

DIANE DE POLIGNAC

CHU TEH-CHUN (1920-2014)

A Franco-Chinese painter, Chu Teh-Chun formed with Zao Wou-ki and Wu Guanzhong the trio of the “Three Musketeers” of Chinese Modern Art. They integrated the traditional techniques of Asian painting with free gestural painting of western Lyrical Abstraction.



BIOGRAPHY

CHU THE-CHUN'S TRAINING YEARS

The painter Chu Teh-Chun was born in 1920 in the province of Jiangsu in China, to a family of doctors and collectors. Very early, he learned calligraphy and was passionate about Chinese painting: his father encouraged him in this path. In 1935 at only 15 years old, he entered the National Academy of Fine Arts of Hangzhou which was directed at the time by the painter Lin Fengmian. This was an Avant-Garde school where Chu Teh-Chun was trained in modern western painting and its techniques.

The following year, the Chinese painter Chu Teh-Chun became friends with the future painter Wu Guangzhong with whom he created watercolours around the West Lake. In 1941, he settled in Chongqing, the provisional capital and new cultural and intellectual centre that combined the academies of Peking and Hangzhou. Chu Teh-Chun, recently graduated, was appointed an assistant professor of the National Academy of the Fine Arts. His oils were influenced by Cézanne, Matisse and Derain. In Chongqing, Chu Teh-Chun showed in two group exhibitions, in 1945 with his friend Zao Wou-Ki and the following year with the older painter Liu Keran.

In 1947, when the National Central University of which he had become professor of drawing, left Chongqing to return to Nanjing, Chu Teh-Chun followed, travelling to Nanjing by boat along the Yangtze River. This voyage along the river through its majestic landscapes proved to be a huge source of inspiration for the Chinese painter. At Nanjing, Chu Teh-Chun married Liu Hanfu who had been a fellow student at the Hangzhou Academy; they had a daughter, Kate.

In 1949, they left for Taipei where Chu Teh-Chun became professor of drawing at the National Technological Institute and then at the National Taiwan Normal University, in the architecture department. Tung Ching-Chao was among his pupils and later became his second wife. Chu Teh-Chun was friendly with the painter Lee Chun-Shan who would become a pioneering figure of abstract art in Taiwan and they exhibited together. The Chinese painter Chu Teh-Chun's first solo exhibition held at the Hall Sun Yatsen of Taipei was a success: his works, figurative oil paintings of the mountainous landscapes of Taiwan, of nudes and still lifes were all sold, financing his journey to France in 1955 and his first years in Paris.

A CHINESE MODERN PAINTER IN PARIS

"I came to Paris in the spring of 1955 to find the response to a profound yearning. I needed to find my own path there, through learning about and practicing western painting" said Chu Teh-Chun.

Living in the Latin Quarter, the Chinese painter attended the Académie de la Grande Chaumière where he drew nudes from the live model. There, he was reunited with

his friend Zao Wou-Ki and met other Chinese artists in exile: the painters Sanyu and Pan Yuliang, and the sculptor Xiong Bingming.

The year 1956 marked a turning point in Chu Teh-Chun's art. He was profoundly moved by Nicolas de Staël's work which he discovered at a retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. For the Chinese painter, this was a real aesthetic shock that drove him towards abstraction. The same year, Chu Teh-Chun exhibited a "semi-abstract" painting at the show *Peinture d'aujourd'hui* (Painting of today) in the gardens of the Palais Royal alongside Picasso, Miró, and Cocteau; another semi-abstract painting by Chu Teh-Chun was shown at the Salon Comparaison the following year.

In 1958, Chu Teh-Chun signed a six-year exclusivity contract with the Galerie Legendre in Paris, allowing the painter to concentrate solely on his work and his artistic experimentation. There he met other artists such as Paul Revel, Albert Féraud, Francis Bott, Ladislav Kijno, James Pichette... The Galerie Legendre also organized and promoted many exhibitions of Chu Teh-Chun in France and abroad such as in Pittsburgh at the Carnegie Art Museum in 1964, in Athens and Jerusalem.

Ching-Chao, his former pupil joined him in Paris. They got married and had two sons, Yi-Hwa and Yvon.

In 1961, the first solo exhibition about Chu Teh-Chun in Paris was held at the Galerie du Haut-Pavé, where only abstract paintings were shown.

Other exhibitions followed in France and Europe: in Switzerland, Spain, Italy, Germany and Luxembourg between 1965 and 1978. The painter Chu Teh-Chun also exhibited at the 10th Sao Paulo Biennale in 1969, where he had a booth representing China. During a trip to Amsterdam the same year, he was influenced by Rembrandt's work which moved him deeply.

In 1971, Chu Teh-Chun and his family moved to Bagnolet outside Paris where he had access to a studio. He then returned to the practice of calligraphy. In 1982, the Musée des Beaux-Arts du Havre held an exhibition of his work: Chu Teh-Chun, *Peintures et dessins*, 1955-1982.

THE PAINTER CHU THE-CHUN'S INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

Chu Teh-Chun returned to China after a 35 years absence in 1983. Indeed, the Chinese painter was invited to be a juror at the University of Hong Kong, and then by the Association of Artists of China. He took advantage of this opportunity to continue his journey around China with the painter Kijno and his wife, from the Imperial tombs near Xi'an and the Buddhist grottos at Yungang to the Yellow Mountains that inspired him so much. At that time, Chu Teh-Chun created a series of works in ink wash on Chinese paper.

