



THROUGH THE EYES OF CHARLES CHU

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APRIL 1 - MAY 13, 1990

"The Old Sojourner at New London" (*Hsin-lun chiu-k'o*) is the legend of the carved-stone seal that Charles Chu impressed upon his painting of *Tiger Lilies*. In doing so, he joined himself to a venerable Chinese tradition in which the painter acknowledges the completion of his creative process and his satisfaction with its outcome by impressing his personal seal upon his work. More than a mere stamp of approval and authenticity, this impression affirms the mutual identity of the painter and his painting.

In commissioning the carving of his seals, the Chinese artist chooses his words carefully, because they concisely embody his identity, experience, and values. Thus, the four Chinese characters of this seal encapsulate Charles Chu's experience in life and art as a Chinese painter in America. He stands in a long tradition of Chinese sojourners who, set upon their travels by duty, political upheaval or economics, came to rest far from home. For Charles Chu, as for his predecessors in traditional China, the place of sojourn becomes a new home and the sojourner draws inspiration both from his past and from his present. This is the message of *Hsin-lun chiu-k'o*, and it is affirmed each time the artist puts his seal to paper.

The traditional Chinese painter did not limit himself to one artistic identity, nor did he sign and seal his works using only one name or one seal-legend. Two other seals appear frequently on the works of Charles Chu. "*Ch'ing-feng shan-chuang*" (Pure-breeze

Mountain Villa) is a poetic studio-name. In Chinese painting history, these words might refer to an artist's favorite painting place in the hills around the West Lake of 13th-century Hang-chou, or in the rustic gardens outside 15th-century Su-chou, or among the sheer cliffs of 17th-century Anhui. In the case of Charles Chu, these words, impressed upon many of his works, refer instead to the artist's former home in mid-20th-century Connecticut and to the charm of the natural scenery around Sleeping Giant Mountain. It is a place he

remembers warmly as the scene of lively gatherings of Chinese scholars, painters, and connoisseurs and as a source of inspiration for his landscapes. Again, in using his *Ch'ing-feng shan-chuang* seal, Charles Chu at once joins himself to the classical Chinese ideal of the hermit-painter in the mountains, and affirms his American experience.

By far, the seals that Charles Chu uses most frequently are the ones that bear his name—that is the name he brought from China. These seals take different shapes and use many script forms and carving styles, but they all say "*Chu Chi-jung*." His surname is familiar; his given name may be translated into English as "Continuing-glory." Encoded in the terse language of Charles Chu's artist's seals, his affirmation of continuity—



8. SEAGULL
After cold days it suddenly warmed up. The thaw brought the seagulls back. Occasionally a stray one left the flock and flew high in the sky to drop a "bomb." "Bang," it landed! The seagull flew down to enjoy an oyster meal. When it finished, it glided away over my head and resumed looking.
 Martha's Vineyard, February, 1987



Professor Emeritus Charles Chu

between China and America, between traditional and contemporary art and values—is expressed in every painting in this present exhibition.

The works of Charles Chu represent the traditional unity of Chinese scholar-painting, bringing together poetry, painting, and calligraphy—accomplishments known as "The Three Perfections"—in a single work of art. The painter's brush is also that of the calligrapher and the strokes that delineate images are adapted from those that form Chinese written characters. The painted pictures and inscribed calligraphy are composed as a formal unity. In the same way, the meanings inherent in traditional pictorial subject matter and the meaning of the poetry or prose inscription work together to express the artist's feelings, experience, and values. This fusion of the three arts into a formal and expressive unity is the distinctive contribution of East Asian painting to world art.

