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Behind the “Abstract Transformation”: The Appearance and the Truth in the Works of Chinese-American Artist George Chann, from the 1950s to 1960s

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Abstract

As one of the essential Chinese American abstract painters in modern America, George Chann’s transformation from figurative to abstract art is closely related to an influential creative group: modern Chinese American artists in the United States. Their artistic pursuits, characterized by dispersion, migration, and cultural exchange, are indispensable subjects of global art history. During the brief fervor of abstract expressionism in the 1950s and 1960s, this article explores how George Chann turned towards conceptual practice from his mature portraiture style and investigates the underlying reasons for this lifelong exploration. Taking George Chann as a case study, this research examines how Chinese American painters in California in the 20th century, to what extent and in what depth, contributed to the development of modern art centered around the United States. It constructs a narrative of intertwined and mutually reinforcing paths of diverse forms of modern art development. It provides substantial evidence for studying marginalized communities, ethnic minority history, and “decentralized” approaches to American art.

Key Words

Chinese American, figurative, representation, abstract, transformation

1. George Chann’s Journey to America as a Teenager and the Chinese American Artists Living in the Cracks at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries

At the end of the 19th century, along with the history of overseas survival of Chinese laborers in California, the status of the Chinese American artistic community can be described as starting from scratch. Right in San Francisco, home to the largest Asian American community in the United States, is found the “earliest documentation of Lai Yong operating a portrait painting studio at 659 Clay Street, San Francisco. He moved to 743 Washington Street in 1871 and is listed as both a portrait painter and a photographer”.¹ In addition to Lai Yong, there were some more photographers and portrait painters such as Ah Hing, Ah Soo, Fong Noy, Ah Chew, etc. Lai Yong’s business was flexible; from laborer to the merchant, his trade with the Chinese was mainly photography; meanwhile, since Lai Yong may have had some training back in Guangdong, orders from Caucasians were mainly oil paintings.

Since then, several photography studios have emerged

from San Francisco’s Chinatown, and the most distinguished one is May’s Photo Studio: “Yet it is the unparalleled invention displayed in May’s photographs—sometimes panoramic, sometimes large, hand-painted, and encrusted with glitter, sometimes incorporating cutouts and collage to reconstitute separated families.”² The opening of those studios not only signaled the beginning of Chinese artists overcoming numerous obstacles to survive in the cracks but also revealed the difficulties faced by Chinese artists who sought their own space in the challenging circumstances of the first half of the 20th century, marked by the reactivation of the Chinese Exclusion Act. Although the 1924 Immigration Act no longer restricted naturalization to only white people, it still excluded “aliens ineligible for citizenship” from immigrating to the United States. This was still an era marked by ethnic exclusivity, and only a small number of Chinese artists could enter the contemporary artistic discourse. The earliest recorded exhibition of traditional Chinese painting in the United States is Yang Ling-fu’s (1887-1978) artworks, shown in 1928 at the East and West Gallery, a private commercial gallery in

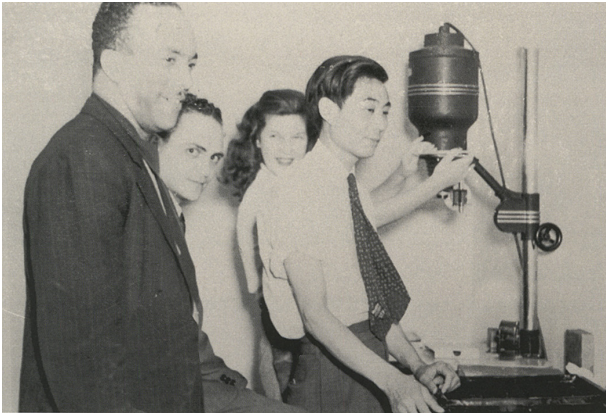


Figure 1. George Chann at Otis Art Institute, with a professor.

San Francisco. Wah Ming Chang's (1917-2003) paintings were also exhibited there in the same year. Organizations primarily composed of Asian artists, such as the East-West Art Society (EWAS), gained prominence in significant exhibition spaces; it was in the 1922 exhibition, organized by EWAS and held at the San Francisco Art Museum, where more than half of the participating artists were of Asian descent, primarily Japanese. Even though only one Chinese artist, Chee Chin S. Cheung Lee (1896-1966) participated, this undoubtedly marked the precursor to the increasing number of exhibitions featuring artists of multiple ethnicities in the 1930s and solo exhibitions by Chinese American artists.

On January 1, 1913, George Chann was born in Guangzhou, China; he moved to California in 1922. He grew up in the environment of his father's traditional Chinese medicine shop but had no intention of inheriting the family business. In an act of rebellion, he "left home to work at an orphanage in Los Angeles and began studying painting. Through the orphanage's recommendation, in 1934, he received a full scholarship to the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, where he formally enrolled. He majored in courses such as drawing, painting, art history, design, and figure construction and also served as a teaching assistant in painting and drawing classes."³ During his time at the Otis Art Institute, Chann studied under renowned teachers such as Alexander Brook (1898-1980), Edouard Vysekal (1890-1939), and Joan Hubbard Rich (1877-1941), mastering the skills of realistic representation and impressionistic style. He obtained his bachelor's degree in 1940 and pursued further studies to earn his master's, solidifying his Western art training at Otis. With his natural talent and the influence of a solid education in Western traditions and modern art, Chann can be considered an exceptional example of an early 20th-century

Chinese American artist who achieved high recognition and honors.

Teaching at institutions and participating in exhibitions were essential ways for Chinese American painters in the early 20th century to establish a foothold in California. Chann served as a teaching assistant at his alma mater, the Otis Art Institute, and from 1951 to 1952 he taught at the San Francisco Art Institute (another Cantonese Chinese painter, Yun Gee [1906-1963] also taught there) and the Dana Bartlett Art Gallery & Art School in Los Angeles. At Bartlett's school, he primarily taught portraiture and figure painting and collaborated with the renowned American abstract painter Stanton Macdonald-Wright. Macdonald-Wright, who founded the Los Angeles Art Students League in 1906, had learned the methods of abstract art creation in Paris in the 1910s and greatly valued artistic heritage from China and Japan in his teaching. Returning to Los Angeles from Paris in 1919, Macdonald-Wright briefly "abandoned pure abstraction and turned to figurative painting influenced by Asian art".⁴ He played a significant role in introducing Asian, especially Chinese American artists, to mainstream American modern art in the first half of the 20th century.

