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## Ed Lai interview about Grace Lai

Thomas Matt

*DePaul University*, [tommatt@me.com](mailto:tommatt@me.com)

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**Interviewer: Thomas Matt**

**Artist: Grace Lai (passed away in 2010. Her son Ed Lai was interviewed)**

**In-person interview at Ed's residence, Chicago IL**

**Date: May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012**



Grace Lai pictured with her son, Ed.

Photo courtesy of Ed Lai

*Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Asian American Arts/Culture during the spring 2012 quarter as part of the Asian American Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor of Art, Media, & Design.*

**Artist Bio:** Grace Lai painted downtown Chicago in concrete and steel bloom, for two decades producing vibrant montages of skyline-shaping buildings as they climbed. An "on-site" artist who didn't seriously take up painting until nearly 60 because of a promise made to her deceased husband, Mrs. Lai donned a hard hat and was unafraid to board construction elevators for rides high into the sky to complete her work. In winter she'd wrap herself in plastic garbage bags and substitute rubbing alcohol for water in her paints, so they wouldn't freeze.

Artist Bio taken from the Chicago Tribune ([http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-03-17/news/ct-met-0318-lai-obit-20100317\\_1\\_paintings-materials-train-stations](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-03-17/news/ct-met-0318-lai-obit-20100317_1_paintings-materials-train-stations))

To learn more about Grace Lai visit: <http://www.visionbridge.com/gracelai/>

### **Interview Transcript:**

**Thomas Matt:** So when I was doing research on Grace, it seemed like there was a very interesting story as to how she got her start as an artist. I was just wondering if you could tell me more about how this happened?

**Ed Lai:** Sure, sure. Actually, she was an assistant to my father, and my mom and dad had a commercial art studio called "ACME Studio" – not like the one in the roadrunner cartoon—and

they had it for about 40 years. They did signage and displays, but it was before the age of computers. A lot of times, large black and white photographs were colored in to make them look like color photographs, and so a lot of the signage was hand-done, hand-lettered.

**TM:** Oh really? I had no idea that's how it was done.

**EL:** Yea, that's how it was done in those days. Anyways, so my dad eventually passed away. He was a prolific fine artist and a great guy, and he passed away in 1985. Before he died, my mom had promised him that when he did pass, she would go back to school and learn perspective because one of her goals was to draw buildings. Her perspective was always very bad, and my father would always tell her "You need to go back to school and learn perspective" and she said, "Okay, I promise you I will". So that's exactly what she did. She went back to school at the age of 55.

**TM:** Wow, 55?

**EL:** Yep, she went to the American Academy of Art, and she graduated. However, in the first few months of school, it was still very warm weather, and when she was getting off the bus she had fractured her foot. She wasn't used to all the things that were going on at the time. We were moving the studio back to home and moving all the things to our new home – and she was without my father, of course. With all that weighing heavily on her, she stepped off the back of the bus and fractured her foot. This was a fortunate thing, actually, because she found out that in order to get to school on time she would have to leave about two hours earlier to avoid the traffic. It just so happened that at the same location of the bus stop for the American Academy of Art, John Buck, one of the most famous American builders, was constructing a new building. So, she said, "Well, I'm in art school and I've always loved a challenge. This looks like a really difficult thing to do. I've got some extra time, so I'll just draw this." So she started to draw and she started to get very good too. She would strike up conversations with the construction workers, which she found to be one [of] the best parts of painting. She loved those interactions. And that's how she started.

**TM:** I had noticed that the pretty much all of Grace's artwork I found online appeared to be architectural drawings and sketches. Did she only stick to drawing stuff like that? Did she ever do more abstract artwork, or was it always architectural paintings?

**EL:** Usually. A lot of her work was architectural. Not so... how do I say it? Not in the exact architectural manner, but it's a characterization of what she saw. It's not something you would see in an unveiling of landscape plans or in a formal presentation, but she put her own body and soul into it.

**TM:** Speaking of that, I read that Grace would actually put on a hard hat and go up into the buildings as they were being constructed.

**EL:** Absolutely. In fact, it was required that everyone on the construction site had to wear a hard hat, otherwise there can be huge fines and people could be killed. So just for safety's sake, she would always be wearing a hard hat. Many times, she would be hired by the different builders

for the period of time that her drawings were being done, and she ended up with many hard hats over the years with the different names of the companies. It was very funny.

**TM:** So, I feel it's just as important to learn about the artist as an individual as it is to learn about their work. I was wondering if you could tell me of any artists in particular that Grace really drew inspiration from, side from her husband, of course?

**EL:** That's a great question. Mark McMahon. He was a great quick sketch artist who was able to capture the character of people or surroundings with only a few strokes, so he was really one of her favorites. She also really liked a lot of the courtroom sketchers. In fact, that's what she wanted to be because you can sit down and draw.

