

ENCOUNTERS: TRADITIONAL ORIENTAL THEME PAINTINGS
WITH WESTERN INFLUENCES

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

My drawings and paintings were personal investigations into my changing perspective of Eastern and Western culture--how I saw it and felt towards it; how I interpreted it intuitively/spiritually by using my personal language.

A few years ago, I arrived in the United States. Encountering Western thought, a culture shock hit me. This shock gave me an opportunity to explore art in a new direction. My concept, perspective, and previous way of thinking about art have been changed. Faced with continual, rapid changes in contemporary art, I questioned how a Chinese artist could establish himself in the West. After a confused period, I realized that I might be able to combine these seemingly opposing forces by using my experience with brushwork. Different from other young artists in China who approached modern art by using Western methods of installation, collage, et cetera, I began with traditional theme-paintings, employing ink, rice paper, large goat brushes and such Western media as charcoal, pastels, Spectracolor pencil, and acrylic. The aim was to blend American drawing media with Chinese brush painting techniques to create a personal style.

The first matter I wanted to investigate was the cultural dualities in art. It was true that American art influenced my painting. But, the flower, a major category in Chinese painting, still remained as a dominant subject matter in my art. This theme has been developed in a stylistic pattern throughout a long history in China. Tired of following in this tradition, I pursued a new direction in developing brush painting in order to challenge the idea of traditional art, and to push the limits of what brush painting would be.

My goal was to make work that functioned on several levels. I expected to break through on format, composition, media usage, and visual perception. The problem remained, could the traditional oriental flower theme be combined with contemporary expression and new materials to form a unified visual statement? The following aesthetic and technical questions were specifically considered:

1. Format. The principal formats in Western paintings were rectangles and squares, while in China the traditional vertical and horizontal strip compositions were more commonly used. Those Chinese characteristics were carried to an extreme in my work.

- a. How could I develop traditional formats for my nontraditional paintings?
- b. How could a contemporary meaning be implanted into a traditional format by expanding its inherent artistic characteristic?

2. Placement. Because I combined four or five panels for a painting, placement was essential.

- a. In what ways could four or five panels be joined, and composition be used in creating an oriental flavor?

3. Media. It was important for the artist to know the advantages and limitations of the material in which he worked. In my approach, American painting and drawing media such as charcoal, pastel, Spectracolor pencil, and acrylic were employed to achieve a rich surface quality.

- a. How could the watercolor techniques be employed to enhance value results?
- b. Could oriental paper be made stronger with mixed media?

4. Wrinkle. Previously the work had looked wrinkled because the rice paper was too thin for the mixed media. The wrinkle affected the results of direct painting.

- a. When should the paper be mounted -- before painting or after painting?
- b. Was it possible to mount rice paper with drawing paper?

5. Value Control. Ink was the dominant medium in my painting. The value was controlled by proportionally adjusting the amount of ink to water in the brush. Several large sizes of goat brushes were indispensable.

- a. In what ways could value be used to enhance the constructive relationship of the flowers and background?
- b. In what ways could I make the use of ink spontaneous, but still control it during the process?

My proposal involved gathering and analyzing both visual and written information. The following steps were specifically considered:

1. Exhibition catalogues and related information on Robert Rauschenberg and Zao Wou-Ki were reviewed. Those artists deal with cross-cultural ideas in their work.

2. A sketchbook and an artistic journal were kept, as well as a record of my creative processes.

3. A body of work was done in a consistent manner. I employed a spontaneous/intuitive strategy in my creative activity. I kept myself flexible in order to approach the idea in a loose manner by simultaneously making several paintings with the same content.

CHAPTER II

THE MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE BRUSH PAINTING AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF FLOWER IMAGERY

The aesthetic standards of traditional brush painting are rooted in the background of philosophy and culture. In China, the major philosophical influences have been Taoism and Buddhism. Of special interest are the tenets of Taoism, which have greatly influenced the principal of brush painting. Their embodiment in painting and calligraphy made the work an affirmation of the philosophic precepts. "The cult of nature", the concept of void, selflessness and clean mind are the core of Taoism and Chinese painting, which stresses simplicity, symmetry, empty space, economy of line, condensed brushstroke, and limited color.