In the 1930s and 1940s, art "ambassadors" from China arrived in the United States with their missions. In 1934, Yang Ling-fu came to the United States with her Chinese paintings of flowers and birds, and although she still needed to settle down formally, she laid the foundation for later spreading Guohua and calligraphy in the United States. In 1938, Chang Shan-zi (1882-1940) went abroad with a total of 180 paintings by himself and his younger brother Chang Dai-chien (1899-1983) and held exhibitions in France and the United States for about two years, fundraising more than 200,000 yuan, all of which were sent back to China to support the Anti-Japanese war. In 1941, Chang Shu-chi (1900-1957) embarked on the S.S. President Harrison as "a messenger of art and goodwill". He arrived in San Francisco on October 4, starting his artistic career in the United States. These three outstanding artists let the people of the West Coast feel the charm of traditional Chinese painting (such as Guohua and calligraphy), the strong sense of family, and the country of China. However, it is easy to overlook the fact that in November 1941, Chann had just held a solo exhibition at the Maison D'Art in Los Angeles and also responded to the call of the Los Angeles expatriate community to raise funds for the relief of refugees during the Sino-Japanese War, selling his portraits for \$9 a painting. Chinese art and new faces from across the Pacific Ocean brought a fresh breeze to modern American art. Regrettably, at this time, Chann,



Figure 2. George Chann. *Self Portrait*. Oil on canvas, 75.4×60.3cm, 1940.



Figure 3. Geroge Chann. *Black Girl*. Oil on canvas, 41×51cm, San Francisco, Private Collection.

who depicts minority themes by Western painting techniques, did not receive widespread attention as did the first three artists because of his low-key, humble character. Looking back at history, whether it's Yang Ling-fu, Chang Shan-zi, Chang Shu-chi, or Chann, the strong sense of concern for the country and the people behind the art creation and dissemination of Chinese painters and the deep humanist concern not only injected fresh blood into California modern art but also laid a solid foundation for the diversified and active Oriental art spirit in modern art.

2. The Rise of Abstract Practice among Chinese American Painters in Mid-20th Century California and American Modern Art

2.1 Eastern Resources and the Emergence of Abstraction in American Modern Art in the Mid-20th Century

In 1986, curator Maurice Tuchman organized the exhibition "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985" at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which marked the first public appearance of Swedish artist Hilma af Klint's (1862-1944) abstract works. The exhibition propelled an artist who had remained silent for many years to the forefront of the international stage, capable of rewriting art history. If not for the earlier



Figure 4. Geroge Chann. *Boy*. Oil on canvas, 41×51cm, San Francisco, Private Collection.

endorsement by writer and art historian Åke Fant (1943-1997), the origin of Western abstract painting would have continued to be attributed to the "first wave of pure abstraction" represented by Kandinsky, Malevich, and Mondrian. Yet, even before Kandinsky and other abstract painters, af Klint, aged 44 in 1906, had already developed a mature visual expression of abstraction. However, she instructed that her works could only be made public twenty years after her death. The sudden appearance of these works posed an unprecedented challenge to the narrative framework of abstract art in the 20th century, and this impact led to reflection: the linear development trajectory from Europe to America, from Paris to New York, seemed to offer a more diverse and intricate narrative space.

In the 1950s, abstract expressionism prevailed in American art. The new language and new traditions of American art emerged from the European system and began to establish their intrinsic value. The collection, translation, and introduction of East Asian art and classics opened a new window for American modernist artists and played a crucial role in the further integration of abstract language into the development of modern art. The appropriation of Eastern concepts such as Kong, Tao and Zen, as well as the adoption of brushwork techniques, significantly propelled the rise and extension of abstract expressionism as an accomplished art

movement.

Influenced by the book *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art* by Ernest F. Fenollosa (1853-1908), Mark Tobey (1890-1976) was the first to incorporate calligraphy into his paintings. When Ad Reinhardt attended Brooklyn College, this book was on his required reading list. For Tobey, true art was abstract creation imbued with strong Eastern philosophical thoughts. Arthur Wesley Dow, an artist and art educator who served as the head of the Department of Fine Arts at Columbia Teachers College, co-authored *Composition* (1899) with Fenollosa and was deeply influenced by Eastern art paradigms. He profoundly influenced several American modern painting pioneers, most notably Georgia O’Keeffe, who knew Dow. Under the guidance of her teacher Alon Bement, O’Keeffe sought advice from Dow as well. The early experiments with monochromatic brushstrokes and linear explorations in O’Keeffe’s work seemed to resonate with a particular characteristic found in Far Eastern art.

Furthermore, the translation and introduction of numerous significant classical Eastern texts in the early 20th century played a foundational role in facilitating the Western reception of Eastern thought. Laurence Binyon’s (1869-1943) *The Spirit of Man in Asian Art* (1965) and “Flight of the Dragon: An Essay on the Theory and Practice of Art in China and Japan” expounded Zen Buddhist philosophy and Chinese painting aesthetics, profoundly influencing artists such as Isamu Noguchi, Robert Motherwell, Macdonald-Wright, and Tobey.

Starting in 1944, American abstract expressionist painter Reinhardt, under the influence of East Asian art historian Alfred Salmony (1890-1958), became acquainted with and learned about Eastern art. This exposure also influenced his friend, the mystic, Catholic writer, and social activist Thomas Merton (1915-1968), whom Reinhardt had known since their college days. Another world artist closely associated with abstract expressionism, Ulfert Wilke (1907-1987), who incorporated calligraphic brushstrokes, a sense of black-and-white color, and empty spaces within the composition, also exhibited strong Eastern influences. Wilke maintained connections with Mark Rothko, Tobey, David Smith, and Motherwell throughout his life.

One crucial figure should not be overlooked despite this trend of absorbing Eastern artistic resources regarding theory and spirituality. John Millard Ferren (1905-1970), an avant-garde artist and educator with years of cross-cultural experience, met Yun Gee, a Chinese American painter living in San Francisco’s Chinatown, who later became his close friend. Influenced

by Yun Gee, Ferren developed a deep interest in Taoist and Zen Buddhist thought, which led him to explore abstract composition to evoke dynamism and unity. In 1938, Ferren, who had relocated to New York, joined The Club, an emerging core organization of abstract expressionism.

