

DIANE DE POLIGNAC

WALASSE TING (1928-2010)



Chinese-born Walasse Ting was a genre-breaking artist who worked in Paris, New York and Amsterdam. His geographical mobility and artistic agility foreshadowed the international development of contemporary Chinese art in the 1990s. Walasse Ting formed an essential link between the Cobra movement, Abstract Expressionism and Pop art.

BIOGRAPHY

THE PAINTER WALASSE TING'S EARLY LIFE AND ARTISTIC TRAINING

Walasse Ting was born in Wuxi, China, in 1928 and grew up in Shanghai. Not much is known about Walasse Ting's artist training. He is said to have studied for a short time at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, before leaving China for Hong Kong in 1946. Walasse Ting arrived in Paris in 1953 and stayed there until 1958.

THE PAINTER WALASSE TING IN PARIS

Walasse Ting mixed with artistic circles in Paris as soon as he arrived in the city, but he did not join a particular artistic movement and refused to associate himself with any particular school or group. Walasse Ting became very close to the artist Pierre Alechinsky in particular, as well as other members of the Cobra movement. Alechinsky reported that when Walasse Ting arrived in France, he came with a "cylindrical package of grey and black paintings..." Alechinsky continued, "The brushstrokes tell of a small cart ridden by a traveller with flowing sleeves, marked by large blotches where our eyes try to guess (it's a horse)." Although Walasse Ting used materials associated with traditional Chinese painting, the artist defined his works very early on as "modern" and representing an "Eastern and Western style".

In the article "À l'école de Paris", published in the *Cimaise* magazine in 1956, Herta Wescher explained: "The artists who come from all different countries to Paris today rarely have a school or academy in mind where they seek to receive precise training. Nor do they envision, in most cases, working under one of the great masters and becoming their student or disciple. On the contrary, they are attracted by the thousand and one possible artistic adventures that await them here." This applied perfectly to Walasse Ting, who considered himself a modern Chinese painter in Paris. Walasse Ting's encounters with Western artists were not enacted through the perspective of a master-student relationship, but rather as equals, which was illustrated by the many collaborative projects that Walasse Ting worked on in duos in all the different countries he lived in. It is also known that Walasse Ting introduced Alechinsky to the practice of calligraphy. For his part, the painter Walasse Ting tried his hand at oil painting as soon as he arrived in Paris. His artistic works presented traditional subjects in ink on paper as well as sombre, abstract paintings in oil on canvas.

Walasse Ting's artworks were presented in Paris at the Studio Facchetti in 1954 in the artist's first exhibition. In the exhibition catalogue, Julien Alvard wrote: "The influence of Chinese philosophy on Western painting, especially American painting, is well known. What we are faced with today is the opposite question, and a

much more inscrutable one: 'How can one be a Chinese painter?' after experiencing the shock of Western painting. Walasse Ting's painting is one facet of the new battle that is beginning."

Walasse Ting's work was then presented at an exhibition in Brussels at the Galerie Taptoe in 1956.

THE PAINTER WALASSE TING IN NEW YORK

Walasse Ting moved to New York in 1957. It was there that he discovered the Abstract Expressionists, in particular those with ties to France such as Sam Francis, Joan Mitchell and Paul Jenkins. These encounters sparked the artist's passion for colour. This network of friendships and exchange between Europe and the United States was solidified by Walasse Ting's work *One Cent Life*—a collection of artists' lithographs. Edited by Sam Francis and published by E.W. Kornfeld in 1964, the work brought together a collection of 62 lithographs and serigraphs by 28 different artists: Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel, Enrico Baj, Alan Davie, Jim Dine, Öyvind Fahlström, Sam Francis, Robert Indiana, Alfred Jensen, Asger Jorn, Allan Kaprow, Alfred Leslie, Roy Lichtenstein, Joan Mitchell, Kiki O.K., Claes Oldenburg, Mel Ramos, Robert Rauschenberg, Reinhoud, Jean-Paul Riopelle, James Rosenquist, Antonio Saura, Kimber Smith, K.R.H. Sonderborg, Walasse Ting, Bram van Velde, Andy Warhol and Tom Wesselmann.