Take, for instance, Charles Chu's *Tiger Lilies*. The flowers are done in quick applications of vibrant color, their stamens in brisk flicks of the ink-charged brush. In forming the rock, the dry brush moves so swiftly that its hairs spread apart to make the striations known as "flying-white" brush strokes. Charles Chu has wrapped the

rock with his calligraphy. His inscribed poem—in traditional Chinese verse form—reads in his English translation:

*Friends brought two tiger lilies,
Half in bloom half in bud.
Their beauty was intoxicating.
Spreading the paper on the table,
I splashed ink and color.
When the buds blossom,
A new poem will be written.*

The lush, wet color and black ink work together in broad and crisp brushwork. The pictorial and calligraphic elements are joined together in a harmonious whole. More, the exuberance of the painted image also is expressed both through the abstract brush strokes of the calligraphy and through the meaning of the poem that it inscribes. Charles Chu's inscribed poem here evokes the pleasures of friendship and of flowers, a pleasure that provokes the artist to respond through painting and poetry, and engenders his eager anticipation of opening buds both in nature and in art, as he acts out his exhilaration by splashing on color and ink, and then composing a new poem. This work of art is a record of its own creation.

In the same way, in another season, Charles Chu paints tangled branches and winter berries, bright touches of orange and red among bold, black, ink branches. And winding through them, appearing in their interstices, and disappearing again behind the branchwork is his calligraphy inscription. Likewise, a sinuous branch of wisteria finds its formal and expres-

sive twin in the inscription that follows its undulating path. Sometimes, as in Charles Chu's *Sea Gull*, the painted image itself—here the gull with outstretched wings—is composed and "written" as if it were, itself, a large Chinese character. Inspired by the antics of the gull, Charles Chu captures it in a few swift strokes. In making his poetic inscription, he chooses



10. MOUSE
This creature called mouse steals at night and in the broad light of day. Some beings act like gentlemen, but steal secretly. It is much easier to prevent the mouse from stealing than to prevent the man.

I painted this in 1958 but never showed it to the public until October, 1963 at Connecticut State Teachers' College (now SCSC).

a calligraphy style and arranges the lines of his inscription so that the forms of the calligraphy and their placement will develop the visual expression of his work at the same time that the words of his inscription enhance and extend his meaning.

The materials and techniques of the art of Charles Chu and the aesthetic values that it embodies are typically Chinese. But he uses them not only to draw upon his traditional heritage but also to express his

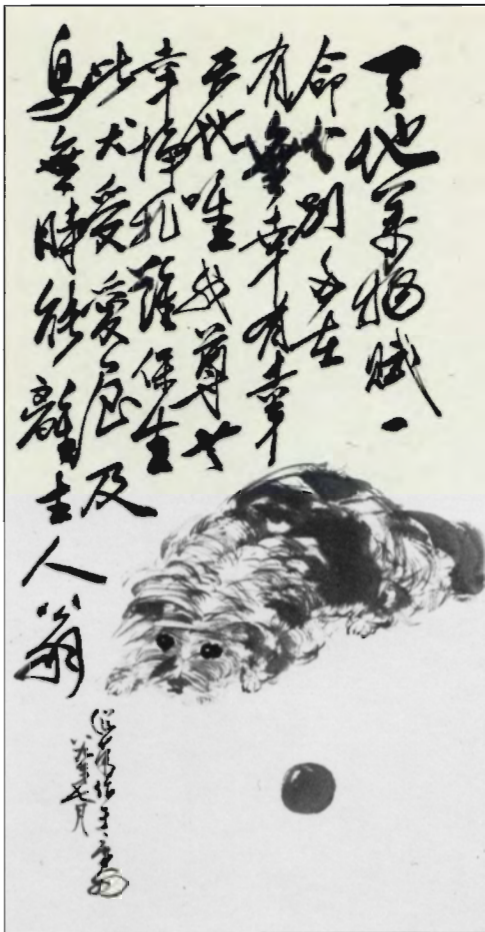
New England experience. His inked brush strokes and colored washes now conjure up the classical Chinese theme of *The Red Cliffs*, now evoke vivid memories of the spectacular Yangtze River Gorges (which he revisited in 1988), now depict the sheer heights of New Haven's East Rock and West Rock, now the coast of Martha's Vineyard or Connecticut, where fishing boats drift peacefully at their moorings at Haddam or Old Lyme, now set his viewer travelling for *Four Hundred Miles on the Connecticut River*—through his long painted handscroll. Among Charles Chu's favorite subjects are scenes around his New London home—autumn colors at the Connecticut Arboretum, a snow-bound Williams Street, winter berries in front of the Lyman Allyn, Thames River landscapes, and a panorama of Connecticut College, painted with the same loving knowledge and care that his predecessors brought to depicting their mountain villas and favorite gardens in old China.

