

# A Study of Chu Teh-Chun's Abstract Paintings from the Perspective of East-West Integration

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**Abstract:** Chu Teh-chun is an outstanding abstract artist of the twentieth century and the first member of the Académie française of Chinese descent since the establishment of the academy. His abstract paintings are full of brilliant colors and beautiful melodies, and are filled with a poetic aura, and his works show a kind of oriental imagery that transcends the objective world, which is regarded as a "perfect fusion of the subtlety of oriental art with the richness of western painting". He has been described as "a perfect blend of the subtlety of oriental art and the richness of western painting". He travelled to Paris in 1955, when Western modernist art was in full bloom, and through continuous exploration, his painting style changed from figurative to abstract. Later on, in the process of exploring abstract painting, he incorporated the cultural spirit of the East and created abstract paintings with oriental connotations. His abstract paintings use the compositional forms of Western modern painting and the colour techniques of oil painting, blended with the charm of traditional Chinese painting, to create a painting space with changing colors, powerful brush strokes, and a sense of rhythm and light. His abstract paintings are the result of a high degree of fusion of Chinese and Western artistic spirit.

**Keywords:** Chu teh-chun, integration of Chinese and western cultures, abstract painting

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## Introduction

Oil painting has been introduced to China for hundreds of years since the end of the 16th century, and there has always been the problem of how to integrate it with the local Chinese culture. Due to differences in national character and philosophical foundations, Chinese and Western art are very different in their ways of thinking, artistic spirit, and methods of expression, which determines that the fusion of East and West is bound to be a difficult process. Xu Beihong and Lin Fengmian, the pioneers of Chinese oil painting, had different understandings and interpretations of the direction of the integration of East and West. Xu Beihong developed the direction of Realism by following the methods of Western classical painting, while Lin Fengmian developed the direction of Expressionism by summing up the characteristics and strengths of Chinese and Western art. Chu Teh-chun was the first Chinese-American member of the Académie française in more than 200 years, and is a world-renowned master of painting. He studied under Lin Fengmian, and throughout his life he painstakingly explored and endeavoured to fuse the spirit of traditional Chinese culture with the techniques of Western abstract expressionism. Chu Teh-chun has made remarkable contributions to the promotion of traditional Chinese culture in the world and has occupied a very important position in both Chinese and Western painting.

## 1. Biography of Chu Teh-Chun

Born in 1920 in Xiao County, Anhui Province to a family of cultured doctors, Chu's family was a well-known local family of traditional Chinese medicine practitioners and lived a relatively affluent life. Chu Teh-chun's father and grandfather loved to collect calligraphy and paintings of celebrities, and the family used to hire private tutors to teach him.

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Chu Teh-chun loved cursive writing, and his father instructed Chu Teh-chun to practice the Mustard Seed Garden Painting Catalogue. Chu Teh-chun's father also taught him how to practice the Mustard Seed Garden Painting Manual. The traditional literati painting and calligraphy and the interest in ink and brushwork were all imprinted in Chu Teh-chun's mind during his childhood, as a result of his family's cultural cultivation.

After graduating from junior high school in 1935, Chu Teh-chun enrolled in the Hangzhou Art College, which was one of the few state art schools in China, founded in 1928 by Mr Cai Yuanpei, then Minister of Education, who hired Lin Fengmian, who had returned from his studies in France, to serve as its headmaster. At that time, the art college was full of talents, including Wu Dayu, who graduated from the National Academy of Fine Arts in Paris, as the director of western painting, and was excellent in poetry, calligraphy and painting; Li Chaoshi, who first brought gouache painting into China; and professors such as Fang Ganmin, William Cai, and Liu Kaiqiu, who had studied in France and strongly promoted modern styles such as Impressionism, Post-Expressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism, among others. During his studies at the Hangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Chu Teh-chun was influenced by Wu Dayu, and became familiar with the bold colours of the Fauvists, as well as the modernist paintings of Europe in the early 20th century.