East Asian art collections and the influx of Eastern philosophical resources profoundly impacted American modern art, not just in terms of its specific forms but also in how it perceived space, embraced subtlety, and embraced a vast cosmology. This influence is strongly palpable: it is clear that abstract expressionism didn’t solely originate from European Cubism and Surrealism, but also drew from intellectual and spiritual roots beyond them. The artists representing abstract expressionism were far more numerous than the superstars commonly mentioned in art history textbooks. The expressions of abstract expressionism went well beyond Jackson Pollock’s famous drip technique, and the fertile ground for modern art wasn’t confined to New York alone. The dynamic relationship between ink painting and abstraction, along with the interplay between East and West, wasn’t merely a straightforward opposition. Instead, they mutually influenced, absorbed, reflected, and inspired each other. Throughout history and repeated exchanges, it is hard to ignore the fact that this diverse and interactive artistic landscape offered substantial spiritual support, paving the way for cultural identity and integration among Chinese American artists in the first half of the 20th century.

2.2 Chinese Artists in California and the Development of Early Modernist Art in the United States

In 1882, the United States enacted the Chinese Exclusion Act, which “completely suspended Chinese immigration to the United States”.⁵ This was, and perhaps still is, the most stringent exclusionary legislation in the long history of immigration to the United States, significantly impacting the development of Chinese American painting. In the early 20th century, it was a notable fact that in California was that more Japanese artists pursued studies and development in the United States than Chinese artists. In 1901, printmaker Teikichi Hikoyama (1884-1957) arrived in San Francisco; in 1902, photographer C.J. Ishiguro established himself on Fillmore Street in San Francisco; and in 1903, Chiura Obata (1885-1975) arrived. In April 1906, the Great San Francisco Earthquake and subsequent fire caused immeasurable losses, including the destruction of records of thousands of Chinese immigrants, opening the door for Chinese immigrants to assume false identities

as “paper sons” in the United States. Obata documented the scenes after the earthquake in his sketchbooks. That same year, Yun Gee, an important Chinese American painter of the early 20th century in California, was born in Kaiping, Guangdong. “The background of George Chann is similar to another Chinese American artist, Yun Gee. Yun Gee began his artistic career in modern art, while George Chann started with conservative representational painting and only entered the field of contemporary art in his later years. Both belong to the category of painters who succeeded in their early years but remained unknown later. However, they devoted their lives to art and deserve our recognition.”⁶

During the 1920s and 1930s, American modernism and regionalism experienced the early stages of representative experiments. However, Chann had just entered the Otis Art Institute for studies during this period. In the 1930s, the two largest and most representative groups in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles were the Revolutionary Artists’ Club, founded by Yun Gee in 1926, and the Los Angeles Oriental Artists Group, whose primary focus and direction were modernist oil painting and representational works full of linear elements and vibrant colors. Macdonald-Wright was among the earliest to experiment with abstraction, and moved to Los Angeles in 1918 and began to “abandon his abstract style in favor of figurative painting inspired by Asian art”.⁷

The 1940s marked the beginning of a new era of artistic diplomacy and exchange, with creative diplomacy and art education as two coexisting critical forces. From an international relations perspective, Warren Cohen, who explored East Asian art in American culture, once said, “I want to know when, how, and why Chinese art and Japanese art became a part of American life and what stories they can tell me about America.”⁸ Representing the most notable example was Chang Shu-chi, whose vivid on-site painting and lectures, along with his tireless exhibitions across states and continents, played a significant role in introducing Chinese traditional flower-and-bird painting and ink media to the American public. On May 11, 1944, in a live demonstration at the Otis Art Institute, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on Chang Shu-chi, stating, “It was persuaded to visit the institute by George Chann, a star pupil there”.⁹ This introduction is not only a fragment of the friendship between them, but also a certain intrinsic identification of Chann’s traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy, and a silent recognition of the importance of Sino-American art diplomacy.

By the 1940s, Chann’s works of portraiture had

become very mature, and he held dozens of solo shows in California. In 1944, he held a solo show titled “Chinese, Mexican, and American People” at the de Young Museum, featuring portraits as the main theme. During his return to China in 1947, he held several exhibitions in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Hong Kong, showcasing works collected during his travels on the mainland, with a total of thirty-three pieces exhibited and accompanied by a catalogue.¹⁰ He also stayed at Chang Shu-chi’s home during his visit to Nanjing on April 8, 1948. There are currently no details available regarding the artistic exchange and mutual influence between the two artists, who both had unique creative experiences in the United States, during their time in Nanjing; however, based on an occasional floral and bird painting experiment created by Chann, it can be seen as a rare attempt at such on his part. This also indicates that the meeting and interaction between the two painters in China, amidst their busy schedules, was even more precious and significant; however, it did not affect Chann’s subsequent artistic style. The original inscription in the upper left corner of a painting with the imprint of *Spring Slumber Unaware of Dawn* (from the first line of the poem “Spring Dawn” by Tang Dynasty poet Meng Hao-ran [690-740]) which was quickly obscured, it appears that the floral and bird subject matter and the accompanying poetic inscription, reminiscent of the compositions of Wang Ya-chen (1894-1983) or Hua-yan (华喆 1682-1756), was not a type of art Chann was accustomed to. The depiction of shadows in the painting also reflects a Westernized painting technique. However, whether this affects the artistic effects, breadth of attention, and depth of exploration that arise from his incorporation of classical literature and calligraphy into his paintings, which differ greatly from the similar practices of John Way (1921-2012), is still a topic worthy of further exploration.

In the late 1940s, Macdonald-Wright wrote an article in *California Arts and Architecture*, affirming the significant influence that early Chinese American artists, whom he was familiar with, had on California and even American modern art. He stated, “I believe that as there is a closer communication between the Orient and California, more and more, we here in America will begin to appreciate the subtleties and excellencies of Oriental work. We have much to learn from them. Our extraversion has not been helpful for our art; in placing too much emphasis on objectivity and political faddism, whether they derive from New York or Mexico, we have lost a special quality indigenous to the great painters of our own country. Once a sensitive artist here has been ‘exposed’ to the implications of Oriental art, he

can never again conceive of graphic expression in quite the same way. Oriental art throws them back upon themselves and brings to the surface those qualities which are the opposite of transient. It is this quality that Oriental art so beautifully expresses."¹¹ The article acknowledges the unique achievements of Chinese American painters such as Chann, Chee Chin S. Cheung Lee, Dong Kingman (1911-2000), Tyrus Wong (1910-2016), James Leong (1929-2011), Jade Fon Woo (1911-1983), and others. The accompanying illustrations in the article include Chann's *Nude Woman*, Milton Quon's (1913-2019) *Mother and Child*, and Dong Kingman's *Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association*; Chann's *Nude Woman* represents a typical foundation rooted in Western oil painting training.