After returning to France, Chu Teh-Chun began to paint very large works that were exhibited among other places at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Liège in 1988 and made his famous series of *Neiges* (Snow) paintings inspired by a snow storm he had experienced in Switzerland in 1985. It was also at this time that Chu Teh-Chun's work first received recognition in Taiwan and he returned there for the first time since his move to France. His first retrospective in Taiwan was held at the National Museum of History of Taipei in 1984, while several galleries also showed his work. There followed a travelling exhibition 1988 and 1989 with a long itinerary through 15 municipal and county cultural centers around Taiwan. He also met Michael Sullivan in Oxford at that time, an important art critic and art historian of modern Chinese art, who wrote about the painter Chu Teh-Chun's work.

During the early 1990s, Chu Teh-Chun and his family moved to Vitry-sur-Seine where he had a large studio for making his large paintings. He also continued to work with calligraphy and wash. His exhibitions continued in France, Europe and Taiwan. In 1993, Pierre Cabane wrote a first monograph, published by Cercle d'Art; a second monograph followed, published by Flammarion.

In 1994, Chu Teh-Chun returned to China with his family and his friend Albert Féraud accompanied by his wife. He discovered new landscapes, such as Dunhuang, its grottos of Mogao and the river Li. The Association Française d'Action Artistique (AFAA) organized two waves of travelling exhibitions of Chu Teh-Chun's work around Asia: the first between 1997 and 1998 in Beijing, Hong Kong, Kaosiung (Taiwan) and Taipei, a second in 2000 that travelled to Shanghai, Guangdong and Pusan (South Korea).

In 1997, Chu Teh-Chun also participated in group travelling exhibitions, with Kijno and Riopelle in Quebec. Chu Teh-Chun then went to Quebec and discovered new landscapes. The same year, he was elected to the Académie des Beaux-Arts of Paris – he had received French nationality in 1981 and was the first painter of Chinese origin to enter such an institution. In 2001, Chu Teh-Chun received the Legion of Honour.

At the start of the 2000s, Chu Teh-Chun worked on a spectacular project: a canvas that was 4 metres high by 7 metres wide, commissioned by the Shanghai opera: this was the *Symphonie Festive* that was exhibited at the Opéra Garnier in Paris before being unveiled in Shanghai in 2003.

During the first decade of the new millennium, exhibitions continued in Asia, at the Shanghai Museum of Fine Arts, the Royal Museum of Ueno in Tokyo in 2007, and the National History Museum of Taipei in 2008, at the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in 2010 to celebrate his 90th birthday. In Paris, another retrospective was held at the Pinacothèque in 2013.

In 2006, the Chinese painter Chu Teh-Chun exhibited for the first time with an American gallery: in New York at the Marlborough Gallery.

His last major project was a collaboration with the Manufacture de Sèvres between 2007 and 2009 that enabled him to produce 50 vases that were later exhibited at the Musée Guimet in Paris between 2009 and 2011. Chu Teh-Chun died in 2014.

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Translation: Jane Mac Avock



SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Nantes, Musée des arts

Paris, Musée d'Art moderne de Paris

Vitry-sur-Seine, Musée d'art moderne et contemporain du Val-de-Marne (MACVAL)

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Hall Sun Yatsen, Taipei, 1954

Peinture d'Aujourd'hui (Painting of Today), gardens of the Palais Royal, Paris, 1956

Salon Comparaison, Paris, 1957

Solo exhibition, Galerie du Haut-Pavé, 1961

30 gouaches de Chu Teh-Chun, Galerie Legendre, 1958

The 1964 Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture, Carnegie Art Museum, Pittsburgh, 1964

10th Sao Paulo Biennale, Sao Paulo, 1969

Chu Teh-Chun, Maison de la Culture et des Loisirs, Saint-Étienne, 1978

Chu Teh-Chun, Peintures et dessins, 1955-1982, Musée des Beaux-Arts André Malraux, Le Havre, 1982

Chu Teh-Chun, Musée d'Art moderne, Liège, 1988

Retrospective, National Museum of History, Taipei, 1987

Chu Teh-Chun, Paysagisme des songes (Chu Teh-Chun, Landscape of dreams), La Malmaison, Cannes, 2004

Chu Teh-Chun, Arsenal, Metz, 2005

Chu Teh-Chun, Shanghai Museum of Fine Arts, Shanghai, 2005

Chu Teh-Chun, The Royal Ueno Museum, Tokyo, 2007

National Museum of History, Taipei, 2008

National Art Museum of China (NAMOC), 2010

Chu Teh-Chun, Les Chemins de l'Abstraction (Chu Teh-Chun, The Paths of Abstraction), Paris, Pinacothèque, 2013

Marlborough Gallery, New York, 2006

De neige d'or et d'azur. Chu Teh-Chun et la manufacture de Sèvres (Snow of gold and azure. Chu Teh-Chun and the Sèvres factory), Musée Guimet, Paris, 2009-2011

Chu Teh-Chun, amours océanes (Chu Teh-Chun, ocean loves), Fondation Monticelli, Marseille, 2015

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hubert Juin, Hélène Jousset, Xavier Longobardi, *Chu Teh-Chun*, Paris, Éditions du Musée de Poche, 1979

Pierre Cabane, *Chu Teh-Chun*, Paris, Cercle d'art, 1993

Pierre Cabane, *Chu Teh-Chun*, Paris, Flammarion, 2000

Pierre-Jean Remy, *Chu Teh-Chun*, Paris, La Différence, 2006

Pierre Cabane, Marc Restellini, Chu Teh-Chun, *Les Chemins de l'Abstraction*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Pinacothèque, 2013