The dependency upon literature is another characteristic of traditional brush painting. It was common for the artist to use one verse of a poem as the painting's title, making it the source of inspiration and criterion for the artist. Traditionally, the pursuit of a poetic concept in the painting was the highest purpose for the artist. Lyrical and romantic concerns were more important than artistic expression and formal problems. In this respect, the narrative and decorative dominated brush painting.

Conventionalism is a factor which profoundly influences brush painting. With Taoism, the concept of selflessness, glorification of nature, and the objective and technical depiction of scenes was preached. Traditional imagery was stylized in painting books, such as The Book of Bamboo, The Book of Irish, et cetera. Highly emphasized brushwork and style resulted in the discipline being more important than the artistic expression. These academic canons limited artists' individual and creative activities. This tendency to follow the masters of the past resulted in Chinese paintings looking the same. Throughout the thousands of years of history, brush painting has repeated itself in a circular movement. Although the painting style has been developed to a perfect level, it still lacks risk, breakthrough, and the creative activity to compete with Western art.

The horizontal and vertical formats of the past are the greatest contributions of brush painting. They give the artist freedom to organize the elements within vast compositions. In order to meet the demands of the formats, multiple perspectives were first employed by Chinese artists. A fixed viewpoint was eliminated, and the whole painting was divided into several parts, each with its own perspective. Each of these parts was then arranged in a harmonic composition. Furthermore, the different scenes were combined on a single painting. Some examples of this

type of perspective are Northern and Western Chinese landscapes, where the flowers of the Spring and of the Autumn appear together. Much earlier than in Western art, the concept of arranging the elements in such an ideal manner became a basic artistic characteristic in the traditional brush painting of China. It gave brush painting the great potential for carrying out contemporary messages.

Before I actually started my studio work, I searched and reviewed the information on Robert Rauschenberg and Zao Wou-Ki. These two artists deal with cross-cultural ideas in their works.

In the 1980s, Rauschenberg traveled to oriental nations many times. In China and Japan he was involved in papermaking and clayworks. Chinese papermakers collaborated with Rauschenberg to produce hand-made papers for his collage work. He was interested in using oriental material such as cloth, local opera masks and Chinese character cardboards to make his installation art. My father, a traditional brush painter, described Rauschenberg's work as interesting, despite the oriental quality of the materials. He also said that the works of Rauschenberg still bear the strong characteristics of Western art. Welish wrote "Calling on native technique resulted not only in a collaboration of cultures, moreover, it is Rauschenberg's transposition into an exoticized version"(Welish 1986, 54). This statement stimulated me. It also gave me the desire to

combine Eastern tradition with Western thought.

Zao Wou-Ki was born and trained in China. He went to France in the 1940's, and established himself as a notable artist in Western culture, by absorbing European avant-garde art. Jean Leymarie wrote:

He did not retain Cezanne's internal structure or density of construction but developed those elements that coincided with his own intensions: the vibration of the light, the careful spacing of the planes, the arrangement of the space by means of well-directed brushstrokes. (Leymarie 1978, 16)

Chinese brush painting and calligraphy techniques, which combine chance, ink, and brush were employed in his Western abstract-style painting, where calligraphic lines were dissolved into gestural marks on an atmospheric, misty space. He successfully transferred identifiable Chinese brushwork into his own expressive need. This pioneer's experience encouraged me to explore the combination of cross-cultural ideas with traditional flower-theme painting.

Flower painting is a major category in Chinese painting. As I mentioned before, under Taoist influence, landscape and flower themes are of greater importance than figures in the painting. "Cult of nature" is embodied in landscape painting. It became the symbol of truth, beauty and immortality. The flower imagery is an archetype that presents the aesthetic and technical standards of brush painting, such as condensed brushstrokes, and economy of line. Generally speaking, flower imagery has more philosophical meaning than any other art form in Chinese

art.