Overall, the group of Chinese American artists and their artworks in the 1930s and 1940s continued the representational tradition of American modernist art while also demonstrating the exploration of Asian cultural symbols. For example, Quon, born in Los Angeles, portrayed traditional Chinese mother figures and ethnically vibrant robes. As one of the Bay Area figurative movement members, Chann's extensive portraiture was also an essential part of his artistic exploration trajectory. Although recognized by official institutions, his portraiture paintings, characterized by astonishing consistency, many repetitions, and similar themes, always faced the awkward situation of not truly entering the art market.

However, it is precisely because of the valuable explorations and attempts by artists like Chann and numerous Chinese American artists that modern art in California presented a more refined and diverse appearance. The exhibition "East of the Pacific: Creating Asian American Art History" at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford in 2023 showcased around eighty artworks, with approximately thirty-six donated by Mike D. Brown, accounting for 45% of the total. Although Chinese American painters constituted less than half of the exhibition's artists, including Yun Gee and the others just mentioned in Macdonald-Wright's article, most of those paintings were landscapes and portraiture, with various styles and media showcasing this group's immense creative potential and diversity. Correspondence between Brown and Chann, mainly through his daughter Janet Chann, can be observed in Brown's extensive letters.

Macdonald-Wright's fascination with Asian art provided an environment that valued the ancestral heritage of Japan and China. Undoubtedly, Macdonald-Wright built a solid and sturdy bridge for the understanding and absorption of Asian art in the art circles

of California and even the United States. At this time, although Chann was recognized by Macdonald-Wright and many public institutions in the United States because of his mature style of nudes and portraits, he believed that the only way for artists to express their thoughts and emotions indeed was not through realistic representation but through the creation of abstract art, using form, color, and texture to convey their feelings. In other words, abstract art allows for more profound personal expression.

After running the Farmer's Market Art Gallery in the 1960s and venturing into decades of unwavering abstract creations during the latter part of his artistic journey, George Chann not only dabbled in the occasional creation of representational landscapes or portraits, but primarily dedicated his energy to the pursuit and exploration of abstract painting. During this period, spanning a mere decade, several Chinese artists who left a profound mark on American modern art found their home in California: in 1956, Hou Beiren (1917-) moved to the San Francisco Bay Area and became close friends with Chang Dai-Chien, who visited California a year later; in 1960, Yeh-Jau Liu (1910-2003), who was invited by Kai-yu Hsu (1922-1982), first came from Taiwan to teach at San Francisco State College and later, in the mid-1970s, invited two of his old friends, Wang Chang-chieh (1910-1999) and Zheng Yuebo (1907-1991), who graduated from the National Art Academy, to come to the United States. During his residence in Carmel in 1967, Zheng Yuebo met Chang Dai-chien through his involvement in Yang Ling-fu's Chinese Art Gallery. They subsequently became ink and wash painting confidants, exchanging ideas and achieving mutual growth. Wang Chang-chieh also cooperated with others to run the Jiahe Gallery (W&L Art Studio), while Yeh-Jau Liu established the Hanxi Studio. In addition, many painters relied on art studios or related commercial channels as significant sources of income in the United States. Chang Shu-chi founded the Chang Art Studio in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1949; Jade Fon Woo conducted an annual watercolor workshop for twenty years at Asilomar on the Monterey Peninsula; Ng Win (1936-1991), who had worked at Jade Snow Wong's (1922-2006) pottery studio, co-founded Taylor & Ng company (formerly known as Environmental Ceramics) in 1965, which specialized in handmade crafts and furniture, together with artist Spaulding Taylor; Wong Lui-sang (1928-2011), a Lingnan School painter and a student of Zhao Shao'ang (1905-1998), relocated to San Francisco in 1960 and reestablished his East Wind Art Studio in Chinatown, where he held exhibitions for Chinese artists, including Zheng Yuebo.

Asian American or Chinese American artists who have settled in the United States may have a deeper understanding of the importance of balancing and integrating their existence in a foreign land with the dissemination of their art than any other practitioners of modern art. Behind the seemingly simple concept of East-West fusion lies the adoption of new resources by each artistic character, careful contemplation of the transmission and transformation of Chinese traditional art, and timely and swift responses in the face of cultural impact. John Seed, a retired art professor of art and art history at the Mt. San Jacinto College in California, once said, “People often say that modernism in art is the creation of exiles: leaving familiar things and encountering new cultures is one of the fundamental experiences of modern life.”¹² As one wave sets off, many waves follow. The participation of Chinese artists and the development of American modern art were entering each other’s perspectives in a completely new way. However, for several decades Chann had been diligently creating at the Farmer’s Market Gallery. Although he had accumulated a large number of remarkable works that received attention in Taiwan and mainland China, during that era artistic exchanges required more physical interaction, which limited the function of Chann’s gallery to a means of mere livelihood, rather than fully maximizing its potential for art promotion and interactive communication.

3. Surging Undercurrents: The Rise and Fall of Abstract Expressionism and the Intrinsic Reasons behind George Chann’s Transformation to Abstraction

It was during the ever-changing late 1950s and early 1960s that abstract expressionism, centered in New York, began to decline under the impact of other emerging art movements such as Pop art and Minimalism. Several major representative artists either shifted to other styles or passed away prematurely. However, few have pondered why abstract expressionism receded rapidly in the 1950s while Chinese American painters in the United States, represented by Chann, continued to adhere to abstract paths and created a distinctly similar abstract language within this group. “Chinese American painters’ exploration of abstract art in the United States mainly followed two paths. One path started with Western-style abstraction, navigating through the tidal wave of abstract expressionism and then turning to the East. It began with George Chann and John Way in the 1950s-1960s, followed by the May Painting Association members in the 1960s-1970s. The other path involved

the exploration of semi-abstract and abstract painting through ink splashing and color splashing by Chang Dai-Chien and Hou Beiren in the 1960s-1970s, using traditional Chinese art to transform abstract painting. The exploration of these two paths provided a broad vision for Chinese mainland artists who studied or resided in the United States in the 1980s, ultimately rejuvenating abstract art that receded in Europe and America in the 1970s, and prompting the world and China to reconsider the concept of ‘qi’ in art.”¹³ By comparing these two paths, we can see that Chann and Way, who experienced the tidal wave of abstract expressionism firsthand, truly felt the impact brought about by its sweeping in and receding. Chann (who “choked on water”) —when did he become the hidden undercurrent beneath the big wave, fearlessly persisting in turning towards the boundless world of abstraction? What were the true motivations and irresistible factors behind his work?

