

BOOK REVIEW

Yun Gee: Poetry, Writings, Art, Memories

Edited by Anthony W. Lee, University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA 98145 with The Pasadena Museum of California Art, California ISBN: 0-295 98353-1 cloth, 0-295 98354-X, paper.

As reviewed by Amy Hodgson

This book contains a selection of paintings, poetry, essays, and writings by Yun Gee, the Chinese American modernist and others. It also provides an insight of cultural, political activities, and reminisces of his life.

Yun Gee was born in the early 1900's in Canton, South China. Little is known of Yun Gee's childhood in China. By his own account, he was a prodigy and thought he easily exceeded the skills of his teachers in Kaiping County, China. As a boy he became an ardent supporter of the Kuomintang, Sun Yat Sen's Nationalist Party. He left China and went to San Francisco at the age of 15 years old.

In San Francisco Yun Gee became a painter and founded an artists' collective called the Chinese Revolutionary Artists' Club. He studied painting and drawing with various modernists and beaux-arts teachers. Within a few years he established himself as one of the city's avant-garde painters. He received much praise as an aspiring artist. The shows and sales he generated were uncommon for a Chinese immigrant in San Francisco at that time. In spite of these achievements he had to leave San Francisco in 1927 due to anti Chinese sentiments.

He went to Paris upon leaving San Francisco and he received some new ideas in art. He had a brief marriage to Princess Paule de Reuss, a well known poet. It was here he painted some thirty pictures and had significant success in solo exhibition endeavors. Eventually he had to leave France due to again extreme anti-Chinese feelings. He left France for New York in the early part of 1930s. Aside from the six years in Paris, he lived in New York until his death 1963. He had a daughter, Li-Lan through his second marriage

to Helen Wimmer. In 1947 he divorced Helen and lived with a companion, Velma Aydelott until he died.

There are four specific sections accorded to the book. The first section conveyed Yun Gee's overall career as a painter. According to Wesley P Jessup, Executive Director, Pasadena Museum of California Art, Gee can be considered "easily the most remarkable Chinese American painter of his generation." It is interesting to note that Gee's painting career is multiple in nature varying from the uphill struggles most forward artists encountered as they searched acceptance for their work to the limitations and opportunities dictated by race. The paintings of Gee are modernist and stylist and several of these are presented in the book. Generally, his art and life had the mark of longing and desire, constantly looking for something, beyond what was available. Maybe this illustrates his desire to be accepted by the society in which he lived. He lived through the difficult era following the 1924 Immigration Act barring all Chinese entering United States. His work reflects the racism present during his time in San Francisco. It was in Paris and New York his artistic career diminished in the 1940s till his death in 1963. Gee's fortunes from an earnest painter in 1920's to attempts reinvigorate his career in the 1950's are traced in a series short articles by the artist himself and others.

Yun Gee's poetry and essays dominate the second section of the book. His poems were mostly hidden in his papers and kept private during his lifetime. The difference in Gee's poetry writings and his painting was that he was extremely reluctant to publicize his poems. Forty-three of his poems are published for the first time in this text. Poetry writing was defined as his

private enjoyment as he mastered the English language. These poems exhibit short, choppy lines to produce a unique style which includes humor, ideas, emotions, and the banal aspects of daily life. Yet, his poems sometimes convey a melancholic, restless soul with a yearning for what is traditionally Chinese. He also tried to draw a distinction of who he was and what he wanted to be.

The third section of the book depicts the rise and fall of Gee as a cultural and political revolutionary. It composes of writings by Gee and about Gee. He frequently gave accounts of his life and changing its details and "recasting particular events in different light." Many writers stressed on his small stature or recounted his entrepreneurial efforts from an amused and patronizing distance. They quoted him in philosophical language as if he was a Confucius sage. To make the matter worse Gee regularly played on the image of a Chinese philosopher and sometimes his role playing perceived as ludicrous.

Fourth and last section composes of reminiscences of Yun Gee's life by both himself and others. Through his various writings and observations, one know where he lived, at different stages of his life. Also, what jobs he held, what he painted, wrote and exhibited and even at times why did all of those things including exaggerated self promotion in various ventures

during the 1940's and 1950's. Both Yun Gee's daughter, Li-Lan and Nancy Bing, individually wrote touching essays reminiscing on their views and thoughts. They relate their commitment to him even in the face of his obsessions and failures, and also described the alcoholism that plagued him in his late life. His daughter Li-Lan portrays him as a troubled man constantly searching to make art and hoping to achieve greater things.

After reading this book one could not help but ponder what truly led to his decline. This is a man full of talent and capabilities who comes across as a persistent struggler trying to fit into whatever society he was at the time and often failed in his attempts to overcome the racialized existence he encountered. It is a sad end to the life of Yun Gee, a Chinese American man of enormous artistic talents and deep poetic feelings.

Chutt Fan (Amy) Hodgson was born in China and raised in Singapore. She received further education in the United Kingdom (UK) and United States (USA). Amy has extensive experience in professional health related to nursing, occupational health and safety, and care of the elderly in Singapore, UK, and USA. She also has a Bachelor of Science degree in Professional Art (Psychology) and is a certified Contemporary Legal Assistant. She lived and worked in various parts of USA for the past 28 years. She has done volunteer work throughout the years, and is currently involved in several activities since moving to St. Louis three years ago.