It represented a synthesis of Abstract Expressionism, Pop art and the Cobra movement, as well as a bridge between Paris and New York. Pierre Alechinsky summed up the spirit of the work: "It is clear that cultures today are marrying up; they are no longer like terracotta dogs looking at each other without making contact; they are secretly beginning to focus on a common denominator, a new image of the world. This interpenetration belongs to our era."

Two Walasse Ting exhibitions were organised at the Lefebvre Gallery in New York—in 1963 and 1965 respectively. The director Hidai Nankoku filmed the painter Walasse Ting at work in 1965. The film shows the artist painting on sheets of paper on the floor, using a gestural form of expression, just like Jackson Pollock. Discussing his approach, Julien Alvard explained that the artist "wanted to be able to paint with a fish whose convulsive movements would leave living traces of raw nature on the canvas." Walasse Ting was particularly fond of experimenting with techniques: "It's not the painting itself that matters, nor the image afterwards; it's what happens during the course of it, it's the act of painting."

Walasse Ting won the Guggenheim Fellowship Award for drawing in 1970. In the same year, he donated forty of his works to the Cernuschi Museum in Paris. Walasse Ting

then took part in the Fresh Air School exhibition alongside Sam Francis and Joan Mitchell at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh in 1972. In the exhibition catalogue, Ting defined himself as: “Self-taught. Individual. Not part of any group.”

The artist won recognition in the United States through the distribution of a series of works in fluorescent colours in the form of posters, calendars and postcards. Walasse Ting became an American citizen in the 1970s.

THE PAINTER WALASSE TING'S LEGACY

Walasse Ting moved to Amsterdam in the 1990s, continuing to travel to New York on a regular basis.

Walasse Ting's work was characterised by the recurrent use of certain themes: women, flowers and horses. Walasse Ting was also a poet and publishes numerous books. He gave himself the pseudonym “the flower thief”—the invisible author of his paintings. Describing his own duality, Walasse Ting wrote: “I borrow money; he spends it like a madman. I feel as solid as a tiger; he is as light as a butterfly. I walk on the pavement; he flies in the wind. I am the root; he is the pollen. I am the burning water; he is the steam. I am the mountain; he is the cloud. I am the rain; he is the rainbow...”

Walasse Ting died in 2010. A posthumous retrospective exhibition of the artist's work was presented at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum the following year. In 2016, Françoise Marquet-Zao, the widow of the painter Zao Wou Ki, donated two paintings by Walasse Ting—one on paper, the other on canvas—to the Cernuschi Museum in Paris. The exhibition *Walasse Ting, le voleur de fleurs* [Walasse Ting, the flower thief] was presented at the same museum from 2016 to 2017.

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SELECTED COLLECTIONS

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum
Baltimore, Baltimore Museum
Boston, Museum of Fine Art
Buffalo, NY, Albright-Knox Art Gallery
Chicago, IL, Chicago Art Institute
Detroit, Detroit Institute of Art
Hanover, NH, Hopkins Center Art Galleries, Dartmouth College
Hong Kong, Hong Kong Museum of Art
Jerusalem, Israel National Museum
London, Tate Modern
Los Angeles, CA, M.C.A.
New York, NY, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
New York, NY, Rockefeller University
New York, NY, Museum of Modern Art
New York, NY, Metropolitan Museum of Art
Norfolk, VA, Chrysler Museum
Paris, Musée national d'art moderne - Centre Pompidou
Paris, Musée Cernuschi
Pasadena, Pasadena Art Museum
Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum
Pittsburg, Carnegie Institute
Pittsburg, U.S. Steel
Pittsburg, Gulf Oil Corp.
Provincetown, Chrysler Museum
Randers (Denmark), Randers Museum
Reykjavik (Iceland), National Gallery of Art
Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara Museum
Silkeborg (Denmark), Silkeborg Kunstmuseum

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Hôtel Cecil, Hong Kong, 1952
Studio Paul Facchetti, Paris, 1954
Galerie Taptoe, Brussels, 1956
Galerie Chalette, New York, 1957
Galerie Martha Jackson, New York, 1959, 1960
Galerie Espace, Amsterdam, 1960
Galerie Birch, Copenhagen, 1960, 1963, 1970, 1975, 1980
Galerie Van de Loo, Munich, 1961
Galerie Rive Gauche, Paris, 1961
Galerie Smith, Brussels, 1961
Galerie St. Stephan, Vienna, 1962
Lefebvre Gallery, New York, 1963, 1965-1972, 1979, 1980-1984
Galerie J. L. Hudson, Detroit, 1967
Galerie de France, Paris, 1968
Galerie Esther Bear, Santa Barbara, 1970
Fresh Air School, group exhibition, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, 1972
Galerie Minami, Tokyo, 1974

