Emerging from the Shadows

Foreword The Visual Arts and Asian American History

Gordon H. Chang

Asian American art history, not to speak of work by contemporary Asian Americans, is being recovered from the shadows of neglect. Art produced by Asian Americans years ago is now gracing the covers of important new books.[1] Several major studies about the artistic production by Asian Americans in the past and present have appeared.[2] Historical exhibitions of work by Asian American artists also are now occurring regularly. Even though much of this work was created decades ago, the public has just rediscovered it and is beginning to give it due appreciation. The artwork has waited patiently to be seen again—it has been largely invisible before the public's very eyes for years.

Why has this treasure been outside our vision?

Both art historians and social historians might address this interesting question. I am not in a position to discuss at length the reasons that mainstream art criticism neglected to study Asian American artists, other than to state perhaps the obvious, which is that the history of Asian Americans, like that of other marginalized racial groups, commanded little respect from any quarter of mainstream America. Although Asian Americans had been the objects of considerable popular and scholarly attention and speculation since their first arrival in the United States in large numbers in the mid-nineteenth century, sustained scholarship that seriously studied their lived experiences or their life as creative communities is a relatively recent development. This new attitude is a direct result of the rise of what is known popularly as "ethnic studies." Today, the study of "Asian American history" is a vigorous and growing field of investigation.

But the past scholarly neglect of Asian American art history does raise important questions of how and who determines what is "art" and who is an "artist" worth studying. These and many other questions related to art criticism, it seems to me, form a potentially large and rich area for discussion. A good number of Asian American artists in this volume received great acclaim, won prizes, and were commercial successes during their active careers, but they fell into oblivion over the years. For some, art critics and art historians never could quite understand how to label or characterize their work: Were the artists Americans, Asians, or some other sort of animal? Was their

Kyohei Inukai, *Self-Portrait*, 1918 (detail, p. 489).

artwork American, Japanese, Chinese, or something else? Oriental? Eastern?

Isamu Noguchi, arguably the most famous artist of Asian ancestry in America, is now widely celebrated. But during his lifetime, critics often didn't know how to refer to him. Even though he was born in the United States and spent most of his professional career here, critics often described him as Japanese, sometimes using epithets. New York critic Henry McBride dismissed him in 1935 as "wily" and predicted he would not amount to much in the public's eyes: "once an Oriental always an Oriental," he pronounced.[3] Dong Kingman, one of the most popular mid-twentieth-century artists in America, could not escape racial caricature, even when praised. "Bouncy, buck-toothed little Dong Kingman" was how *Time* magazine celebrated him in its pages in the 1940s.[4] Virtually all the other artists discussed in this volume suffered similar treatment during their careers. (One of the most bizarre may be the apparent caricature of famed painter Yasuo Kuniyoshi at the hands of author Truman Capote and film director Blake Edwards, who include a Japanese American artist, a Mr. I. Y. Yunioshi, in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Mickey Rooney's yellow-face portrayal of an obnoxious buffoon is one of the most racially repugnant in modern film history.) Aesthetic judgment in America was never race-free but was always racially constrained. Viewers could rarely free themselves from the assumption that art produced by persons who looked "Asian" somehow had to express something "Asian." Mainstream spectators assumed that racial or immutable cultural sensibilities indelibly marked artistic production. For many past observers, conscious or not, art was the trans-historical, transcendent materialization of race.

Kingman once commented on the confused and quixotic reaction to his art: "Western painters call me Chinese. Chinese painters say I'm very Western. I would say I'm in the middle." He also once observed, "Everyone writes that my work is half East and half West, that I'm in between." He himself wasn't quite sure what to think about this perceived "in-betweenness." "I don't know," he said. "I just want to be myself."[5]

But of course, Kingman and other Asian Americans could never be just themselves, unmarked by race, in America. Kingman in many ways endured the same ambiguities and challenges that Asians historically faced in the United States: not until 1965 did Congress lift the last of the immigration laws that overtly discriminated against Asians. The United States had deemed Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, and South Asians "aliens ineligible to citizenship" for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They could not become naturalized citizens. Dominant society marginalized Asians and believed it virtually impossible for them to become acceptable members of American life. Similarly, art produced by them was rarely considered "American." At best, their art was constantly subjected to the trope of being a bridge between "Eastern" and "Western" art. Though often said in a complimentary way, the evaluation still assumed that the mainstream of American art was, as America itself, entirely Europe-derived. At worst, they were simply dismissed or not taken seriously, as they were not European American.