Flower painting has played a rich and varied role in Western art. Western artists differ from Eastern artists by giving greater attention to the structure and form of subject matter. The contemporary artists "develop a lexicon of both marks and images that form the basis for a personal visual vocabulary"(Steir 1983, 7). Georgia O'Keeffe's flower paintings were different from former flower paintings in that she concentrated on formal issues. She developed flower imagery as both subject and symbol. The unique and special vision takes the viewer into the center of the flower, and the cropped and close-up focus resulted in a symbolic and abstract image. "She was painting a flower or a canyon, she saw the image she wanted in her mind's eye- both the forms themselves and their abstract qualities"(Castro 1985, 171). The only similarity between O'Keeffe and oriental artists is the simplification in painting. In our time, Pat Steir adopted various styles from the past, and developed forms, line, cubes, spheres, adding personal signs to achieve her flower painting. Her works "had in common an emphasis on the pursuit of personal and idiosyncratic vision"(Steir 1983, 10). The subject matter in Steir's painting conveys personal and symbolic meaning in a more radical way. On the other hand, like Chinese artists, Steir's paintings involve literature and myth. The mythical, poetic and narrative qualities are

conveyed by isolated, arranged elements.

The flower still remains as a symbol of beauty and grace in the brush painting of China. In contemporary art, however, the flower painting has been developed to a higher degree--that of conveying a personal message.

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CHAPTER III

THE DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

My exploration of the intricate relationship between past and present, between East and West, between cultural adaptation and change was embodied in specific artwork. The flower theme functioned as a symbol, related to both tradition and progress in brush painting. My strategy involved two methods of resolving the problem. The first centered around a new concept developed from the look of a traditional painting in a nontraditional presentation, as in The Past, the Present, and the Future (Fig.1, Appendix). The second involved Western materials and methods such as charcoal, pastel, monotype, and collage, which were adapted to enhance brush painting, as in Red Lotus, Chinese Painting or Not (Fig.2, Appendix) and Mountain View (Fig.3, Appendix).

The Past, the Present, and the Future was based on Chinese ink, rice paper, and brushwork technique. The long horizontal format is derived from the traditional Chinese hand scroll. In the beginning, I produced a traditional brush painting. When the painting was completed, I cut it into three pieces and presented it in a row, with the middle panel upside down. Two long strips of ink-washed paper were used to divide the picture into several geometrical forms,

thus breaking with the traditional look. Sepia-toned charcoal was introduced as a Western medium, in contrast to the ink.

A right panel was added later in order to stress a long, horizontal composition. Ink was used in reverse to fill out the background. The abstract landscape and ambiguous space were made through spontaneously changed value. Several transparent Chinese brushstrokes were kept on the upper portion of the paper, in reference to the specific material and brush painting quality. Over the ink, a flower was drawn using gouache and charcoal. A veiled, abstract flower was totally isolated in the lower, right portion of the picture plane. A pencil line was used to define arbitrary, floating petals which conveyed my personal perception--the sentimental beauty.

Red Lotus, Chinese Painting or Not consisted of three panels. The first one was a typical flower painting executed in a traditional manner. The Lotus, in pure red, contrasted with ink masses which resembled leaves, and the bare background functioned as infinite space. The second panel was a combination of Western methods and materials such as collage, print, and Spectracolor pencil. Monotype was introduced in the third panel, with Chinese-style flower drawings and a photo landscape in five separated squares. Those images were destroyed by a rude stroke over them. The stroke could be read either as a basic element of brush

painting or a negative sign to oriental imagery. The drops indicated the accidental process.

Mountain View, contained two pieces of brush painting on rice paper and one piece of monotype on BFK paper. The Lotus flower as a symbol of Buddhism was again employed through a brush painting style. Although ink and brush are derived from tradition, the brushstrokes in Mountain View, were applied with expressive power and became abstract signs, varied in shape and value. Conventional space--bare paper was eliminated. Heavy masses of ink filled out the background. In the foreground, the Lotus image was once again interrupted by rude strokes of expressive line. Collage and monotype were employed in the middle panel as a transition between two brush paintings. A piece of rectangular rice paper with abstract brush signs was glued on it, repeating the format and cultural origin. The third panel was a landscape drawing in ink. It dealt with a feeling of isolation, as well as orderliness, due to the arbitrary placement of flowers. To achieve this effect, I employed full brush painting techniques, working from thick to thin with dispersed washes and broad brushstrokes.