Galerie Adrien Maeght, Paris, 1974, 1977
Musée National, Taipei, 1975
Galerie Nord, Randers (Denmark), 1975
Galerie Grafica Club, Milan, 1977, 1980
Lens Fine Art, Anvers, 1978, 1980
Galerie Aeel, 1978
Galerie Nouvelles Images, La Haye, 1979, 1980, 1986
Galerie Dessers, Hasselt (Belgium), 1980
Gallerihuset, Copenhagen, 1984
Lung Men Art Gallery, Taipei, 1984
Avant-garde Art Center, Taichung, Taipei, 1984
Lung Chiang Art Gallery, Kao-hsuing, Taipei, 1984
Galerie BBI, Anvers, 1984
Galerie 2RC, Rome et Milan, 1984
Art Unlimited, Amsterdam, 1985
Galerie La Hune, Paris, 1985
Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, 1985, 1987
Galerie Asbaek, Copenhagen, 1985, 1987
P. Galerie, Hamburg, 1986
Galeria del Manifesto, Verona, 1986
Galerie Dessers, Hasselt (Belgium), 1986
Kunstforum, Gand, 1986
Alisan Fine Arts Gallery, Hong Kong, 1986
Galerie Esperanza, Montréal, 1987
Artibus et Amicitiae, Amsterdam, 1987
Elfin Art Gallery, Quebec, 1987
Ars Mundi, Hanover, 1987
Galerie l'Orangerie, Genève, 1987
Lung Men Art Gallery, Taiwan, 1988
Galerie Alcolea, Barcelona et Madrid, 1988
Walasse Ting Retrospective, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Taipei, 2011
Walasse Ting, le voleur de fleurs, Walasse Ting retrospective, Cernuschi Museum, Paris, 2016–2017

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- Pierre Alechinsky, "Calligraphie Japonaise" in *Quadrum*, international modern art magazine, 1956
- Herta Wescher, "À l'école de Paris" in *Cimaise*, 3rd series, No. 3, January–February 1956
- Walasse Ting*, exhibition catalogue, New York, Galerie Chalette, 1957
- Michel Ragon, "Le Japon et nous" in *Cimaise*, 5th series, No. 5, May–June 1958
- Walasse Ting. Recent Paintings*, exhibition catalogue, New York, Lefebvre Gallery, 1969
- Artistic Drawings of the Sixties. A Selection*, exhibition catalogue, New York, New School Art Center, 1969
- Pierre Alechinsky, *Roue libre*, Geneva, Albert Skira, "Les Sentiers de la création", 1971
- Mia Ting, *Walasse Ting, Jolies dames*, Paris, Yves Rivière, 1988
- Pierre Alechinsky, "Troisième pinceau" in *Baluchon et ricochets*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994
- Helen Frances Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties. Interaction in Art between East and West*, Zwolle, Waanders Publishers, 1996
- Fong Shen Xi, *Walasse Ting. A Very Hot Day*, exhibition catalogue, Shanghai, Shanghai Art Museum, 1997
- Claire Stoulling, "Pierre Alechinsky. Migrations du poète au peintre, du peintre au poète", in *Alechinsky au pays de l'encre*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 1998
- Irene Poon, *Leading the Way. Asian American Artists of the Older Generation*, Wenham, Gordon College, 2001
- Pierre Alechinsky, *Des deux mains*, Paris, Mercure de France, 2004
- Kara Kelley Hallmark, *Encyclopedia of Asian American Artists. Artists of the American Mosaic*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2007
- Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions. Contemporary Asian American Artists and the Social Imagery*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2008
- From Heroic Expression to Resplendent Color. Walasse Ting, Retrospective Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue, Taipei, Taipei Fine Arts Museum, 2010
- Stuart Hall, Identités et cultures 2. Politiques des différences*, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2013
- Walasse Ting, le voleur de fleurs*, exhibition catalogue, Paris, Cernuschi Museum, 2016