Also necessary to note is that prevailing trends in art criticism influenced the way past art was viewed at a particular moment in time. The fascination with modern abstraction and nonrepresentational art, especially after World War II, turned public eyes away from art that appeared to have social messages or overt ethnic connections. Art produced by Asian Americans, other racial minorities, and women in America that displayed such markers now appeared nonmodern and was eclipsed by the interest in abstraction. Art that reflected the quandary of exile (such as that suffered by Chinese diasporic artists—Wang Ya-chen, Chang Shu-chi, and Chang Dai-chien, for example—in the mid-twentieth century), displacement (such as that experienced by

artists who worked in the United States during the height of racial antagonism, such as Yun Gee or Chiura Obata), and persecution (the Japanese artists who suffered internment, Eitaro Ishigaki and others, hounded because of their political beliefs) fell out of fashion. Painting techniques that appealed to abstract painters, such as calligraphy in the post–World War II period, interested some in America precisely because they could be used to pursue abstract, modernist purposes.

But one must also ask, why have historians dedicated to studying the Asian American past themselves neglected to appreciate the importance of art in Asian American lives? The historical work that Asian Americanists produced before the 1990s contains virtually no mention of Asian American art, the personal identities or experiences of any Asian American artists, or any sense of the place of art in the everyday lives of Asian Americans.

One might offer several explanations for this lacuna. For one, there is the historical circumstance of the emergence of Asian American studies. From its birth, this field of study was closely connected to the development of heightened racial and ethnic identity and self-assertion in America, and Asian American historians in the main attempted to reconstruct the broad outlines of this history to serve that political/ideological purpose. What is more, much of the early historical writing reflected an overriding interest in social history and in history viewed from the perspective of "from the bottom up." Evidence of mass political and social resistance to racial discrimination, laboring experiences, and social marginalization in America was given special place. Individuals, and certainly intellectuals, attracted less attention.

Art and art history, when it was considered, was often viewed as an elite, even elitist, realm, one that did not touch the lives of, and was irrelevant to, the laboring masses, the subject of much early Asian American historical imagination. Historians were interested in writing history that could help "claim America" for Asian Americans, that is, to show that Asian American experiences were an integral part of the social and political fabric of the country. They also hoped to help "claim Americanness" for Asian Americans, to assert that Asian Americans were as much American as others in the country. Asian Americanists hoped to end the stigma of perpetual foreignness placed upon people of Asian ancestry. One consequence of this effort was to downplay the transnational connections of Asian Americans and, somewhat ironically, the heritages from their lands of ancestry. Artists whose work may have displayed influences from East Asian art therefore fit less comfortably in the historical project.

But it may also simply be that Asian American art eluded attention because it is an especially challenging subject. The language of art and its interpretation (styles, themes, aims, and audiences, if one thinks of art as a "text") among Asian Americans is not easily approached. The artwork itself posed difficult questions, such as: Was it really possible to locate and define a body of art that might be called "Japanese American," "Chinese American," or even "Asian American"? How would one understand the relationship of these productions to "American art" or to "East Asian art"? Could one use established analytical tools and critical vocabulary to understand this art, or would new categories and approaches be needed? And, most of all, what "relevance" did all of this have to understanding Asian American lives in the past?

In recent years, there has been much greater understanding of the complexity of social identity in a highly racialized society. These days, the new recognition that identities are often multiple, contextual, hybrid, shifting, transnational, or unstable enables us to better appreciate the circumstances of Asian Americans past and present, including artistic production and intellectual work in general.[6] Such understanding helps us break the reification of categories such as "American" or "Eastern" art that

had been constructed over many years. In addition, scholars are moving beyond the laboring masses to view other social classes among Asian Americans.[7]

One might consider the study of Asian American literature in thinking about the emerging possibilities in Asian American art history. The examination of Asian American literature began simultaneously with that of the historical project. Like history, literary study was a way to understand identities, past and present, and as a way to reclaim voices that, like Asian American historical experiences themselves, had been marginalized or even buried by the dominant society. Asian American literature seemed to be an approachable subject: it is, as has been studied, a body of texts created by people of Asian ancestry living in America writing primarily in English. The characters, contexts, and issues in this literature also tend to be clearly related to America-based experiences. The dominant concern, at least as has been interpreted to this point, is the place of the Asian in American life and her or his understanding of America. Literary scholars could engage the formal and historical qualities of these English-language literatures directly; at the same time, they relatively quickly established a discourse of interpretation that engaged older Asian American work, and American literatures more broadly, with contemporary Asian American expression. The potential to do the same was not as clear in the visual arts. In fact, to many, Asian American visual arts in the 1970s and 1980s appeared detached from any ethnic inspiration or model from the past.

What might be the value of art history to historians of the Asian American experience?

