

Fine Art



SHAO KUANG TING
AN ARTIST FOR THE AGES

Shao Kuang Ting 's Long Struggle Yields "The Peaceable Fruit of Righteousness"

Although he studied socialist realism at "Beijing's Central Academy", Ting was secretly influenced by the works of Picasso, Matisse and Modigliani. One of China's foremost living artists, his work imparts a purposeful marriage of ancient customs, masterful brush strokes and calligraphic lines mixed with the starkness and beauty of modernism. This unique style combines traditional Chinese painting techniques and the more expressive qualities of Western art.

Kuang's personal feelings led him to seek artistic freedom in the United States in 1979.

Here follows the amazing story of Chinese contemporary art and the incredible success of one of its leading proponents.





Ying Shaoqiang
1989



Balinese Flowers



Olympics

“Art is the ideological expression of human life.”
 MAO TSE-TUNG, 1939
 Yunnan Forum on Literature and Art

“I use my art to show my love to the world.”
 SHAO KUANG TING, 1999

“For those keeping score at home, and I know you are, Ting: *One*; Mao: *Nothing*.”
 —STEVE SOMERS, Sports Radio WFAN, New York

By VICTOR BENNETT FORBES

Editor-in-Chief

Born in the Shaanxi Province of Hanzhong during the Sino-Japanese War, Ting’s early years are Dickensian. Abandoned by his parents and reduced to poverty at the age of nine, the boy used a door for a bed, learned martial arts to defend himself and joined a street gang to survive. Today, Shao Kuang Ting is recognized the world over for his groundbreaking paintings that introduced the first new Chinese Art movement in 700 years—The Yunnan School—and as a muralist whose work graces The People’s Great Hall and has just recently been installed (facing the main entrance) in the \$150 million Shanghai Grand Theater, dubbed by the *New York Times* in a front page **Sunday Arts & Leisure** headline (December 6, 1998) as “a New House of Cautious Openness.”

“Caution” may still be a buzzword to free-thinkers in today’s China, but it is a concept that is foreign to the soul of Shao Kuang Ting. A free spirit with an attraction to beauty and not a trace of fear, Mr. Ting, as a youth, performed daring physical feats, which served to form the foundation for even more daring feats of fancy later. A love of literature turned him from the street to a more cerebral life with early ambitions to become an author based on his reading of classical Chinese stories and translated Tolstoy and Balzac, an activity he preferred over sleep. At the age of eleven, he began to paint, receiving his first formal training under Lei Jian-nong at the Beijing Number Eight High School in 1954.

Citing an ancient proverb from his homeland, *One must read ten thousand books and walk ten thousand miles before one is fit to paint*, Ting recalls that

when he was a child, he surrounded himself with literature. “One thing I realize now is that the ladies that I read of then are the same ones I create today in my art. They are not in real life, but rather what that I see in my heart.”

Never from models, the women Mr. Ting paints are from his feelings and hopes; composites of persona created by almost all the important writers from around the world. By reading those books and talking about their characters, he established a character in his paintings.

“In Chinese literature,” states Mr. Ting, “There are about 100 very famous female characters.” They become his subject matter. “When I paint the lips of a lady, it could be based on a legend like *Mulan* or any number of others.”

Ting’s women emanate a universal beauty, their countenances evoking a tenderness—toward a child, a friend, an animal, a work of art or just the open space set before them. Perfect love is the predominant theme, eros is vaguely implied. A vast range of color is necessary to convey such an accurate expression of the artist’s feelings. “We rarely live more than 100 years, which is nothing in the history

result of three paintings shown at an art fair by a neophyte American art dealer named Ron Segal, which set the stage for the widespread acceptance of Yunnan School art and made both artist and dealer major and immediate art world successes.

That stated, it must also be noted that the universal recognition achieved by Mr. Ting has been attained by a very select few artists in their lifetimes in

any era and from any nation. What set such a course for Mr. Ting, in addition to beautiful imagery and blazing color, was the heartfelt originality and emotional depth of his early American serigraphs taken from the paintings *Harmony*, *Ashima at Sunrise* and *Mother and Child* that so took the affection of a new generation of American, and then Japanese, art collectors. These were quickly sold out as limited edition prints, which has resulted in their value today be-



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of mankind, so I incorporate historical cultural experience, not simply my own.”