What is the personal experience that underlies this artistic continuity of past and present so apparent in the painting, calligraphy, and poetry of the art of Charles Chu? In 1988, on the occasion of Charles Chu's one-man exhibition, "Nutmeg Paths, Chinese Brush," at Wesleyan University's Mansfield Freeman Center for East Asian Studies, Phillip Wagoner interviewed the artist and composed a biography that sheds light on the artist's early life and training. Born in Hopeh province in 1918, Charles Chu practiced calligraphy as a schoolboy, learning in the traditional way by copying model scripts from the Northern Wei (386-535) and T'ang (618-906) dynasties. Recognized as a child prodigy, he constantly was called upon to write on festive and public occasions in his village. Later, he began to study painting under Liu Chün-li, who had once studied with the contemporary master Ch'i Pai-shih (1873-1957).

As a young man, Charles Chu responded patriotically to the Japanese invasion of China by joining the army, in a political unit that undertook propaganda, organization, and relief work. Then, disillusioned by the corruption that he saw and deter-



9. SNOWSCAPE
Snow clearing over mountains in the spring. 1973



11. PEKINESE DOG

All creatures are endowed with life. The differences are whether one is lucky or not. The fortunate ones claim they own the world, the unfortunate struggle to keep alive. This dog is favored. He stays with his master at all times.

July, 1989

mined to become "a good Confucian scholar and civil servant," he turned to the study of political science and international relations. He earned a B.A. degree from National Central University in Chungking.

In 1945, Charles Chu came to the United States and continued to study political science at the University of California at Berkeley (where he received his M.A. degree) and at Harvard University. Then, his career took a turn which brought him the dual role of teacher and artist by which we recognize him today. In 1948, he accepted a teaching position at the famous Army Language School in Monterey and he began to paint again. In 1951, he joined a legendary group of scholar-teachers of Chinese language at Yale University, where many of today's leading sinologists were trained. Generations of future American scholars of China cut their Chinese-language teeth on Charles

Chu's contributions to Yale's Far Eastern Publications series: *A Sketch of Chinese Geography* (1954, 1963), *Campus Talks* (1958), *Ch'i Pai-shih* (1960), and *Contemporary Chinese Writings* (1971). While at Yale, Charles Chu began his systematic study of the history of Chinese art, a study which enriched and broadened his own work as a painter. It was then, also, that the chance observation of a valued friend changed the course of his artistic development. The artist still remembers that T.Y. Li once told him that any serious artist paints landscapes (the preferred mode of the traditional scholar-painter). And with that, Charles Chu added landscape painting to his bird and flower repertory.

In 1965, Charles Chu came to Connecticut College, where he established one of the first undergraduate majors in Chinese language and literature to be approved by a private liberal arts college. He retired as Professor Emeritus in 1984. A tireless friend of the College, as well as a superbly gifted teacher of Chinese language, he continues to spread the study and enjoyment of Chinese painting in his role as Curator of The Chu-Griffis Art Collection at Connecticut College.