To begin with, it appears that art and artists in fact occupied a very important position in the everyday lives of many Asian Americans. The number of Asian American artists alone is impressive. The biographical survey that appears later in this volume covers 159 artists in California, just a portion of the more than 1,000 artists documented in that state alone. This survey comprises the most extensive historical study of *any* occupational or professional group of Asian Americans. This recovery of hundreds of identities will become the starting point of countless numbers of future projects in a wide variety of disciplines and interests.

One might even argue that the visual arts were a uniquely attractive and important avenue of expression for creative Asian Americans in the past. This may have been so for a variety of reasons: ancestral traditions that highly valued visual arts; freedom from the demands of English fluency that writers faced; and mainstream interest in Asian aesthetics (Asian American artists were seen as embodying an "Oriental" talent) all may help account for the relatively large number of Asian American artists.

And apart from the artists themselves, the prominent place that the visual arts occupied in the daily lives of many Asian Americans is striking. Art production, its display in the home and community, its enjoyment in individual and in organized ways, and its celebration were all highly popular activities in Asian American communities ever since their arrival in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. For example, Yamato Ichihashi, a Stanford history professor who studied Japanese Americans, once claimed when he was in a World War II internment camp that the Japanese were the most artistically inclined people in the world. His comment, though certainly chauvinist, did in fact highlight the special place that the display and appreciation of the arts occupied among Japanese Americans. His internment camp diary is filled with references to and descriptions of art classes and exhibitions. During incarceration, he himself spent many hours with a painter friend.[8] Important Asian American cultural figures such as Younghill Kang, Mine Okubo, Jade Snow Wong, and Chiang Yee are known mainly for their published writing, but they devoted as much or even more of their lives to art. In rereading local histories and old accounts of Chinese Americans, one is

struck by the frequent mentions, brief and undeveloped as they usually are, of painting and the arts in community activities.[9]

Can one even go so far as to suggest that, given the number and productivity of Asian American artists, the special place accorded art by many people of Asian descent, and the connections of these artists with the general American art world (unacknowledged as they have been), the visual arts are an especially rich site for study of Asian American experiences? As a site of cultural and social expression, might visual art even be considered for Asian Americans akin in importance to the central place that music occupies in the African American experience? Might it be that Asian Americans have made special and unique contributions to the visual arts?

A number of other areas of study of Asian American life may benefit from a greater appreciation of the visual arts:

THE ARTWORK AND CAREERS of the artists themselves offer fresh material to enlarge our understanding of Asian American social and intellectual history. If we understand this art as social as well as personal expression, it can help us gain insights into a wide variety of subjects, such as identity formation and projection, felt experience, perceptions of racial and ethnic identity and place, the texture of daily life, and intellectual and personal interaction with other communities, both white and minority.

ART HISTORY CAN LEAD to greater understanding of the internal organizational and institutional dynamics of Asian American communities, especially art clubs and societies, festivals, and even commerce (the ubiquitous art and curio stores, and galleries) and the business of art.

ART, IN ITS MANY FORMS, often played an important role in the daily lives of Asian Americans. Art, for many, was not something distant or only for the "privileged" but was an important and integral element in the home, family, and community. This recognition helps us begin to recover a sense of the actual lived experience of Asian American lives.

ART MAY LEAD US to better understand the forms of political expression. Some artists were thoroughly apolitical and detached from social activism, but a great many of the artists mentioned in this volume were profoundly affected by contemporary social movements and participated as artist activists. Asian American artists such as Yasuo Kuniyoshi and Yun Gee strongly opposed Japanese aggression in Asia during the 1930s and 1940s. Eitaro Ishigaki and Isamu Noguchi used their art to protest American racism. In the 1960s and 1970s, Lewis Suzuki, Nanying Stella Wong, Mitsu Yashima, and, of course, many younger Asian American artists used their creative talents to oppose the Vietnam War.

ASIAN AMERICAN ART OFFERS the exciting possibility of viewing the *familiar*, such as places, people, and life experiences, in *unfamiliar* ways, of seeing America with "new eyes." Chiura Obata's *Setting Sun: Sacramento Valley* (see Mark Johnson's essay, fig. 10) and Chang Dai-chien's vision of Yosemite, *Autumn Mountains in Twilight* (see page xiv), offer fresh perspectives on the American landscape. We might gain new ways of understanding how others in the past have viewed traditional themes such as the "West," man and nature, the city, and, of course, race. Asian American art also might reveal the *unfamiliar* (at least for many other Americans), such as the internment experience or the attachment to heritage prompted by exile and social alienation.

THIS ARTWORK ALSO ENCOURAGES us to think about the many ways that cultural influences from Asia have influenced America. T'eng K'uei (Teng Baiye) came from China in 1924, studied art at the University of Washington in Seattle, did graduate work at

Portrait of T'eng K'uei with dedication to Mark Tobey, 1926.

