chinese writing system, evolved from pictorial images in antiquity, become meaningful signs or logograms without obvious representation of the original forms, and this makes them “abstract”. In this aspect, one can say that the uniqueness of Chinese characters is to give up resemblance to natural form and to create a purely abstract language of form. In addition to the “form” which can be presented in a variety of calligraphical styles, each character also contains meaning and sound. These qualities enhance the depth of Fong’s artwork. The structure, composition, balance, and rhythm of the characters as well as the calligraphic strokes or lines that compose them both contrast to and complement with the large block of color fields in Fong’s work. The evocative interplay between representation and expression, extrinsic and intrinsic, as well as humanity and nature make these paintings fascinating. These paintings also reveal the interesting affinity between Chinese calligraphy and Western abstract painting. Through his abstract artwork, Fong provides to his expanding audience in the West an intuitive insight into the art of Chinese calligraphy. An aesthetic experience is created that engages the sight, sound, form, space, color, even time, as well as philosophy, religion, and culture for both the artist and the viewer. These works convey a sense of spirituality that can transcend cultural, language and geographical boundaries.

The innovative technique that Fong used around the mid-1990 was to apply acrylic onto plastic sheets with the resulting designs transferred onto paper. This art “making” process of his was close in spirit to the “happening” of Abstract Expressionism. This experience is also similar to the teaching of Chan or Zen Buddhism that emphasizes meditation and experiential wisdom for attaining realization. True knowledge is transmitted outside of written words. In creating these works, artistic intuition, spontaneity, and immediacy are essential. Chance and unpredictable outcomes are welcome surprises. The process of creating these art works is as significant as the end-product. The pulsating vitality of the surface designs evokes one’s psychic energy for reflection. These works draw viewers into the realms of humanity and nature and sometimes a metaphysical world that is both mystical and powerful. This “crackle effect” eventually became a hallmark of Fong’s later works. Around 2010, Fong started to stencil Chinese characters into

dried layers of acrylic color to further complement the crackle effect. These characters are archaic in their formation which have affinity to those found on ancient Chinese bronze vessels.

To Fong, art is life; life is art. He has never stopped creating and continued to take part in many exhibitions from the 1980s to the present. These include: *Six Artists from Taiwan*, National Art Museum, Beijing, China in 1984; *Tong-Fang Art Association and Fifth Moon Group 35th Anniversary Exhibition*, Taiwan in 1991; *A Tradition Redefined*, Arthur M. Sackler Museum in 2007; *Beyond the Brush*, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, England in 2017, and *The Weight of Lightness*, M+ Museum in Hong Kong.

Fong Chung-Ray once said: “. . . no single theory is the ultimate truth of art . . . for any vogue will eventually pass like surging waves. What survives the wash and crash of tide is works of great art created with universal compassion and quiet acceptance of life.” (*Paintings by Fong Chung-Ray*, p. 17) He has lived true to his words and continues to search, experiment, evolve and create with passion.

Doris Sze Chun, Ed. D.
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Untitled

#1976-1

Ink on paper and collage, with torn ink-paper painting that he did from the 1960s pasted on the lower left part of this work



Untitled

1986

Ink on paper with collage

Fong Chung-Ray's art works can be found in the following publications:

1. Art in Hong Kong, ed., *The New Face of Ink Paintings: Modern Ink Painting Group Exhibition and Symposium*. Hong Kong: Sino Group, 2007.
2. *Beyond Abstract: A Glimpse at the Cosmos by Lee Shi-chi, Chuang Che, Chung-Ray Fong, Diana Shui-lu Wong*. Rui-Man Gallery, Carmel, California, 1997.
3. *Dong-fang Wu-yue huahui sanshiwu zhounian zhan* (The 35th anniversary exhibition of the artists from the Eastern and the Fifth Moon Painting Societies). Taipei, Taiwan: Contemporary Gallery, 1992.
4. Meng, Chang-ming, "Yongheng de xiangchou – hua le bange shiji de Fong Chung-Ray" (Nostalgia Forever – Fong Chung-Ray who has painted for half a century) in *Artist magazine*, 1996.1, 352-359.
5. Mowry, Robert D., ed., *Modern and Contemporary Chinese Ink Paintings from the Chu-tsing Li Collection, 1950-2000*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007.
6. *Paintings by Fong Chung-Ray*. Taipei, Taiwan: National Museum of History, 1974.
7. *Quanguo shi-da jiechu qingnian meishu chuanguo dezhu zhuanji* (A special collection of art created by the successive winners of Taiwan's annual top ten young people's award for creative achievement). Taipei, Taiwan, 2007.
8. The National Taiwan Arts Hall, *Five Chinese Painters: Fifth Moon Exhibition*. Taipei, Taiwan: The Book World Co., 1964.