5-13-2011

Agnes Chou Interview

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Recommended Citation

https://via.library.depaul.edu/oral_his_series/43

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Interviewer: Frankie LaCoste  
Artist: Agnes Chou  
In-Person Interview: Glenview, IL  
Date: 5/13/11, 47 min long  

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts and Culture during the 2010 Spring Quarter as a part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media & Design.

Artist Bio:  
Agnes Chou, also known as Jua-Ling Chou, is an artist of the Lingnan style of Chinese painting. Agnes began her work at the age of seventy when she began taking classes from Andy Chan. Her work is primarily composed of botanical arrangements in water color on rice paper. Agnes Chou is now eighty-one years old having participated in an international exhibition eight years ago in Japan where her work can now be found in the Murphy Hill gallery. She now uses painting as a hobby and teaches at Oakton Community college.
Interview Transcript:

Agnes Chou: First I will introduce myself, I am Mrs. Agnes Chou. But you will ask me how long I have learned Chinese painting. But I learned maybe some, but you doesn’t believe me, But I since 1997 start learning. Now I am 81-years old, so all my friends doesn’t believe me, I only learned a short time but I already participated in Chinese painting exhibition. Even that’s eight years ago. My teacher let me participate in international contest. I got award in Japan. But these painting still now in Chicago in there’s Murphy Hill gallery, have you heard this gallery? You know, this big, big building. There’s almost forty nine famous artists there that their painting is there. So all the paintings still there, so from April 7 or 9th to May 20th, so it is a long time. So if you have time, you can still go there.

Frankie LaCoste: so can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

AC: myself is . . . when I’m getting old what I do at home with your brain, right? But since I was young I liked the artwork, usually I learned the piano, then I learned Chinese musical instrument, over there [points to instrument in room] then I suddenly I learned Chinese painting. My teacher is Andy Chan, he lives in Chicago, he teaches a lot of students. You know in the Oakton Community College every Sunday there is a Chinese school so my teacher taught there, but I only learned a few years. He went to china to teach a short time and now I go to his house to learn. So I am very interested in the flowers. You know the nature, the very colors so that’s why I learned. Because I told you why the Chinese paining there is a different style, different technique, there is different skill to do this. So Lingnan style is very . . . it just looks very nature. so I will show you this book. this book is Lingnan style, so you can take a look. This book is Lingnan style so you can just take a short look.

[She shows me a binder full of photographs of her work]

FL: Oh wow, so where did you grow up Mrs. Chow? Where were you born?

AC: I was born in Beijing, so I spent my childhood in Beijing. So that’s why I speak standard Mandarin, now I am still teaching Chinese adult class in Oakton Community College. So Sunday afternoon from 1:30 to 4 we have two adult class. My son, he teaches at DePaul University graduate school to teach the computer. So I think for many years. Now, my son teaches the first class, and I teach the second, so that is why I speak standard Chinese. So . . . the Chinese painting is my hobby that’s because my son and grandson are all grown up, so stay home nothing to do so at least in this time its my hobby.

FL: So how did you first get involved in painting?

AC: Ahhh see I think this is a long story!

FL: It’s probably a good one.
AC: Yeah, one day I just went to Chinese school, right? My friend say “Hey!”, because I’m very old they call my “mama”. “Hey! Mama! We have Chinese painting class! You come to take a look, maybe you like it?” So yeah, that’s why I started learning Chinese painting, at seventy years old. Now I’ve learned ten years now.

FL: Is there any specific meaning to the paintings of yours over there on the wall?

AC: All my paintings, like this, now I will show you just last week. When I finish Chinese painting in here you can mount it. But in Chinese painting, for the mounting, use Chinese style with different materials. Even in Chinese painting we use what call that rice paper. It’s very soft, very thin. Even all the colors, I bought some from Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan. See these were last week I finished these [points to paintings]. Do you know what flower it is?

FL: It looks very familiar, but I don’t know the name.

AC: It’s a peony! You go to the botanical gardens. But the peony there is two kinds, one is the tree peony one is peony. Different if you look at the leaves a little bit different. So if you learn art you have to notice what’s different even the name is the same but even the leaves different.

FL: What does this writing say on the side of your piece?

AC: Usually when the Chinese art is finished painting have to first write your name, your Chinese name. This is not finished yet, but you have to write your name. That’s finished [points to a painting with a red seal on it] better you have to write some poem, Chinese poem to describe what this painting mean. Because peony is a famous flower in China. And there is black peony have you heard of that?

FL: No, I can’t imagine one,

AC: The different color’s very beautiful.

AC: So my characters, “in this world there is no other flower like peony. So the colors very beautiful. In there you can smell the fragrances”, so I write that. Last Friday, my friend invited me to in May there is Asian American heritage celebration, have you heard of that? It’s in the Chicago downtown from different countries, so this is something I did last week, so you learn art what flower is this? I ask you.