3.1 Two-Dimensional Space and Latent Expressive Features in Figurative Portraits

In the 1940s, a common characteristic among Chann’s numerous portraits of children, such as *Girl with Hat* and *Shy Boy*, was the composition’s shallow spatial depth, flat backgrounds, and graphic representation. The thin brushstrokes swiftly passing over the canvas surface are visible, indicating a focus not on the subject’s shaping but on the presentation of the figures within the shallow space, conveying a heightened perception of the thematic issues. Thus, whether in terms of representation or expression, it is precisely through this extensive creation of portraits with highly similar styles, depicting children and ethnic minority themes, that Chann showcases a particular psychological inclination when confronted with multiple cultural contexts. Chann wrote, “I have a special fondness for painting ethnic types along the Pacific Coast. Chinese, Mexicans, Japanese, African Americans and other ethnic types on the coast have left a deep impression on me because their temperament differs greatly from those exhibited in the East, South, and other regions. As an artist, I hope to devote myself to depicting such lives and character traits, believing it can become a valuable record and supplement American art.”¹⁴

“However, George Chann’s significance and position are not solely based on these brilliant records... George Chann was one of the earliest Chinese painters to explore abstract painting. Still, more importantly, he developed a unique painting style that is not entirely equivalent to Western abstract expressionism, based on Chinese calligraphy and stone inscriptions.”¹⁵ Behind

Chann’s exploration of figurative portraits lies the investigation of hidden emotional sensitivity and abstract modes of expression. The emphasis on linear brushstrokes differs from the technique of brush and ink absence in the Western traditional painting system.

3.2 Psychological Need for Transformation in Technique after Maturing of Style

From Chann’s participation in a group exhibition at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1941 to his solo exhibition at the Legion of Honor in San Francisco in 1942, his position in the modern California art scene was firmly established. “In general, Chinese artists, even those born in the United States, are more adept at watercolor painting than oil painting. However, George Chann’s oil portrait paintings at the Legion of Honor were very successful and expressive. It is worth noting that this Chinese American artist from Southern California can completely omit Eastern colors when dealing with Western subjects,”¹⁶ as Alexander Fried commented. Art critic Alfred Frankenstein remarked, “As a student of Alexander Brook, George Chann was deeply influenced by his teacher. His overall melancholic, nostalgic, and understated portrait works are quite successful.”¹⁷ However, compared to his teacher, Chann’s profound understanding of humanity and aesthetic sensibility is more prominent. Critic Arthur Millier called him “the most promising student at Otis College. He has a special talent for portraiture, which seems to reveal the essence of the depicted individuals at a glance. He stands apart from other diligent students or academy-trained painters, as he does not merely focus on color but truly utilizes it—as if it is a natural extension of his thoughts and emotions.”¹⁸ In the foreword to his solo exhibition at the de Young Museum in 1944, it was mentioned that the series “Chinese, Mexicans, and Americans” focused on human depictions. Within this theme, he achieved tremendous success.¹⁹

In the “Small Works Exhibition of American and French Masters” held from April 29 to May 23, 1951, Chann’s selected works were *Little Girl* and *Baby*. The exhibition also included works by French art masters such as Van Gogh, Renoir, Vuillard, Chagall, Utrillo, and Verlaine. In December of the same year, Chann held an exhibition at the de Young Museum. A document from the Brown Papers in Stanford University, dated November 13, 1951, lists the artworks received by the de Young Museum from Chann (including prices). There were thirty-one works, with two portraits not for sale: *Two-Year-Old Daughter Jenny* and *Jenny at One Year Old*. The average price of the remaining twenty-nine works was around \$300, with the highest-priced work at

\$1,000, titled *Where shall we go?* followed by his self-portrait at \$500. Currently, it is unknown what the subject matter, style, and dimensions of the piece *Where shall we go?* were, but it can be observed that Chann’s attitude became more proactive and confident. With such unique creations, whether in subject matter or technique, Chann had daring attempts that went beyond his comfort zone, which are yet to be fully understood.

3.3 Only through Abstraction: “Brushstrokes Determine Everything”

Two years after the end of World War II, in 1947, Chann returned to China and primarily resided in Hong Kong for three years. During this period, he spent significant time with Lingnan artists such as Zhao Shao’ang and Huang Junbi (1898-1991), and served as a visiting lecturer at Lingnan University in 1948. This institution, which had been under foreign management since 1926 but was run by Chinese administrators at the time, aimed to promote a holistic education that fostered independent thinking, judgment, and care for others in the context of Chinese and Western educational backgrounds and the rapidly changing global environment. In this environment, Chann, an artist who had received training in Western painting in the United States, was highly compatible with the educational philosophy advocated by the university. During this period, Chann also completed still life and landscape works, showcasing the landscapes and objects he had seen during his travels to Hong Kong, Shanghai, Hangzhou, and other places. This journey provided inspiration and nourishment for his artistic creations, and during this time his works were still non-abstract. The three years spent in China (1947-1950) gave Chann a deeper understanding of his identity and allowed his inner cultural heritage to find familiar roots. “George Chann’s brief return to China allowed him to ‘experience’ China, transforming his Chinese identity from ‘knowing’ to ‘understanding’, through this, he firmly believed in the new path of dialectical identity recognition based on specific cultural symbols or cultural signs.”²⁰

After returning to the United States, Chann realized that the art scene in the United States had changed in the 1950s. Like many American artists and contemporaries of the mid-20th century, Chann admired Pollock, De Kooning, and Tobey. However, in Chann’s view, “the strong brushstrokes make De Kooning’s paintings fascinating; Franz Kline’s brushstrokes are also good, but different from Chinese-style abstraction, very similar, but not quite.”²¹ It can be seen that the recognition of abstract expressionism is largely based on a strong identification with familiar Eastern brushwork



Figure 5. Geroge Chann. *Willow*. Ink and color on paper, 29.8×36.7cm, 1950.



