

# Peng Ma

## Abstract Ink Painting

Excerpt from Introduction by Lien Chao

### *1. Tasting the Forbidden Fruit in the 1960s*

#### 六十年代，一个初尝禁果的人

In the early 1960s, in the university library at Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts<sup>1</sup> (浙江美术学院) in Hangzhou, a young artist and art teacher named Peng Ma had stolen a few forbidden glances at the abstract paintings published in some Western art magazines. His initial response was a visual struggle to grasp; then his instinctive resistance gave way to excitement; sooner than he realized, it had become an irresistible desire.

To Peng Ma and his fellow professional artists in the 1960s, abstraction was the future. These artists were inspired to think about the fundamental challenges that abstraction could bring to Chinese brush painting as it has done to Western art. Traditional Chinese brush painting,<sup>2</sup> by and large, is a kind of patterned figurative painting. Within each category of subject, aesthetic styles and techniques had been established and passed down by literati artists generation after generation. According to the tradition, the creative process usually proceeds with an artist's observing an object, comprehending it mentally, interpreting it emotionally, and then rendering it artistically in the studio, using brush-painting mediums and techniques.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this methodology, it would not be necessary for the artist to create the kind of realistic effects seen, for example, in Old Masters paintings. Instead, what a Chinese brush-painting artist desires to achieve in terms of representation is expressed best in the words of master artist Qi Baishi (齐白石, 1864-1957), who once said, "The excellence of a painting lies in its being alike, yet unlike. Too much likeness flatters the vulgar taste; too much unlikeness deceives the world."<sup>4</sup> Today this approach

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<sup>1</sup> Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts (浙江美术学院) in Hangzhou was renamed the Chinese National Academy of Fine Art Institute (中国美术学院) in 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Traditional Chinese brush painting includes two different styles. 1. Meticulous - [Gong-bi](#) (工笔) often referred to as "court-style" painting. 2. Freehand - [Shui-mo](#) (水墨) loosely termed brush painting. The Chinese character "mo" means ink and "shui" means water. This style is also referred to as "xie yi" (写意) or freehand style.

<sup>3</sup> The mediums for Chinese brush painting are Chinese ink, water, mineral colour, and *Xuan* paper. *Xuan* paper is sometimes casually referred to as rice paper in the West.

<sup>4</sup> [Qi Baishi and His Paintings](#), About, Inc., A *New York Times* Company. Retrieved November 20, 2007.

董玉龙, "序言" 《齐白石作品集》 (天津人民美术出版社)。

may superficially and coincidentally resemble post-structuralism as opposed to realism; in fact, a Chinese artist creates what the mind perceives, even with figurative images, rather than a correspondence to a three-dimensional object. Furthermore, instead of starting from sketching, training for Chinese brush painting begins with imitating traditional paintings to grasp the basic techniques.

To Peng Ma in the 1960s, Western abstraction presented both an intellectual and an artistic stimulation. He began to experiment with the idea of using Chinese art mediums to emphasize structural formation based on sketching. In order to better understand structure, he also studied sculpture. A large number of sketches created at that time demonstrate strong influences from German Expressionism. In 1966, when he exhibited these experimental ink paintings at the university gallery, the response was strong. Only months before, the Cultural Revolution had swept over the country with its brutal destructive force. Art and ideas identifying with feudalism, capitalism, and revisionism were heavily criticized. Abstraction, expressing Western bourgeois ideology and individualism, was therefore not be allowed to develop in China.

二十世纪六十年代早期，一位名叫马鹏的年轻艺术家，浙江美术学院教师，通过学院图书馆内部教学参考资料的小窗口，窥视了西方艺术杂志上发表的抽象绘画的禁果。他最初的反应是不可理喻的视觉挑战，紧接着，内心的抗拒转变成了兴奋，在他还没有完全意识到的时候，这种感觉已经变成了一种不可抵挡的创作欲望。

对于六十年代的马鹏和他的艺术家朋友们来说，抽象艺术代表未来。抽象艺术给西方写实派绘画带来的变化，使他们情不自禁地想到中国艺术将会因此而面临的根本性挑战。传统国画是一种模式的具像绘画。历朝历代的文人和艺术家们逐步将国画发展成为以人物、山水、花卉、鸟兽类等主题性的绘画形式。而每一项主题又有其独特的风格和技巧，通过艺术家和文人墨客代代相传。传统的国画创作过程大多以画家观其物开始，心里默记物象的特点，然后回到画室用国画独特的媒材和技巧进行创作。由此可见，中国画艺术家不必要创作出西方古典油画大师作品那种三维空间和准确性用光的艺术效果。而中国画家渴望的具象绘画，正如国画大师齐白石（1864-1957）

所言，“作画妙在似与不似之间；太似为媚俗，不似为欺世”。在今天来看，这种追求“似与不似之间”的艺术效果似乎有那么点后结构主义的味道。这样的方法表明国画的相对自由性——艺术家创作的是心中的物象，即便是具象，也不要求符合三维空间里的物象。另外，中国画的学习过程，并不要求从素描入手，而是通过临摹传统绘画，以掌握基本笔墨技巧开始并贯穿的。