**TM:** For this part of the interview, I had some questions that focus on Asian heritage. Obviously, your mom and dad live during tough times for Asians and Asian Americans, especially with the three major wars that made Asian people out to be the enemies and the internment camps. Did she ever really talk about stuff like that? Any of the hardships she faced growing up?

**EL:** A little bit. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, the Chinese were forced to wear patches that differentiated them from the Japanese because if you looked Asian, you were initially thought to be Japanese. They actually had to wear a patch that said, "I am not Japanese". They were often beaten up, unfortunately, because of the prejudice and the sentiment of the times. But she lived through it pretty well, and she had a good attitude about it. She realized that it was only the viewpoints of a few.

**TM:** It kind of seems like that led to her discipline as an artist; I mean, it didn't take her long at all to take up perspective. Do you think that was a result of growing up when and where she did?

**EL:** I do. Asians in general are taught that we're held to a higher accountability. Mom always said, "You have to act right, you have to obey the law, and you have to be a good citizen. Unless you do, they'll look at you and say 'Oh, all Asian Americans must be like this' and then they'll blame it on me, your mother. So you better be good".

**TM:** Was Asian culture a big part her life?

**EL:** Yes, yes. I would say not Asian culture as you would see in China but an American version, perhaps. In fact, my mom was Christian, and that was a leading part of her life. We went to an Asian church; it was the Chinese Christian Union Church. She was a Sunday school superintendent. But yes, my Grandfather had Chinese restaurants. At the time, that was the only thing they knew how to do. Of course, as [Asians] assimilated, we learned different skills and had what all immigrants bring with them, knowledge of their homeland and their culture.

**TM:** Was Grace ever included in any exhibitions on Asian American art?

**EL:** Oh yes, she was. A very good friend of ours has an excellent advertising public relations

firm, and she developed what's called the bookmark event to mark the beginning of Asian American heritage month, which is the month of May. This right here is the front and back of a bookmark. [Grace] was featured in many of these. Around the beginning of every May, she would be included both there and in a number of Asian American art shows at the [James R. Thompson center].

**TM:** How late did she paint in her life? She was 82 when she passed, right?

**EL:** Yes, she was 82, and she painted all the way up to the end.

**TM:** How long could she maintain actually being on-site?

**EL:** Probably until her late 70s, I would say, which I think is really impressive. My mom was also a member of the OCA, which is the Organization of Chinese Americans. It was a national organization, but she belonged to the Chicago chapter. When she passed, the organization made an award. The organization is now a pan-organization so it's Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Indians, Pakistani, all those Asian cultures, and each year we have a scholarship awarding. This year we're awarding \$30,000 to 5 or 6 different high school students that are going to college or university in the fall. They name one of the scholarships after my mom; it's the Grace Lai Scholarship, and it's for students who are pursuing an art degree.

**TM:** Oh wow, I didn't come across that when I was researching Grace. And that started in 2011?

**EL:** Yes. She passed in 2010 and it started the year after.

**TM:** There was a quote I found, which focuses a little bit more on architecture and art than Asian heritage, but I wanted to "With every picture I create, I also fit in the adjacent architecture that will be built over and never seen again. Architects pour over them, trying to see if I left off some significant building. But I strive to make my picture the real view". I guess I was just wondering what your thoughts were on that. I mean, the attention to detail she had was pretty crazy.

**EL:** Oh yes, yes. In fact, you're welcome to look through these paintings. Here's midway airport. As you can see, it's pretty good detail with so much going on the picture.

**TM:** After she started doing these sketches, how soon did people start hiring her to do them professionally?

**EL:** I'd say within the first few months.

**TM:** Man, she just seemed to pick things up so quickly.

**EL:** Yes, God did give her a talent to do that, and she loved to do it.

**TM:** From what I could find, when Grace worked with your father, she managed aspects about the business itself.

**EL:** Yes, she did the books for business.

**TM:** Did she ever do any colorings of the signs with your father or anything like that?

**EL:** I think from time to time she would do some black and white sketchings but more so left that stuff to my dad.

**TM:** Well, that covers pretty much all the questions that I had. Is there you wanted to say about your mom in closing?

**EL:** You know, I think that a lot of the motivation in my mom's life came from the fact that she knew Jesus Christ. [Grace] was a Christian, and she wanted other people to know that. She was very gracious. She was a wonderful mom... a wonderful mom, and a very good friend to me, as well.

**TM:** She seemed to be extremely well liked by everyone.

**EL:** Oh yes, she was very gracious and seemed to bring that out in other people as well. In fact, she was often drawn and painted by other famous artists.

**End.**