Laughter

FL: I don’t know that one either

Laughter

AC: You know art! You should know the flowers name. So you learn art you have to know the name, you have to know the color, you have to know the history.
Laughter

AC: So this is plum, plum blossom. This I did last week. You know plum blossom is national flower for China. Even there is fifty states and each state has their own flower. And this is, you know this bamboo, bamboo everybody knows. This is shrimp, this shrimp I still have one in international contest still in Murphy Hill Gallery, if you have time you can go there, take a look. This is a Chinese orchid, you know this is a western orchid, so this Chinese orchid. But even the leaves, different flowers. So most Chinese people like orchid, because my poem is “Chinese orchid is named “lan”, lan that’s the name. So usually they grow in the valley, even nobody knows but they still have fragrance to people. So this mean for the people no matter you watch me, you smell me but I still do my. Have you heard, Chinese have four gentleman, for the flowers, four gentleman - one is plum, one is bamboo, one is Chinese orchid, one is the mum, so this you learn art so you should know that. Because why that gentleman, you know gentleman’s meaning? So these four different kinds of flowers that’s always like Chinese gentleman. You’re attitude, you are very nice. So that’s why. You will ask me why did I want to learn the arts. Even my age is seventy, I start age seventy. I say first that this is my hobby for spending my time. Second, I feel that I am a Christian, and god created the world, its beautiful, right? Like people, enjoy the colors, they’re beautiful. But people sometimes don’t care, right?

Laughter

AC: So we enjoy god creates all the nature and let people enjoy it, because I’m Christian so. Before I learned painting, I never noticed what flower, what leaves, now I have to notice. So you start learn the art and have noticed everything. Then you draw it, it look nature from nature. Today you will talk about art and culture. Culture and art quite different, art is for the beautiful, right? Draw something its beautiful. Culture is for each country has own culture. Culture is for your life. For you language. Different from art. Americans culture and China’s culture quite different. Language different. Customs different. Food. Every thing is different, it’s the culture. China has five thousand years history, very very old country. Even I think when you were in middle school you learned history, foreign countries history. So each dynasty have their different culture. Even in china there is now I think 28 provinces. I don’t know I left China for over fifty years.

FL: How old were you when you came here?

AC: I spent my child hood in Beijing, then we moved to Shanghai, because my father do business in Shanghai. Now during that time is the second World War. You know since 1968 to 1976 the ten years Culture Revolution. During that time Chinese culture quite changed. Then China like America demonstrate their different parties. China too, there is Communist party and Republic party. Since my parents all part of Republic party during that time 1940 . . . 1949 moved to Taiwan. The government moved to Taiwan. Then we stayed in Taiwan for twenty . . . thirty . . . forty years. My son Marco came here to study in Northwestern University, I only have one son. When he graduate he says, “mom I want to stay here, how about you move.” That’s why we come here. So I come here so I can feel this American’s Western culture . . . is different from the East culture. So first I teaches in the Montessori school, after ten years I retire. So that’s my history.
FL: Have you ever been included in an exhibit that labeled your art as Asian American?

AC: I start learning the arts so I start learning the arts such as I told you the Lingnan style. In the Western style there is the oil painting, so you go to the galleries so there is oil painting. Chinese painting mostly use the Chinese brush and rice paper we call water color. Chinese painting there is different styles and ways of painting.

FL: Have exhibition opportunities changed for you since you began painting?

AC: You know my teacher teaches me is what I learn.

FL: You said that you had been in an international exhibition? What was that like?

AC: That like you know, I just draw the shrimp. The first on I sent to Michigan. All the Americans want to participate they say first you must send to Michigan to do a first selection. If they say oh, your painting is ok we can send you to Japan. The first selection there is no good they send your paintings back. What is the significance of the shrimp? You know shrimp in the water right? In the water they always very active. Why I want to learn the shrimp, because many years ago in china shrimp is very famous so my teacher want me to learn the shrimp. Not many people like the shrimp, most like the flowers. What do you like?

FL: I like the shrimp

AC: Oh you like the shrimp? Really? This one, I give to you. This my name [points to red seal], my Chinese name is Tsun-Chiang, this [points to poem on artwork] because their is water, they are very free. So this one I give to you

Gives painting

AC: I usually send to Taiwan to mount it, because it a different way to mount it. I send it there and it takes one month. Usually in Chinese we call that a scroll. If you don’t like it you can just roll it and put it away. But in the frame, if you don’t like it you still need big space to keep it. So even there is a Chinese style. But the frame is easy to keep clean

FL: What is the significance of the birds in your pieces over there?

AC: This is a plum too, the flower is a plum. The two birds did you notice the heads are white? In china even the elders like white, my hair getting [laughter], meaning longevity. So two birds usually the husband and wife get longevity. Chinese everything have their special meaning.

FL: Has your art changed since you started?

AC: The progress? What do you mean changed?

FL: Well the style, progress, or what you like the focus on?
AC: The style never changed because I learned the Lingnan style. When you start to learn the painting the teacher always teach you very simple way. A leaf like this, very simple. Then later more like the flower, different color, different style. Even the birds, many different kinds of birds. Now I can do all the different birds and style. Later you make by your design the painting. From the beginning teacher only teach you like bamboo, how to draw it, the leaves how to do it very simple. But later let you design your own.

FL: Have you been in any exhibitions recently?

AC: Just last week in the Northbrook library, in April they’re still in the gallery - Murphy Hill Gallery. Just last year all the teachers and students get together and have Chinese painting exhibition. In the Westmont there is a Chinese culture, economic and culture office there, I have heard maybe there is Chinatown they will build a new big library. But my friends and I, we have several friends, I think this a big library, we will go there for our next exhibition.

FL: Thank you very much for sharing your story with me.

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