抽象绘画给六十年代的马鹏带来了思想和艺术上的冲动。他尝试着画了一批强调以素描为结构造型的水墨实验，为了深入研究结构，他又研习了雕塑。这批带有强烈的德国表现主义的风

格的作品在学校陈列馆展出的时候，引起了强烈的反响。在史无前例的文化大革命以摧枯拉朽的破坏力横扫一切到来之前，来自党内的文件明确指出，要批判封（封建）、资（资本主义）、修（修正主义）的艺术及其世界观。重申艺术要为党的路线和方针服务。由于抽象艺术代表西方意识形态和个人主义，当时的中国是不允许抽象绘画的存在和发展的。

### 3. *Artistic Missions*

#### 艺术使命

Peng Ma's teacher Pan Tianshou's (潘天寿1897-1971) remark that paintings from the East and West should be distanced from each other<sup>5</sup> has clarified Peng Ma's artistic direction. In the last twenty years he has followed two artistic visions, as outlined in his artist's statement.<sup>6</sup> In his first approach, by experimenting and combining different methods and techniques from oil painting, he has developed sketching and impressionistic brush techniques to modernize the traditional techniques of Chinese brush painting. Moreover, by using contemporary subject matter, such as city life and Canadian landscapes, he has enriched Chinese brush painting, giving it a Western context, specifically Canadian. In a way, he has transformed his unique cross-cultural experience as a minority artist into "an active force" in his artistic creation. In 2008, the book *Peng Ma: Chinese Brush Painting* presented his Chinese brush paintings of Canadian landscapes to the world.

The second vision outlined in Peng Ma's artist's statement is "to systematically establish abstract Chinese brush painting." He believes abstract ink painting should also derive from the tradition of Chinese brush painting instead of copying Western abstraction with Chinese brush painting mediums. Perhaps the East should continue to be the East, and the West the West---their coexistence or polarity is vital to their future survival though they should interact, like the *yin* and *yang* energies of the universe.

In 1994, Peng Ma held his first solo exhibition of abstract ink painting in Toronto. For this landmark show, he carved an abstract seal, perhaps the first one in the 1500-year history of Chinese brush painting.<sup>7</sup> To him, this abstract seal was more suitable than the traditional personal and decorative seals usually stamped on calligraphy and figurative paintings. In the following two decades, Peng Ma has had many more art exhibitions, both figurative and abstract. While demonstrating contemporary Chinese

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<sup>5</sup> Pan Tianshou, *Pan Tianshou on Art*, ed. by Pan Gongkai (Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Art Publications, 1997). 《潘天寿谈艺录》潘天寿著；潘公凯编，浙江人民美术出版社，1997。

<sup>6</sup> Peng Ma, "An Artist's Statement," *A Collection of Ma Peng's Chinese Brush Paintings* (Taipei: Dynasty Publications, 1997) 7. 《马鹏画集》台北朝代出版社，1997。

<sup>7</sup> Yuan Jian Chen, "Merging Eastern and Western Art Theories in Pursuit of the Abstract: Ma Peng First Creates Chinese Abstract Seal Carving," *Sing Bao Newspaper/Can-Am News*, Toronto Edition. 21 May 1994.

陈永健, "融汇东西艺术思潮追求无为, 马鹏首创中国抽象金石印章," 《星岛日报》加美新闻, 多伦多版, 1994年5月21日。

brush painting to Canadian audiences, he hopes that a cultural bridge will eventually be established for Chinese brush painting to cross over, and that his abstract expressions will be accepted as Canadian art.

#### 潘天壽教授 (1897-1971)

教诲“东、西方艺术应该拉开距离来发展”为马鹏在加拿大二十年来的艺术拓展拨云开路。他努力地去实现在自己在艺术家申明中确定的两大使命。第一个使命是通过借鉴和综合，他成功地把油画的方法和技巧，包括素描和印象派画法应用到传统中国画里，使之具有现代感。同时，他把社会生活、地方色彩、加拿大风光等当代主题运用到中国水墨画里，使之和西方（加拿大）文化进行交流。总之，他把少数民族艺术家跨文化的经历转变成了艺术创作的原动力。2008年，《马鹏中国画作品集》由加拿大TSAR出版社出版发行了,把他的加拿大风光系列展示在世界观众的面前。

马鹏在加拿大实现的第二个艺术使命就是系统地发展抽象中国绘画艺术。他认为抽象水墨创作应该源于中国画的传统，而不是简单地模仿西方抽象绘画。或许，东方应该继续是东方，西方就是西方，犹如宇宙间的阴、阳两极相互影响、相互依存。东、西方艺术两大营垒的共存，对保证未来世界两大艺术系统的存在是极其重要的。

1994年，马鹏在多伦多首次举行了抽象水墨个展。为了准备这次展览，他特地雕刻了一枚有一个点迹的抽象印章。他认为对于抽象水墨作品来说，这枚抽象印章，要比盖在传统书法和绘画上的个人印章和闲章更加合适。在过去的二十年里，马鹏举办了无数次展览，向加拿大观众展示当代中国绘画，努力去建造一座文化的桥梁，期盼着他的水墨画终究会成为当代加拿大艺术的一部分。