In considering the biography of Charles Chu, we are reminded of generations of Chinese scholar-painters whose lives took unexpected turns through the upheavals of traditional and modern China. His experience as a precocious and talented village youngster, as a young man determined to make a difference and deflected from his early expectations, as a sojourner in distant places, as a person who used his talents to meet the exigencies of his times, and as one who nevertheless fulfilled his ambition to teach, to serve, and to create in ways that he, himself, could not have predicted, is

12. CAT

Pa Ta (1626-1705) is not the only one who paints cats. Before Shen Chou (1427-1509) cats were done in detail. Ta Ch'ien (1899-1983) wins the gold medal for drawing cats. It is said that "One can produce bamboo when bamboo is well conceived."

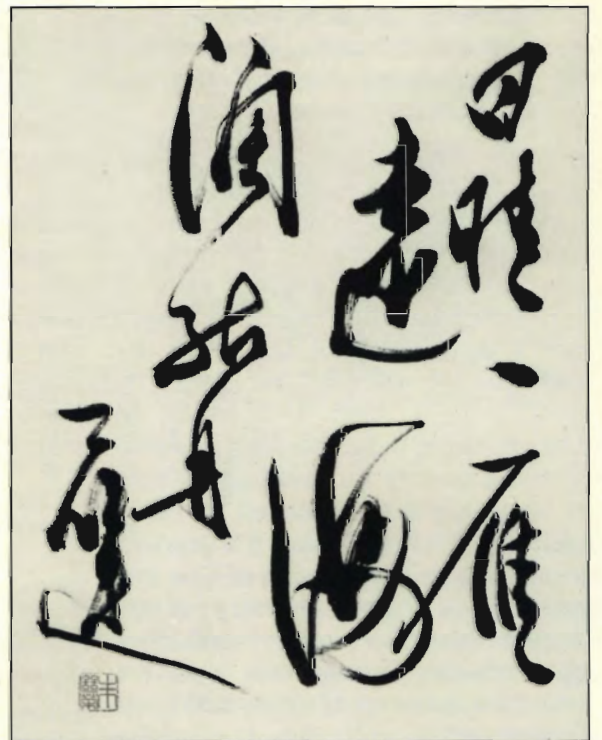
an experience that Charles Chu shares with his distinguished scholar-painter predecessors of Yüan (1279-1368) and Ch'ing (1644-1911) China.

Maggie Bickford
Assistant Professor of Art History
Brown University
9 February 1990





1. COVER: TIGER LILIES
*Friends brought two tiger lilies,
 Half in bloom half in bud.
 Their beauty was intoxicating.
 Spreading the paper on the table,
 I splashed ink and color.
 When the buds blossom,
 A new poem will be written.* 1989
2. MARTHA'S VINEYARD
*Under a sky full of churning clouds
 Edgartown Bay was half thawed and
 there was still snow on the shore.
 As the sun was setting
 a flock of geese returned for the night,
 calling gently as they fed themselves in
 the shallow water.*
 Painted in 1987,
 Inscribed in 1989
3. WISTERIA
*Behind Sleeping Giant our garden was
 full of spring colors;
 the wisteria in bloom.
 The old place was refreshed by a
 warm breeze.
 In the days ahead, the terrace would
 become a family gathering ground.
 End of autumn, 1983*
4. THREE SMALL GORGES OF THE
 YANGTZE RIVER
*I took a delightful trip in October, 1988
 through the Yangtze River gorges
 and learned that "roads to Szechuan
 were difficult."*
 Summer, 1989
5. ENDLESS FALL COLORS
*An autumnal scene in front of the
 Lyman Allyn Museum*
 Fall, 1989
6. Calligraphy (a quotation)
*"When the sky is clear a goose can be
 seen far away.
 In a wide ocean a late boat returns alone."*
 1986





7. MILKWEED PODS
"I am surprsed to find that although my function has been fulfilled I am still beautiful."

Planning to paint the 350 miles of the Connecticut River, we drove north along the river in April this spring. My wife picked a stalk of dried milkweed pods and asked me to paint it with the above inscription. This I dutifully did. The painting is to record the beauty of our lives and it should remain with the Chus forever.

July, 1989

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