Figure 6. Geroge Chann. *Mountain Trial*. Ink and color on paper, 43×33cm, 1950.

and “Chinese-style abstraction”. This Chinese-style abstraction is Chann’s practice of combining ancient characters with calligraphic brushwork, which had been his daily practice for decades, where “every stroke must be powerful and pure”.²² Therefore, for Chann, the artistic charm of calligraphy and brushwork was an important factor in the formation of abstract painting.

However, being in the realm of abstraction, it was

not easy for Chinese or Chinese American artists to integrate into the mainstream art circles, even though there was a cultural gap in mutual cultural understanding. In the 1950s, abstract expressionism began to sweep the American art world. As Way said, “At that time, he did not understand abstract painting but believed that since so many artists were embracing it, there must be a reason for its existence. So, he also wanted to learn abstract painting.”²³ In 1960, Way’s solo exhibition of oil paintings in Boston quickly caught the attention of local artists, and five years later he participated in the “Paintings without Brushes” exhibition at the Boston Museum of Modern Art alongside many American contemporary masters. One significant factor was Way’s profound calligraphy background and extensive and in-depth interactions with political, business, cultural, and artistic elites during his time in the United States. “Just as Zao Wou-Ki (1921-2013) encountered the works of De Stael (1914-1955) when he arrived in Paris, it was like being struck by lightning, becoming a turning point in his artistic development, liberating him from the constraints of symbolic objects, and he openly acknowledged this sentiment.”²⁴ In the 1950s, when galleries invited Chann to the East Coast to further develop abstract painting, he rejected it.

“Overseas was where this group of artists settled down, and it was completely different in nature from today’s artists coming overseas for a short period to get experience or for exhibitions.”²⁵ The reasons why Chann refused to move to the East should be sophisticated, while Dong Kingman and Yun Gee were less hesitant in this matter, but it also has something to do with their personalities; Dong Kingman and his artworks were optimistic and open, Yun Gee is more of a cosmopolitan artist: “wandering around San Francisco’s Chinatown, Yun Gee presents a ‘public image’ that is closer to a ‘flaneur’ in a modern metropolis where national and cultural identity are blurred.”²⁶ The extent to which this decision affected the media attention on Chann’s work cannot be definitively judged; still, it undoubtedly had a dampening effect compared to the Chinese painters with similar experiences who were his contemporaries.

In 1991, a letter from Jenny Chann to Brown revealed her desire for her father’s abstract paintings from the late 1950s to the early 1960s to be presented to the public. On the one hand, this was because Chann had no desire to promote his artwork in his later years. On the other hand, it indicated that Chann, who had been consistent in his artistic pursuit for decades, operated more from his inner self, immersing himself in an inner creative world, detached from the public and the market for

an extended period.

3.4 Walking Towards Each Other: Sponsors and Collectors of George Chann and His Artwork

In the 1940s and 1950s, the California Palace of the Legion of Honor held several exhibitions of Chinese American artists, such as George Matsusaburo Hibi (1886-1947), Chiura Obata, and Dong Kingman. Recommended by Roland J. McKinney, Chann had his solo show in mid-February 1942. In August of the same year, Chann’s portrait paintings were included in a joint exhibition at the de Young Museum. In September, he was invited by McKinney to hold a solo show at the Los Angeles County Museum, becoming the first Chinese artist to exhibit there, showcasing twenty-two artworks, with an accompanying exhibition catalogue.²⁷ Two years later (August 8 to September 6, 1944), the solo show at the de Young Museum just mentioned before indicates that Chann created many portraits that consistently conveyed “the spirit of compassion”, highly recognized by most institutions. However, the recognition in art and academia did not contribute to the private collections or public market for Chann’s works. As a professional artist, he ultimately had to face more practical issues in life, which laid the groundwork for his later establishment of the Farmer’s Market Art Gallery.

McKinney, who “noticed George Chann’s works during a visit to the Otis Art Institute in 1941, became his spiritual mentor and facilitated his exhibitions in major museums in California,”²⁸ significantly promoted Chann’s art within the modern art circles of California and even the United States. He can be regarded as Chann’s benefactor, and McKinney particularly appreciated Chann’s portrait works, such as *Refugee*, *Lily Li*, *Chinese Boy*, and *Nude*, exhibited at the L.A. County Museum. As for McKinney, those paintings are not only reminiscent of Robert Henri’s children’s portraits, full of life, but also reflect a strong tradition of European and American painting, with a truly Chinese sense of subtlety. Even in the “Small Painting by French & American Masters” exhibition held in Los Angeles in 1951, the aspect of Chann’s art that received the most recognition from the art community was still his mature style and expertise in portrait oil paintings. Meanwhile, Way had already embarked on a path from calligraphy and seal carving, participated in exhibitions in the eastern cities of Boston and New York, gradually entered the core circle of American modern art, and devoted himself to abstract transformation. Way also had more frequent interpersonal connections and visiting activities in the United States and even Europe, which laid an essential foundation for his worldwide attention



Figure 7. George Chann. *Rock Meditation*. Oil on canvas, 183×154cm, 1960.



Figure 8. George Chann. *Bollage*. Melting oil on canvas, 136×120cm, 1960.

and recognition.