When Chu Teh-chun arrived in France in 1955, he visited the Louvre and Impressionist exhibitions, and made friends with like-minded people such as Pan Yuliang and Chang Yu, etc. In 1956, Chu Teh-chun created *Portrait of Jing Zhao* (shown in Figure 1), a realistic portrait, which was the last figurative work he painted, and was known as the "Oriental Mona Lisa". In the spring of 1956, the city of Paris held a retrospective exhibition for the abstract painter Nicolas de Staël at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris, and Chu Teh-chun was deeply impressed by the "formlessness" of the picture, which had been his desire to find a way to be free and not to be bound. For many years he had been trying to find a way to be free and not to be bound, and he found the answer in this retrospective exhibition. The "formlessness" is not only pictorial, but also poetic, musical and architectural, and can freely develop different language styles according to the painter's own cultivation and cultural foundation. At the same time, he recalled that in traditional Chinese painting, the painter's observation and understanding of nature, and then blended with poetry, resulting in works that emphasize "meaning" rather than "form". This idea coincided with modern Western painting, and realizing this, Chu Teh-chun began his attempts at abstraction.



**Fig. 1** Portrait of Jing Zhao.

By the 1980s, Chu Teh-chun was no longer obsessed with distinguishing between the characteristics of Western abstraction and Chinese writing. His compositions were not bound by frames, and his colours became more intense and fierce, freely expressing what was in his heart. In painting, one can become a free messenger, travelling between the picture and the spiritual world at will, which is absolutely beyond the reach of the people<sup>[1]</sup>. On 17 December 1997, Chu Teh-chun was selected as a member of the Académie française des Beaux-Arts, the first artist of Chinese descent to receive this honour. Behind the honour was not false praise or monetary hype, it was through a moving piece of artwork that impressed the judges and the viewers. At this stage, Mr Chu Teh-chun began to act as a link and bridge between Chinese and Western art. His compositions are completely unencumbered, and his brushstrokes dance to the music. The use of

colours is most distinctive, and those that are difficult to match are combined into a perfect movement by his subtle handling.

## **2.The reasons for the formation of Chu Teh-Chun's abstract painting art style**

Firstly, the influence of traditional Chinese culture on Chu Teh-chun was subtle. Chu Teh-chun has been influenced by traditional painting and calligraphy since his childhood. In his childhood, Chu Teh-chun learnt to practise calligraphy and calligraphy under his father's tutelage, and especially loved cursive writing, while the influence of Tang and Song poems was even deeper in his bones. The influence of calligraphy and painting on Chu Teh-chun is also present in all his abstract works. The history of aesthetics, ideology and philosophical thought in ancient China have had a significant impact on Chu Teh-chun's painting language and ideas.

Secondly, representative Western artists had a profound influence on Chu Teh-chun's artistic concepts. Firstly, it was the influence of Cézanne, the "father of modern painting", on Chu Teh-chun's artistic conception; Chu Teh-chun entered Hangzhou Art College in 1935, where President Lin Fengmian and Professor Wu Dayu widely disseminated avant-garde art schools and aesthetic ideas, such as the painting styles of Monet, Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse, which were universally admired. Therefore, as early as when he was studying at the Hangzhou Art College, he had already begun to be enthralled by the works of Cézanne. Secondly, it was the influence of Nicolas de Staël on Chu Teh-chun's artistic conception. 1956 Staël's retrospective exhibition was held in Paris, and this exhibition became an important turning point in Chu Teh-chun's painting career. Staël's works, from the tangible to the intangible, the mind became more and more free spirited. Last but not least, an important influence on Chu Teh-chun's artistic conception was the 17th century Dutch painter Rembrandt. In addition, Matisse, Kandinsky, Picasso and other representatives of Western modern painting all influenced Chu Teh-chun to a greater or lesser extent. Together with the romantic environment of Paris and the exposure to the most trendy information of world art around him, all of these are the potential influences of Western modern culture on Chu Teh-chun.

The most important characteristic of Chu Teh-chun's artistic conception can be summarized as the "fusion of East and West". In his paintings, Chu Teh-chun focuses on the expression of ink and colors in the form of oil paint, emphasizes on learning from nature, stresses the power and formal beauty of dots and lines in Chinese painting and calligraphy, and focuses on the free expression of the heart. Chu Teh-chun's uniqueness lies in the combination of Western oil colors and Eastern humanistic philosophies in his works<sup>[2]</sup>.