Chrysanthemum (Fig.4, Appendix) was a combination of brush painting and monotype in a vertical composition. It was more to the point and more in tune with my own vision of the fusing of Western-style mixed media and the traditional theme, with a radical twist. As with the painting of the

landscape, the different styles of flower images were adopted and arranged in a casual manner. A piece of rectangular rice paper on the print emphasized the vertical format, and the chrysanthemum at the lower portion suggested a sense of Chinese painting. The brushstrokes and images were concerned with meaning, in terms of the artistic mark. I attempted to construct the systems of flower images which would allow visual communication.

Because prints may create decorative effects and mysterious lyricism, Look Back to the Past, a Lost Song (Fig.5, Appendix), and Black Veil (Fig.6, Appendix), were responses to the traditional sensibilities through the use of the monotype technique. In Look Back to the Past, a Lost Song, collage was used on monotype. A photo of rocks and a flower-shaped newspaper were added on blackened BFK paper to make several focal points. Black Veil was a monotype. A soft-edged blue flower was painted with gouache on the right, lower corner, creating a cool tone on the black background. The reprint process resulted in value variation in the consistent black background and veiled the flowers, achieving a subtle, tinted surface.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

My problem involved a search for a new direction in traditional Chinese brush painting, to be accomplished by combining traditional and nontraditional materials, Eastern theme and Western methods. It was always stimulating to play something you already knew against something new. My aim was to execute a number of works that clearly and satisfactorily conveyed my ideas.

Using the concept of format in the painting, The Past, the Present, and the Future, I addressed the issue of how to develop traditional formats for my nontraditional painting, as well as how to expand its inherent, formal character to carry a contemporary meaning. This traditional format compressed the scene in a strip-like picture plane, and gave the viewer an expanded feeling, due to the continuity of the horizontal edges. Three vertical strips of ink-washed paper were set in place to divide the picture plane into several sections, each having incomplete imagery. The strips were essential in making the traditional format function as a nontraditional composition. In this respect, the traditional concepts of balance and the movement of brush and ink were interpreted in this painting. Generally, the painting could be read as two parts, with six uneven strips

and square forms on the left, and one single rectangular piece on the right. Because more bare paper showed up at the left, the vertical inked strip added weight, balancing with the massively inked right panel. The movement of the ink brushstrokes was enforced by the vertical strips.

Although the strips blocked the movement, the imagery, with strong brushstroke and heavy ink mass, was carried through the blocks, making a staccato-like movement. This led the viewer's eye across the picture plane. This action was more substantial than the easy flowing movement of brushstrokes.

I absorbed Western thought and was inspired by it when I discovered that an American artist had described traditional Chinese calligraphy as abstract art. I had never thought of calligraphy as an abstraction because the lines and strokes make characters. But when the viewer does not respond to the characters, the calligraphic lines and strokes become nonfunctional--pure artistic marks. The different cultural backgrounds can make for a unique response to the same issue. I expanded the inherent artistic characteristic of this traditional format by setting inked strips in a flower painting. This resulted in a change of imagery that was visually stimulating. With the image dissolved into basic elements, The Past, the Present, and the Future became less narrative and more abstract. Ironically, the leaf images as ink mass, caught the viewer's eye first. Reacting from my traditional understanding of

painting in which brushstrokes are condensed and economically used to make imagery, I employed brushstrokes as a sign of cultural origin. They became independent from the imagery, and the functional element became a nonfunctional artistic mark. If the purpose can be removed, the brushwork as a traditional characteristic can function at different levels. In this painting I stressed traditional format, imagery and tools, using them in a nontraditional way and making them serve my needs.

The Past, the Present, and the Future was also concerned with the spiritual aspects of Chinese culture, rather than the purely artistic problem of brush painting. The painting stressed that traditional images and religious symbolism do not have a fixed relationship to painting. For instance, the Lotus flower has great symbolic meaning in Buddhism because it is an indispensable decoration on the Buddhist idol. The same image can be altered by style, composition and presentation and can have a new meaning or several meanings in different context. This can be compared to a musical note, which can be changed from movement to movement, composer to composer.