Currently housed in the Green Library’s special collection at Stanford University, the Michael D. Brown papers reveal that this collector was the earliest and most significant figure in the San Francisco Bay Area

concerning his extensive materials on Chann. These materials demonstrate the level of attention and frequency of interaction that Brown devoted to Chann compared to other Chinese American artists. Looking at Brown's collection in the exhibition "East of the Pacific: Creating Asian American Art History", it is not an exaggeration to say that he was one of the earliest collectors to focus on Chinese American art in California. From 1911 to 1930, a period described by Liu Chang-Han as "absorbing Western learning to enrich China's soil",²⁹ artists such as Yun Gee, Hon-Chew Hee (1905-1993), Dong Kingman, etc., were beginning their careers in the United States. The collection includes much private correspondence, such as letters between Brown and Janet Chann, regarding organizing exhibitions for her father and Brown's attempts to purchase George Chann's artworks from the Crystal Cathedral in Los Angeles. From November 2022 to January 2023, as part of the Asian American Art Initiative (AAAI) and the opening of the largest exhibition of three Asian artists at the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University titled "East of the Pacific", approximately seventy-six artworks by East Asian artists were displayed, with thirty-six pieces donated from Brown's private collection. This demonstrates Brown's long-standing interest in Asian-American artists in California, particularly in the Bay Area, and his significant influence on the academic community. However, it is regrettable that Chann's artworks did not appear in this exhibition. Of particular note is Dan Brown's unsuccessful attempt in December 1999 to purchase the "Bible Series" abstract paintings by Chann, which he had donated to the Crystal Cathedral (a total of approximately 250 pictures), as mentioned before. Jim Coleman, a creative director of the church, replied to Brown's inquiry with a letter stating, "Dear Brown, thank you for your inquiry on December 4. However, we are not considering any trade or sale of any of George Chann's 'Bible Series paintings'".³⁰ This is one of the reasons why Chann's "Bible Series" works are rarely found in collections or galleries both domestically and internationally.

Additionally, art collector Albert C. Barnes is mentioned, who had a vast collection of works by artists such as Matisse, Renoir, Cézanne, Picasso, and Van Gogh, and showed great interest not only in influential Western modern artists but also in African art, Chinese art, Greek art, and Native American art. In the Brown documents, the correspondence between the artist and patron explicitly mentions, "A friend introduced (George Chann) to Dr Barnes and mentioned that he intends to sponsor George Chann in establishing a studio."³¹

Subsequently, it was through the recommendation of a Taiwanese friend, Liu Daren, that the Lin & Keng Gallery began to discover the historical significance and research value of Chann's art after his passing. The publication of Chann's catalogue by the Lin & Keng Gallery has brought recognition to this artist, who was once forgotten by viewers from both sides of the Taiwan Strait.

4. Dilemma and Struggle: George Chann's Position Among Modern Chinese Artists in North America and the Reasons for His Neglect

To perceive the truly significant history of modern Western art in the 20th century and today, we must shift our gaze away from the New York-centered urban context, detach ourselves from the once popular abstract expressionism movement, and move away from the group of white male painters. Looking from the West to the East, we can examine this diverse and multifaceted history through observation and supplementation.

As the first and most important artistic movement after World War II, abstract expressionism undoubtedly brought about heritage and value to global art centered in New York. Derived from European modernism and incorporating the essence of East Asian artistic traditions, it nurtured artists who encouraged individualism and self-expression, emphasizing abstraction and mark-making. As the first wave of American art to sweep the globe, abstract expressionism immediately impacted the art world worldwide. Its allure reached far beyond Paris and influenced Chinese artists who had immigrated and exhibited their works there due to the turbulent political situation in their homeland. These pioneering diaspora artists who traveled far received the baptism of this new artistic trend and pondered its benefits for themselves. While external political circumstances influenced their peers in China, modern Chinese artists who traveled to Paris or engaged in artistic pursuits locally could focus on introspection, blending Chinese and Western techniques, and giving birth to abstract or semi-abstract styles. However, behind decades of neglect lie numerous complex factors. The following are some of the most significant points.

4.1 The Challenging Situation of Chinese American Artists Caused by the Vietnam War

Starting in 1955, the impact of the Vietnam War on Chinese American artists in the United States was immense. All public institutions in the United States prohibited the purchase of Chinese artworks. Many Chinese Americans joined forces with activists from

different racial and ethnic backgrounds to protest against the war. Although this brought a strong sense of mission and community belonging to Chinese American artists, it also resulted in racism and xenophobia towards the entire Asian-American community. Many Americans conflated Chinese Americans with Vietnamese or Southeast Asian people, making it difficult for Chinese American artists to fully engage in their artistic careers without obstacles. At the same time, their art also reflected the unique experiences and perspectives of people of color in the ever-changing circumstances of the United States.

It was precisely from 1955 onwards that Chann began to focus on his “Bible Series” and had almost no exhibitions for the following four years. Since Chann had received generous support from churches and had strong religious beliefs, he donated nearly all of his “Bible Series” to the Crystal Cathedral. From the available works in this series, such as *The Last Supper* and *God Creates Multiple Nations/Tower of Babel*, it can be seen that the 1950s were a period of experimentation and fusion of various styles for Chann, without forming a unified expressive path. From the oil painting *Green Mountain and Sails* to traditional Chinese ink and paper themes like *Birds Flying in a Stream in the Valley* and *Melody of Clear Flow in the Valley*, the calligraphic ink abstraction attempt in *Mountain Path* and the incorporation of ancient inscriptions in *Variation of Inscriptions* and *Hong* and then the prolific “Bible Series”, Chann may have experienced oscillation and choices in the face of multiple cultural impacts and difficult circumstances. In the following decade, Chann participated in only a few exhibitions, including the “Contemporary American Chinese Artists Exhibition” at the Otis Art Institute in October 1959, and in late July 1965, over a hundred new works were exhibited at the same venue with Chinese landscapes and abstract textual oil paintings almost equally represented. Chann’s abstract style gradually stabilized after that, engaging in the decades-long conceptual practice, attempting to catch up with Western modern art’s path while deeply indulging in Chinese tradition. In the oral history project of the Asian American Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, Chann mentioned, “My favorite Chinese painter is Shi Tao because he uniquely expresses Chinese tradition”.³²

4.2 Silence and Withdrawal: The Personal Choice of the Puritans and His Lifestyle

As a painter who painted from the heart, Chann’s inner being still embodied his identification with Chinese traditional culture: the attachments to multiple Chinese

characters and life expectations. On the day of his death, his daughter Jenny wrote in her eulogy, “He lived a very simple life, with a wish to be ordinary, not extraordinary.”³³ The decades-long life of being a Puritan or a hermit in the farmer’s market did not diminish the spiritual value of Chann’s works; still, it is somewhat regrettable that the artist and his paintings have retreated from the market.

In 1974, after exhibiting several dozen works by Chann, a gallery in Salt Lake City lost the artworks and failed to provide payment for the transactions. “Despite ineffective reminders, this incident caused George Chann to be unwilling to participate in exhibitions in the future.”³⁴ This unexpected event undoubtedly exacerbated the predicament of Chann’s subsequent solitary and unknown creative endeavors. Chang Shu-chi also encountered similar incidents. Jianhua Shu, the curator of the Silicon Asian Art Center, once said a collector in New York also deceived Chang Shu-chi. To this day, his son, Professor Gordon Chang, at Stanford University, still keeps the legal documents that his father used to seek a resolution.

