

Mian Situ: A Modern-Day Master

by Molly Siple

THE CALIFORNIA ART CLUB (CAC) WAS founded by master artists, and one-hundred years later, continues to count among its membership consummate painters and sculptors. One of the most prestigious is CAC Signature Artist member **Mian Situ** whose canvases tell stories of life in rural China and in the American West as Chinese immigrants first landed on our shores. These masterpieces have earned him an array of top awards, and consistently command some of the highest prices offered currently for contemporary-traditional American art.

But as anyone who has had the pleasure of knowing Situ is aware, he is an exceptionally humble man. This is both in keeping with the traditional Chinese culture that shuns arrogance and typical of Situ himself who says with a sweet

smile, "I am by nature a modest person." He also did not come to art with a great passion to express himself.

In fact, he might have missed this career path altogether if it were not for the disruption to normal life brought on by the **Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution**, commonly known simply as the "Cultural Revolution."

In 1966 **Chairman Mao Zedong** launched the Cultural Revolution to counteract what he perceived as bourgeois elements in Chinese society calling for a restoration of capitalism. His plan to counteract such influences included radical educational reforms, and consequently schools everywhere were closed, putting an end to earlier teachings that were seen as a potential threat to the Communist Party and the new order. As Situ recalls, "I was a good student and especially did well in mathematics, but with the Cultural Revolution, all schools were closed and we no longer could go to any of our old classes."

SITU CONTINUES, "AT THE TIME, I WAS ONLY thirteen and full of energy and I was looking for some way to use it. I had no interest in art, but I had some friends who were illustrating government posters in support of the Revolution. This was the only kind of art allowed. There was portrait after portrait of Mao, or art ridiculing his enemies. Because of my artist friends I decided to try painting for myself. For six months I just practiced drawing Mao. I thought that was how you made art!"

As part of the Cultural Revolution plan Mao also locked the libraries and destroyed many paintings (although some of the best were hidden and have survived), but he effectively put the art of other cultures out of reach, at least for the time. Situ's first exposure to European classical art was thanks to a friend who happened to have a set of keys to a library. "The first art book I saw was about the Italian Renaissance and it opened my eyes!" says Situ. "I was introduced to the paintings of **Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael and Michelangelo**. Even though most of the pictures were in black and white, I tried to learn what I could and got more and more books to look at." For the next couple of years, Situ worked hard copying these pictures and he also began drawing from life, trying to absorb everything he could to help him learn about painting.



A Quiet Day

Oil on linen 24" × 20"

Winner of the 2000 Gold Medal Award from the CAC's 90th Annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition held at the Pasadena Historical Museum (now Pasadena Museum of History)

Private collection

Then in 1971, the **Guangzhou (formerly Canton) Academy of Fine Arts (GAFA)** was finally reopened, but ironically the prime qualification for attending art class was being a faithful supporter of the Revolution, and had little to do with being able to draw. The dismayed teaching staff did what they could to bring in a few promising artists. One of the teachers happened to spot the quality of Mian Situ's work and thus, Situ was permitted formal art training. He studied at the Academy from 1972 to 1975, earning a Bachelor's degree.

Mian Situ's classes during these years followed the time-honored curriculum established in the academies of 19th century Paris, teachings that travelled to China via a fascinating route. Around the turn of the 20th century, the French classic curriculum was introduced to Russia and adopted by Russian art academies such as the **Repin Institute for Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture** (also called the **Russian Academy of Art**) in St. Petersburg, where traditional realism developed into Socialist Realism. Then in the mid-20th century, as the Soviet Union and Communist China developed a strong relationship and the Chinese government realized that realistic art could be used as a handy propaganda tool, Realism became the official style of art.

CHINESE ARTISTS WERE SENT TO RUSSIA TO STUDY European oil painting techniques. One of these artists, **Guo Shao-gang**, who had earlier studied with the famous Russian artist **Yuri M. Neprintsev (1909-1996)**, became an instructor and then, professor at the GAFA from 1960 to 1983. Guo Shao-gang eventually became Dean of the school, and Situ had the good fortune to study under this Chinese master.

After completing his Bachelor's Degree, in keeping with the mandates of the Cultural Revolution, Situ was then given a compulsory three-year assignment to work in the countryside, in his case as a projectionist showing

propaganda films. But in 1978, Situ was invited back to GAFA and with this round of training, with Mao's death in 1976, and the educational reforms associated with the Revolution abandoned, he was now free to study the work of modern masters including **Paul Cézanne (1839-1906)**, **Henri Matisse (1869-1954)** and **Edgar Degas (1834-1917)**, and experimented with a variety of painting approaches, settling finally on, as he says simply, "my own style."

After graduation Mian then taught at the Guangzhou Academy for six years. With this post he took full advantage of his time off, sketching and photographing the inhabitants and daily life of rural Chinese villages in south-western China. He was raised in such a village in Canton and when he was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, life in these places had not changed from a century before, giving Situ a privileged view of historic China. As he recalls, "In your village, you were friends or related to everyone else, and animals and people all lived together. In our living room we kept chickens in a cage and rabbits in another. Village life was visually rich with women in native dress shopping for produce and street vendors selling their wares." This is imagery he still draws on in his renowned paintings of the old China. Friendly village dogs were also a standard part of the scene, a delight of the young Situ, and one reason they make their way into many of his canvases to this day.