Placement was an essential part of my work. To achieve my idea of placement, I combined several panels. This idea was reflected in Mountain View and Look Back to the Past, a Lost Song. Unlike Western artists' panel paintings, my panels were joined to emphasize their oriental horizontal or

vertical composition. In the framing of Mountain View, materials such as metal and glass were eliminated because of their industrial quality. After the panels were joined, long wooden strips were used to frame the top and bottom, reflecting the Chinese scroll format. The right and left sides of the paintings were not enclosed, reinforcing the idea of continuity. The nature of the wooden frame was in harmony with my landscape subject matter. The strong horizontal lines from the wood also gave a consistent look to the combination of brush painting and monotype.

Different from Mountain View, a gray quarter round wood was used to frame Look Back to the Past, a Lost Song. Actually, this work was supposed to stress basic, traditional brush painting characteristics by using Western methods; monotype and collage. A photo of rocks and a piece of newspaper cut in flower shapes were glued on the middle and right panels, indicating the Taoist "cult of nature" in Western style. Black background replaced bare paper, in which the aspect of empty space and minimal imagery addressed the economy of line and limited color. The elements were arranged in a symmetrical manner. Visually, this work is less interesting because of the consistent flat, black space, predictable image arrangement, and over-emphasized stability in the composition. A lack of inner construction of the elements made the work look dull. In order to make the edges interesting, two piece of quarter

round gray wood were framed on the painting as a transition between the solid black picture and the creamy wall, which served as a background for the painting. This semi-spherical shape clearly functioned better than the strip wood, evoking a scroll format. The shapes and shadows gave a dimensional look, somewhat like a gray line flowing on the black picture.

The use of media was also important to my work. This is best represented in The Past, the Present, and the Future. Although I employed traditional materials such as rice paper and large brushes, the watercolor technique was still borrowed. Because the long goat hair brushes can hold a lot of water, it was easy to adjust the value. This was especially true when a goat brush was used to put a wash on rice paper. The absorbent nature of the paper created a fantastic and spontaneous look; from thick to thin, from opaque to transparent. Technically speaking, the effects of the ink played an important role in my painting. As a point of reference, I used both wet and dry techniques from watercolor. For instance, in the background of the right panel of The Past, the Present, and the Future, I wet the lower portion of paper, and left the upper portion dry. The ink was then washed, using a large goat hair brush. As a result, the brush strokes were fused with wet paper, making an ink mass. Brushstrokes applied cleanly on dry paper could be seen on the upper portion. Keeping Chinese ink as

my primary media, I used other kinds of black, such as acrylic black and charcoal black to enrich my painting.

When addressing the subject of wrinkle, the rice paper had its advantages and weaknesses. Because of the thin quality of rice paper, it became wrinkled after painting on it. To resolve this problem, I mounted the painting on another piece of rice paper by using thinned glue. When the two papers were wet, I pasted them on a wall. The paper shrank when it dried, eventually giving me a flat piece of wrinkle-free paper. After mounting, the rice paper was stronger and could take Western media, such as wax oil stick, pastel, et cetera. However, the mounted paper still did not work with wet media. The first panels of Red Lotus, Chinese Painting or Not and Mountain View were mounted after the paintings were done.

As an experiment, I tried to mount a piece of rice paper on both a piece of drawing paper and a piece of BFK paper. Both attempts failed because two different kinds of paper could not be mounted together.

Value control was best demonstrated in Red Lotus, Chinese Painting or Not, Mountain View, and Black Veil. Chinese ink and graphic ink were intentionally used in my work to enhance the constructive relationship of the flowers and background, as well as to unite the brush painting and monotype. The inks served not only as reference to different cultures, but also varied the consistency and

quality of the black, which made for a spontaneous background.