From Chann’s decades-long cross-cultural artistic journey, the transmission of culture and the diplomacy of art are a complex and iterative process involving multiple dimensions, reversals, bidirectional or even multi-directional interactions, and latent crises. In this process, compared to other Chinese painters who have promoted traditional Chinese art in the United States and developed unique new styles in the contemporary cultural context, such as Dong Kingman, Chang Dai-Chien, Hou Beiren, Way, and even the Bay Area’s Three Masters Zheng Yuebo, Yeh-Jau Liu, and Wang Chang-chieh, Chann’s case reveals the importance and significance of artists’ interactions, travels, stylistic transformations, and constant dialogue with the world as the Other in the tide of modern art development. When discussing the German American immigrant art historian Paul T. Frankl in the mid-20th century, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann noted in one of his articles that Frankl never found his American voice. In America, he belonged to the German-speaking community. Although he had lived in America for nearly twenty-five years, after World War II, as early as 1945, he reconstructed his connection to Germany and still maintained his emotional attachment to Germany. Frankl’s personal experiences and hardship to adapt well to the American environment are generally believed to be linked to his character traits. As a painter, Chann, like Frankl as an art historian, showed how their painting and writing languages could find their voice in a journey filled with challenges and identity crises, and is a crucial factor in determining whether a new

brilliance can emerge in the ever-changing world of Western modern art.

5. Unforgotten: Marginalized Groups in the Writing of Global Art History

Any scholar exploring the origins of modern American art must confront the phenomenon of attention to marginalized individuals and communities. This attention was confirmed in several important exhibitions at the end of the 20th century, in which minority ethnic art precursors played essential roles. John Elderfield believes that “precursors have two interrelated functions: first, to contemporize something historical, and second, to historicize something contemporary”.³⁵ Just as the Museum of Modern Art in New York faced challenges when attempting to trace the roots of modern art at its establishment in 1929, Corot and Dumier were insufficient to meet the need for this exploration. Thus, the “Pioneers of the Museum of Modern Art” project can be seen as a specific lineage in the history of modern art. Whether such a lineage can be legitimately sustained, the driving force behind creating this history reveals that era’s interests, biases, anxieties, and infatuations.³⁶

Abstract art, as an essential medium of interpenetration between marginalized groups and mainstream art circles, is not as simple as figurative and non-figurative. Still, it harbors trivial risks: identity, cultural identification, grafting, etc. —the journey from survival from being uprooted to taking root. It generates a new spiritual heritage represented by abstract art that goes beyond the simple fusion of East and West. It encompasses the difficulties faced by Chinese artists venturing into the Western mainstream world represented by the United States and the intrinsic and extrinsic factors manifested by the Chinese artist community as marginalized individuals that drive the progression of modern art and expand the forms of contemporary art.

After decades of silence, whether by chance or necessity, Chann’s works have been brought back to the historical stage since their exhibition at the Taiwan Future Gallery in 2000. “From the currently shining and popular Zao Wou-ki (1921-2013) and Chu Teh-Chun (1920-2014) overseas, to Pan Yuliang (1895-1977) and Sanyu (1895-1966), who has emerged from the historical heap and entered the ranks of masters, to Chao Chung-Hsiang (1910-1991), T’ang Haywen (1927-1991), and Yun Gee, who has also captured attention in recent years, the significance of George Chann’s ‘unearthing’ does not lie in joining the ‘overseas Chinese master’s club’ or simply being fortunate not to be neglected.

Instead, it lies in the uniqueness of his creative process that emerged from the transformation of self-identity consciousness and cultural identification.”³⁷

Whether going to Europe or visiting the United States, this group of Chinese artists who were engaged in seeking a middle ground between traditional Chinese ink painting and Western modern oil painting faced the same question, the same question raised by Michael Sullivan in 1987: “Is his painting truly Chinese? How can it be inserted into traditional Chinese painting if it is ‘yes’? Is his painting abstract? What is the relationship between his painting and Chinese painting and techniques? Finally, what does he think of his paintings?”³⁸ When we once again examine and confront the title of Asian American or Chinese American artist today, it is crucial to understand that we should not allow the contradictions and heterogeneity within the art field to dissolve under labels, nor should we overlook the different evaluations of their value given in other times and spaces over time.

“The future of these Oriental artists? We may as well ask the future of our artists.”³⁹ In the 1950s and 1960s, whether in China or the United States, artists venturing onto the global stage displayed an open and eager mindset, embracing the cultural impact of one another; Chann was no exception. In response to this influence, Chann’s reaction possessed a shared essence with the group yet retained a distinct personal impetus. By exploring this case, this article aims to raise awareness that the exchange of culture and art is akin to a magnificent wave in the vast sea of human civilization, where every artist is a mere droplet within the waves. They may either disperse or coalesce, constantly shaping the world of modernist art centered around the United States through external adjustments and internal reconstructions. This exemplifies the ever-evolving and mutually absorbing new history of humankind.

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「抽象轉型」的背後：美籍華裔畫家陳蔭巖 20 世紀五六十年代創作中的「表」與「真」

蘇阿嬌

摘要：作為美國現代最重要的華裔抽象畫家之一，陳蔭巖從具象到抽象的嬗變之路關涉著其背後無法忽視的一個創作群體：美國現代華裔藝術家。他們離散遷徙、融通碰撞的藝術探求之路亦是全球藝術史中不可或缺的觀照對象。本文將通過搜集加州舊金山、洛杉磯等地的相關主題檔案材料，探討 20 世紀五六十年代陳蔭巖在短暫狂熱的抽象表現主義浪潮之下，是如何自成熟的肖像表現轉向抽象實踐並探索終生的深層原因。以陳蔭巖之個案為例，揆度 20 世紀加州地區的華裔畫家究竟以何種方式、以何種廣度與深度書寫以美國為中心的現代藝術發展圖景，構建起一段互為滲透、相促相長的多形相現代藝術發展之路，為今日邊緣化人群體、少數族裔歷史研究與美國藝術「去中心化」方法提供進一步詳實的佐證。

關鍵詞：華人；具象；表現；抽象；轉型