Harvard University, then returned to China in 1931. While living in the Seattle area, he became friends with Mark Tobey and gave Tobey early lessons in Chinese brushwork. One of the great influences on Tobey's own work was a trip to China and Japan in 1934, during which time he visited T'eng K'uei in Shanghai and attended lectures and classes with his friend. How have artists such as T'eng K'uei been creative agents of this influence? How did they actively explore aesthetic interaction? In what ways have Asian American artists themselves been cultural translators, transmitters, or interpreters?

Chang Dai-chien, *Autumn Mountains in Twilight*, 1967. Mineral pigments and ink on paper, 75⅝ × 40¾ in.

THE WAYS THAT DOMINANT SOCIETY received and understood Asian American artists may lead to new ways of understanding the dynamics of race and racial ideologies in America.

* * *

ALL IN ALL, REGARDLESS OF whatever importance Asian American art may have for the future understanding of history, these newfound artifacts from the past, these wonderful creative expressions, can now be enjoyed once again as their creators had intended: as works of emotion, of beauty, of protest, of intellectual engagement, or deeply personal sentiment. These works of art can speak to us across the divide of time. There is no Asian American aesthetic to which a work must adhere to be appreciated.[10] Exactly how we will view these works will depend on how receptive we are to challenges to our assumptions about "American art," "modern art," "Asian art," and even about Asian Americans themselves.

Notes

The author thanks Mark Johnson, Valerie Matsumoto, and Sharon Spain for their help with this foreword.

1 A photograph from San Francisco Chinatown's May's Photo Studio is on the dust jacket for Yong Chen, *Chinese San Francisco, 1850–1943: A Trans-Pacific Community* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000); a painting by Jade Fon Woo is on the front of Lon Kurashige and Alice Yang Murray, eds., *Major Problems in Asian American History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003); a Jack Chikamichi Yamasaki painting is reproduced on Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); and a Henry Sugimoto painting is reproduced for Brian Masaru Hayashi, *Democratizing the Enemy: The Japanese American Internment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

2 For multi-artist studies, see, for example, Deborah Gesensway and Mindy Roseman, *Beyond Words: Images from America's Concentration Camps* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Michael D. Brown, *Views from Asian California, 1920–1965* (San Francisco: Michael D. Brown, 1992); Alice Yang, *Why Asia? Contemporary Asian and Asian American Art* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Margo Machida et al., *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian American Art* (New York: The Asia Society Galleries, 1994); Amy Ling, ed., *Yellow Light: The Flowering of Asian American Arts* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Elaine H. Kim (with Margo Machida and Sharon Mizota), *Fresh Talk/Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003); Jeffrey Wechsler, ed., *Asian Traditions/Modern Expressions: Asian American Artists and Abstraction, 1945–1970* (New York: Abrams in association with the Jane Vorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, 1997); Irene Poon, *Leading the Way: Asian American Artists of the Older Generation* (Wenham, MA: Gordon College, 2001); and Karin M. Higa, *The View from Within: Japanese American Art from the Internment Camps, 1942–1945* (Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum, 1992). Studies on individual artists are also increasing.

3 Quoted in Masayo Duus, *The Life of Isamu Noguchi: Journey Without Borders*, trans. Peter Duus (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 151–152.

4 "Dashing Realist," *Time* 46, no. 10 (September 3, 1945).

5 Quoted in Leonard Slater, "Sight and Sound," *McCall's*, September 1961, 12; and "Meeting of East & West," *Time* 53, no. 16 (April 18, 1949).

6 See, for example, the essays in Wanni W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee, eds., *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005); Lane Ryo Hirabayashi et al., eds., *New World, New Lives: Globalization and People of Japanese Descent in the Americas and from Latin America in Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); and David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). An example of an emerging trans-Pacific intellectual history is August Fauni Esperitu, *Five Faces of Exile: The Nation and Filipino American Intellectuals* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

7 Bert Winther-Tamaki, *Art in the Encounter of Nations: Japanese and American Artists in the Early Postwar Years* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001).

8 Gordon H. Chang, *Morning Glory, Evening Shadow: The Internment Writing of Yamato Ichihashi, 1942–1945* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). The painter was Ernest Kare Kuramatsu, who had lived in the Monterey Bay area of California.

9 See, for example, Lisa See, *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred-Year Odyssey of a Chinese-American Family* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995). Also see photographs of building interiors reproduced in Arthur Bonner, *Alas! What Brought Thee Hither? The Chinese in New York, 1800–1950* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997); and Marie Rose Wong, *Sweet Cakes, Long Journey: The Chinatowns of Portland, Oregon* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004).

10 For a contemporary discussion, see "Is There an Asian American Aesthetics," chapter 30 in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, eds. Min Zhou and James V. Gatewood (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 627–635.