Compared with The Past, the Present, and the Future, the influences of Western style in Red Lotus, Chinese Painting or Not and Mountain View, were more obvious. The first panel of Red Lotus, Chinese Painting or Not was a typical brush painting, a poetic scene; the red lotus was produced with condensed brushstrokes, and the leaves were painted with spontaneous ink washes. The lovely flower imagery, atmospheric space, and transparent ink worked together to make a lyrical mood. The first panel appeared to be done in a traditional manner, but conventionalism was eliminated when the painting was viewed as a whole. As a reaction to the Taoist concept of nature as aloof from the mundane life, an advertisement with flowers was added to the painting. This indicated the relationship between the past concept of selflessness and the present personal experience; ideal beauty and real life. The second and third panels were executed in a Western manner. The chrysanthemum, a fragment of Chinese brush painting was collaged, combining it with expressive line and color. The strong angular, volumetric rocks overlapped into the flower, altering the shapes and lines into ambiguous space. The expanded use of various media erased the line between Eastern and Western imagery, and exhibited the concept of cultural duality. This painting approached the oriental theme, using different

media and style, which included the use of brush painting, collage, and monotype. My risk here involved the manner in which I handled the image as it shifted from panel to panel, uniting the whole painting under a consistent theme.

Traditional, multiple perspectives were employed in Mountain View, resulting in a non-conventional look. Horizontal line was eliminated from each of the panels. In the first panel, busy brushstrokes surrounded the Lotus flower, leaving little space when viewed closely. In contrast to the flower image in the first panel, the flower image in the second panel was enlarged. Because the image was fused with ambiguous space, it appeared as if more negative space was left. Silver contour lines were used for the illustrated flowers, which resulted in the imagery pulling away from the flat, black background. This kind of push and pull increased the viewer's spatial perception. The last panel was a panoramic view of mountains. Flowers appeared to be weightless in the foreground. Each panel shifted space and media usage in order to attract the viewer's attention. In order to avoid a disorderly look, traditional, identifiable imagery was lyrically composed in a Western manner, shifting space to break the conventional, oriental organization of landscape painting.

The major consideration in Red Lotus, Chinese Painting or Not and Mountain View was to mesh brush painting with Western-style conceptual and visual ideas. Oriental

elements were fused with a contemporary mood of seeing, without losing the original identity.

The monotype, Black Veil, was successful in conveying simplicity and spontaneity in terms of the mysterious background, shifted space, minimal imagery, and limited color. I first rolled the ink on an aluminum plate, and then images were drawn by using a rag to remove the ink from the plate. The strong contrast between black background and white imagery gave a busy look. I reprinted the work so that the previous images were veiled by thin ink. It also gave the picture a certain gray, conveying various subtle changes. As an ending, the condensed brushstrokes made a soft-edged flower, totally separated from the rest of the panels which flowed in a mystical space. This addressed my feeling of isolation. Because I joined three pieces of paper, the torn edges of the BFK paper gave a vertical, linear movement which shifted the consistent black, horizontal picture plane. The reprinting, changed value lines, and the drips of the ink created a relationship between foreground and background, imagery and space. The reprint technique gave me a great opportunity to work with chance.

The spontaneous use of ink with a certain amount of control was best expressed in The Past, the Present, and the Future. Although the work had a nontraditional look, the brushwork came from traditional discipline. The inked

leaves were made spontaneously, since I didn't want to make the imagery predictable. The essential matter was to foresee the shape, value and structure of the brushwork before the brush touched the paper. It depended upon the experience and professional adjustment of proportioned ink and water in the brush. In this respect, I appreciated my brush painting training in China.

Because of political reasons, China has been isolated from the rest of the world for several decades. There was just a small amount of Western culture introduced into China before the open policy promulgated in 1980. Faced with the impact of high technology, commercial society and rapidly changing contemporary art, brush painting is going to be diminished because of its traditional style and its decorative nature. It is sad to find that brush painting has become antiquated, and that almost no traditional artist's works are recognized as masterpieces in contemporary art society. Many Chinese artists are seriously concerned about the future of Chinese painting and how to develop brush painting on a modern level.

Generally speaking, this problem gave me a chance to rethink my culture. Faced with the changing demands of contemporary art, traditional oriental art shows its evolutionary capabilities. Through my research, I am convinced that traditional oriental theme-paintings can play a vital role in contemporary art.

I now realize the importance of originality in my art, as well as appreciating the confidence I had gained in executing the brushwork necessary to depict the traditional Chinese flower-theme paintings.

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