BUT FOR THE YOUNG ARTIST, THE LARGER WORLD was also calling. In 1987, Situ first moved to Los Angeles and eventually Canada where it was easier to live and work in terms of visas. He settled in Vancouver and during summers earned his keep painting tourist portraits for twenty dollars Canadian in the city's Stanley Park (What a missed opportunity for those of us who never strolled through Stanley Park and sat for a portrait on one of those summer days!) saving the rest of the year to paint his then specialty, scenes of the traditional Chinese rural life. Eventually he

moved to Toronto for better access to good galleries, and it was here that one day Situ happened to read about the **Oil Painters of America's 1995 National Juried Exhibition** to be held at **Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art** in San Antonio, Texas. On a whim he submitted a painting and won Best of Show, and as they say, the rest is history.

Soon he was selling more paintings in the United States than in Canada. Consequently, in 1998, Situ with his wife, **Helen**, whom he met in Vancouver in 1991 and who was a former ping pong champion in China, and daughter, **Lisa**, moved to Los Angeles where more opportunities awaited.

In 2000, **John Geraghty**, a noted collector of Western art and a founding member of the prestigious *Masters of the American West Fine Art Exhibition and Sale* at **The Autry National Center** in Los Angeles, invited Situ to participate at the 2001 exhibit. To fit with the ongoing



Street Merchants of Chinatown, San Francisco, 1904

Oil on canvas 48" × 72"

Private collection

Western theme of this event, Geraghty encouraged Situ to paint a scene from the Old West, one with an interesting twist, showing the role that Chinese immigrants played in developing the West.

Situ accepted the challenge and has since produced a series of magnificent canvases telling the story of the Chinese valiantly arriving at our shores, working in the goldfields, building the railroads, becoming successful entrepreneurs by opening shops in the West's young cities, and even launching the fishing industry of Monterey. For such scenes, Situ meticulously researches his subject matter, pouring through early records, travelling to historic locales, and supervising the making of historic costumes for his models. These canvases have collectors willing to pay upwards of half a million dollars.

Situ's return to Los Angeles also led to another vital connection that he generously points out has influenced his painting over the past few years—his membership in the **California Art Club**, which he joined in 1999. "When you come to a new environment," explains Situ, "your work will change by seeing what other artists are doing, even if you're not aware of their influence. American artists have a very different technique from Chinese artists. Their colour for instance, the weak part of Chinese art, is brilliant and bright. And impressionistic paintings of southern California are so full of sunshine. I also like that you can see all the way to the horizon in these landscapes. I learned to paint in a studio, indoors, with no direct sunshine and with limited space. The wall was as far as my eye could go, to the back of the still-life!"

And he continues, "California Art Club artists are so good at colour and atmosphere. I remember watching them paint at the Club's **San Juan Capistrano** paint-outs and learning from them." About fellow CAC artists he says, "**Peter Adams** is so good at combining green with orange and red which is very difficult to do in one painting. Peter's colours work together so well. And **Dan Pinkham's** form is so simple and his colour looks simple too, but when you stand in front of one of his paintings, the longer you look, the more you see. This is painting for painting's sake. His paintings don't need a story. The colour speaks. The composition speaks. And I've also learned from **Jeremy Lipking**. He sees fine features on the face, and lines and edges and shapes in the body that I haven't seen before. This inspires me to look at the real person again." And Situ, always the student, adds, "I see new things sometimes through other artists' eyes. I feel maybe I make progress every day, maybe not. But if I think I can still learn, that makes me so happy!"

Situ also now regularly incorporates landscape into his paintings, again crediting his association with the many CAC landscape artists for this shift in his subject matter. "I still always paint figures in these scenes because that is what I



Yunnan Market
Oil on canvas 38" × 52"
Private collection



The Intruder, Angel's Camp, California, 1849
Oil on canvas 44" × 72"
Private collection

was trained to do," Situ explains, "but the landscape setting I place them in helps me tell their story. Now I realize I have to show both. For my new painting, *Point Alones Fishing Village, Monterey, California, 1875*, I painted the Monterey shoreline as it was at that time."

The year 2000 was a banner year for Situ. His 24" × 20" painting, *A Quiet Day*, received the artists' choice for the Gold Medal Award at the 90th Annual Gold Medal Juried Exhibition of the California Art Club, the Judge's Choice Award and the Purchase Award at the **Arts for the Parks** competition, and Best of Show at the **Carmel Art Festival**. Then in 2002, at the acclaimed *Masters of the American West Fine Art Exhibition and Sale* at the Autry National Center, Situ was given the remarkable honour of garnering the Museum Purchase Award and the Thomas Moran Memorial Award for Artistic Merit,

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as well as the Patron's Choice Award. And to the present, Situ continues to consistently win major awards.

Although Situ has great technical proficiency, how he judges the success of a painting is not based on draughtsmanship and the like. Situ contends that a painting must tell a story and that story must emotionally move the artist and then, the viewer. An ordinary street scene has no appeal while a view of scurrying Chinese on San Francisco's streets, as the city burns in the days after the great earthquake is material for meaningful art. For Situ, the colour in the most famous paintings by **Jean-Francois Millet (1814-1875)** can seem muddy and the drawing in the masterpieces of **Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890)** may not be accurate, but he still sees these paintings as successful because they convincingly convey

emotions. As Situ says, "An artist must paint from the heart and this is what earns them a place in history." By this standard alone, Mian Situ has already become a part of California and American art history. ☒

Notes:

*Contributing Editor **Molly Siple** studied painting and art history at the **University of California at Berkeley**, and is an Artist member of the **California Art Club**. She has also taken formal training from master artists **Shuqiao Zhou** and **Jove Wang**. Ms. Siple is a regular contributor to **American Artist** and **Workshop** magazines. In addition, she co-authored, along with **Jean Stern** and **Roy Rose**, the book, *Enchanted Isle, A History of Plein Air Painting in Santa Catalina Island*, as well as the soon to be released **Rizzoli International** publication, *California Light, A Century of Landscapes; Paintings of the California Art Club*.*