The seeds of Ting’s visionary energy were sewn early, long before Deng Xiaoping’s open door policy released the floodgates and unlocked China’s vast natural resources and market of one billion people to foreign investment in 1979. In that same year Shao Kuang Ting’s art was reviewed in a Hong Kong newspaper. Friends forwarded this information to his mother, who was “temporarily” evacuated to the island of Taiwan in 1948 and had not seen her four eldest children in over 30 years. Shortly thereafter, she was reunited with her son, who was still a few years from his incredible breakthrough in the American art scene. This came about in 1986 as a

ing well into the thousands of dollars, except nobody wants to part with them.

Many of these collectors see Shao Kuang Ting as an artist on a level with his own heroes—Picasso, Matisse, van Gogh—or contemporaneously that of a de Kooning or Johns. That is not a stretch as Mr. Ting is a vibrant young sixty year-old with a world of promise still before him.

The turning point in Shao Kuang Ting’s life came about in the early 1960s when his teacher, Zhang Guangyu, encouraged him to travel to the Yunnan province to gather material for his graduation project. Ting favored this idea, intuitively feeling he would have a greater degree of artistic freedom the farther away he was from the source of political control. In addition to encour-



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aging Ting to go south, Zhang also taught Ting a very simple principle: “There are only two lines. One is vertical and the other is horizontal. The horizontal line can express tranquility and death. The vertical line is the symbol of life.”

Yunnan, which became a province in the People’s Republic of China in 1949, is in the southwestern part of the country, is a China few modern

travelers have discovered. In the exotic beauty of the remote province of Yunnan, during his first visit in 1961, Ting began to find peace and tranquility. One of the cradles of human life, home to the Yuanmou Ape Man who lived there 1.7 million years ago, with fossils known as “dragon bones” that predate Peking Man, Yunnan’s rich natural resources were a magnet which resulted in the migration of 25

minority races, Tibetan nomads and Chinese. The migrations continued south to populate Southeast Asia and also created a passageway between ancient China and Myanmar, India and other countries that was later known as the “Southern Silk Route.” Its landscape ranges from snowy mountains to tropical rainforest with clear, pure lakes, forests of stone and inhabitants who don’t just dress for tourists but honor their traditions every day.

This was the first time Ting had travelled from the northern part of China to the south. Purposely riding on the slowest train with stops at every station, when he finally arrived, he felt as though he was in another world, “very quiet and beautiful.” This trip was very important to the development of his art, he said some thirty years later, and from this experience, he started to find himself.

At the Yunnan Art Institute, Ting taught drawing, oil painting, woodcut, Chinese heavy color painting and art history. This Yunnan heavy color painting, which has since become one of the most popular forms of artistic expression in the world, is executed on rice paper with traditional brushes using ink and gouache. The thick and intense colors create a unique effect on rice paper, which absorbs pigments and plays up the effect of Chinese ink. This type of painting enables the Yunnan artists to combine the special charm of traditional oriental art with the vitality of modern western art. Many of the artists have studied the works of Picasso, Matisse and Modigliani and were inspired to experiment with new themes, techniques and plane compositions. It is a style that does not belong exclusively to the East or the West, but to the world.

The distant province of Yunnan provided an environment conducive to the growth and sustenance of an outstanding core of young painters, many of whom are internationally successful today, including Jiang Tiefeng, the muralist Zhou Ling and He Ning, among so many others. The life stories and sufferings these artists went through mirror the history of their country and are well documented in Ann Barrott Wicks’ book Painting Paradise: The Art of Ting Shao Kuang.

Becoming a teacher in the early 1960s, Mr. Ting “stirred things up in school and made it more lively. His approach to art was so different from the

dogmatism of our other professors," said the artist He Deguang, "that even though he was very young, he influenced many students. We all loved to be around him."

Yunnan artists have struggled long and hard to preserve their freedom of creativity. During the Cultural Revolution, this modern, abstract style of painting was considered unacceptable. Ting estimates he destroyed some 1,500 paintings during a period of the Cultural Revolution when he eschewed repose again for the joy of painting. "I painted in the night and in the morning I burned them in a stove," said Ting. Working from midnight til 5 a.m., the artist found "no time to sleep, maybe 2-3 hours." Many artists forced to destroy their work to avoid being caught by the authorities, left the modern, coastal cities of China to resettle in the mountains of Yunnan. It was only recently that the Chinese government officially recognized this unique style of painting.

There had been a period, prior to this time of burning, where Ting lost all motivation. He found himself looking at Michelangelo's sculpture and listening to Beethoven, but feeling nothing, just "danger. They always gave to me very strong feelings, but all I could feel at this time was danger." He could not paint, could not listen to his beloved classical music. "At that time, I felt that the art within me was fading away because I was not able to do it. But the feeling could not fade away. I was not thinking of the future, I just had to do it. I was in danger, but had to continue. Many people had problems. Art was dangerous for my life and that's why I started to work."