## **3.The artistic characteristics of Chu Teh-Chun's abstract paintings**

In terms of composition, Chu Teh-chun's paintings are characterized by a diversity of compositions. Maurice Barnier once wrote: "Chu's space does not belong to classical perspective. His space can be described as a multi-dimensional space. The clever choice of colors and the placement of small squares on the screen give rise to subtle adjustments that allow light to pass through. The picture is both space and structure ....."<sup>[3]</sup>. Multi-dimensional space refers to the placement of multiple viewpoints in order to produce multiple different small spaces, or the shaping of different spatial sensations through moving viewpoints. Secondly, Chu Teh-chun's picture is constructed in the form of reality and emptiness, with sparse and dense, virtual and real, and clear layers.

Chu Teh-chun's works are harmonious, warm and comfortable, expressing his emotions. He usually allocates several large colour layouts at the beginning, establishes a major colour palette, and then, after completing the first step, slowly pushes the colours one by one. The colours in Chu Teh-chun's abstract paintings are highly subjective, and are the result of subjective imagery. Whether it is the strong contrast of colours or the unique aesthetic pursuit of "blue", "black" and "red", it is Chu Teh-chun's exploration of the beauty of form.

Literati painters emphasized the importance of mood and the interest of ink and brushwork, which is consistent with the pursuit of the pioneers of Western abstract painting, who regarded the elements of painting, such as line, colour, and composition, as independent aesthetic elements. In Chu Teh-chun's mature works, calligraphic lines appear in abundance, linking up the whole picture, with calligraphic undulations forming a rhythm full of life<sup>[3]</sup>. Chu Teh-chun's works all seem

to travel between the tangible and the intangible, grasping back and forth between the abstract and the figurative. Dots, lines and surfaces become the centre of gravity of his images, in which the elements of dots, lines and block surfaces are wielded at will.

The texture of Chu Teh-chun's paintings is mainly reflected in the sense of ink rendering. Ink painting creates the effects of "thick, light, dry and wet", whereas traditional Western oil paint is thick and sticky<sup>[4]</sup>. Chu Teh-chun uses western oil paint in the same way as the "water" in oriental ink paintings, resulting in works that have the composure of Chinese ink paintings, but without losing the lightness of western watercolors. This is also an important contribution to Chu Teh-chun's "fusion of East and West".

Chu Teh-chun likes to listen to music when he paints, and his representative work *Renaissance Charm* (shown in Figure 2) was completed by listening to Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. The painter's emotion is more surging and impassioned in the melody of the music, and the rhythm of the music and the intensity of the colors in the picture reach the most beautiful harmony. Each brush stroke is like a note, with the ups and downs of the painter's emotion, composing a moving song of life, and the beating colors and rhythms in the picture coincide with the rhythms of the music.



**Fig. 2** The Revival Charm

#### **4.The contribution of Chu Teh-Chun's abstract paintings to Chinese and Western art**

Firstly, Chu Teh-chun's abstract paintings expanded the exploration of modernist paintings under the vision of the fusion of East and West. Chu Teh-chun's abstract paintings in his mature period are the combination of Western abstract concepts and the charm of Chinese ink painting, and the paintings are a combination of Western oil colors and different techniques of Chinese and Western expression<sup>[5]</sup>. Secondly, oriental imagery and aesthetic interests began to appear in Western abstract paintings and provided spiritual nourishment for the diversified construction of Western abstract paintings. Finally, Chu Teh-chun further revolutionized the traditional approach and aesthetic mood of painting, reviving the tradition in modern painting. Chu Teh-chun's abstract paintings do not remain on the surface of form, but rather tap into the inner logic and core values of traditional Chinese culture; what he wants to copy is the breath and spirit of painting, and he brings this breath and spirit into Western abstract expression painting<sup>[6]</sup>. Chu Teh-chun not only brings the form of ink into oil painting, but also brings the concepts and techniques of oil painting into ink painting, completely unifying the form with the spirit within.

#### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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