Ting chose the traditional materials—rice paper, ink and gouache and experimented in many different styles. At first, what he felt toward society—anger—was evident. He started with Michealangelo's work and Rodin's; he copied by first drawing, understanding the use of the line. This experience, this study, would be a keyline for him to later establish the quality of his line in his paintings and three-dimensional work. By drawing only the line drawing to modify the sculpture, he had to include all the images' weight and design to find what he calls "the soul of the sculpture."

Mr. Ting says that he learned colors from a Western perspective as well as from the study of traditional Chinese paintings, which are predomi-





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nantly comprised of very simple, primary colors, such as black and red. In line drawings there are four different colors; gold, silver, black and white. The first step of color comes from the classical period artist who solved problems in black and white, very simply. Later on, the Impressionists started to paint under the sun and developed the cool and warm colors, the contrast. The third era, that of modern art, seems to say that most art is meaningful based on the density and brightness of the color and the use of very strong pigment. In the fourth stage, artists use very simple, flat color and from the color they convey a three dimensional feeling, a la Mondrian.

"Another important issue about color is the shape and then the balance between the color and shape. If an artist draws a very realistic figure and the

color is abstract, it is awkward. Without balance there is no harmony. If you change the color, you have to change the shape to go with it, a very important issue for artists to achieve. But the most important balance you have to find is within yourself, how you feel: you paint by the feelings within yourself."

Mr. Ting's manifest as an artist has been to establish his own style, under one art philosophy and staying true to that philosophy. He contends that "If everybody didn't follow the art philosophy they believed in, there would not be a period of art as a style. You would only see people's lives.

"Each civilization has its own style. Picasso was a genius, he created many different styles under the same philosophy, the same set of beliefs, but each painting was quite original within that."

When Ting came to the United States, the first thing he found was freedom in the expression of his art and in his heart he found peace. "Actually in my painting, I am painting a dream, a hope." He has kept all the worries and sadness inside himself. "In my heart, I am only painting what I am hoping for, what I am dreaming."

For such purposes, Ting adheres to the principal that a clean soul life is a necessity. In focusing on the peacefulness within himself, he seeks to find accord between the earth, the universe and humankind, which is a very important tenet of Chinese thought. Ting cites the *I-Ching*, as an authority that speaks not only of Sino philosophy but about the aesthetics of art. "Many artists and scientists," says Ting, "are studying the *I-Ching* right now. It is a most influential book."

More than that, the *I-Ching* (chart of changes) is an ancient Chinese oracle that provides an Oriental philosophical perspective and insight in situations and problems. It is both a book and a method of divination that represents one of the first efforts of humans to grasp their relationship to nature and society—a book of wisdom that illustrates correct and balanced action in a multitude of situations. The basis of the *I-Ching* philosophy is that nothing is static and that our task is to adjust to the ebbs and flows of change evolving over the centuries as a mix of Taoist and Confucian philosophy with origins dating back about 5000 years to the time of the ruler Fu Hsi. By finding the eight trigrams that form the sixty-four hexagrams on the shell of a tortoise, Fu Hsi is credited as being the first person to give some order to an uncivilized culture. The meanings evolved from then on and the book was used mostly for predicting natural events until King Wen wrote the first expositions on the sixty-four hexagrams about 3000 years ago. He wrote them while in prison from a vision on the prison wall and those first comments included social and political connotations.

“In the Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao was doing everything against this. He turned people against nature, and people against people. Natural and man-made disasters and damage to the rain forest were inevitable results.” Ting uses his work to show us we need balance, and peace, and that we can find such a harmony. “Not just China, but every country around the world is facing these problems.

“So many things have been done to destroy the environment. In the *I Ching*, it is said that when a balance is found, the whole world will be peaceful. I am painting the balance to get this message across the world. No matter whether I paint an animal, a tree or a



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“Many renowned Chinese philosophers, such as Lao Tzu and Confucius, have been influenced by the I Ching ...”

person, I try to find this equanimity—the balance and the peace. There’s a reason: you have to do it within yourself.”

Ting is a gentlemen who created an art movement which is about “speaking to, rather than fooling, the people.” There’s nobody out there falsifying what he creates. He strives more to get his message out than to be in the so-called elite. He’s a human, not part of a machine, not part of a

system. He’s part of life. With roots firmly planted, he won’t be bent or swayed by artificiality. And he is eloquent regarding his art.

“I believe there are two types of artists, one who paints as he feels the reality is, that will give people the thinking of laying flat with you; the other group paints with their heart. They give back the beauty, the hope. I use my art to express my love to the world.”