

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

FORTY-SIXTH CONGREGATION

Conferment of the Degree of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*

*A Citation*

**Mr Zao Wou-ki**

Ever since the time of Montesquieu when, according to Jonathan Spence, a young Chinese librarian worked in Paris for King Louis XIV, the French capital has been a kind of spiritual Mecca and haven to Chinese intellectuals and artists seeking stimulation, inspiration, or simply an alternative life style. Few, however, have gained the reputation and received the adulation accorded the émigré painter Zao Wou-ki. Zao's singular success is due less to the French predisposition towards artists than to his own outstanding qualities as an intellectual and painter.

Zao Wou-ki was born in 1921 into a scholar gentry family whose ancestry can be traced to emperors of the Sung Dynasty. The family had a rich and extensive collection of classical paintings through the ages and Zao's grandfather was an amateur painter of some repute who had won a painting competition in far off Panama. His father was a banker but did not discourage Zao junior's ambition to attend art college instead of following education of a more traditional kind. Zao's uncle also encouraged his artistic inclination by bringing him postcards of French paintings from Paris. His mother was not amused when young Wou-ki started to colour her 17th century porcelain collection with paints and inks, to try to improve them, or so he said. She was very relieved, therefore, when, at the age of 14, Zao Wou-ki enrolled in the National School of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. He could now paint on canvas and rice paper instead of on her precious ceramics. In Hangzhou, Zao Wou-ki took lessons in Chinese painting, calligraphy and Western art. Just as the glistening sunlight on shimmering water in the South of France has been the inspiration of many French painters, so the gathering mist overhanging the ageless mountains and the West Lake of Hangzhou has nurtured the creative genius of many Chinese artists, among them Zao Wou-ki.

His first love was Western style oil-painting, not Chinese art which at the time seemed to him strongly derivative and suffocatingly formal. His apprenticeship completed, the young Zao Wou-ki held his first exhibition in Chungking in 1941. His father bought his first painting. It was just as well that he did, because Zao Wou-ki needed the money to pay for the rental of the exhibition hall. After that, Zao the young painter, now a professional,

started teaching at the school from which he had graduated. Seven years later, the lure of Paris became irresistible to one who was an ardent admirer of the Impressionist school of painting, and Zao Wou-ki boarded a steamer in Shanghai and headed for France. He arrived in Paris on April Fool's Day and, as legend would have it, promptly disappeared into the Louvre to see for himself the actual paintings which he had first seen on his uncle's postcards.

As Andre Malraux observed in *Musée imaginaire*, our era is the first to be confronted with the art of all time and all continents, and the confrontation takes place daily in the Louvre and other French museums. Zao relished the experience and thrived on it. He travelled extensively around Europe and immersed himself in the culture of the occident with almost total abandon. Martine Contensou wrote, in her piece on Zao Wou-ki entitled *Life into Work*, that at this point in his career "he developed a passion for the nude", which was of course not unreasonable. But that was not all. The Chinese painter was also turning his attention to European landscapes, Western taste and theories of art and radically different approaches to painting. The transformation of Zao Wou-ki was immediate and refreshing. His flowing oriental lines and strokes, combined with occidental colours and structures, made his paintings unique and extremely appealing. He won the first prize in a sketch competition in 1949 and held his first exhibition in Paris at the Galerie Creuze in the same year. His reputation began to spread and he made many friends in the French intellectual and artistic community, especially among some of the leading exponents of the Lyrical-Abstract Movement.

Art historians are fond of classifying artists' works into periods such as the Blue Period and the Greek Period of Picasso. And so, Zao Wou-ki's work from 1949 to 1954 or, to be more precise, before 1954 is often referred to as his Figurative Period. This was when his paintings still looked like the objects of the artist's attention. Of Zao's work during this period, which is best represented by *Arezzo*, *Piazza* and *Bateaux*, the art critic and historian Francois Cheng said,

"What stands out is the line, because the images have been reduced to their bare frame..... Lines flow across the landscape, directing the movement without restricting its energy, delimiting fields without closing them off. They give the landscapes an effect of lightness, as if they were ready at any moment to take flight (like boats at rest that still seem restless)."

The next period of his painting was very controversial to begin with as Zao Wou-ki abandoned his familiar light and airy style and threw himself, head first, into abstract

painting. Flat rectangular strokes appeared and took over from the refined, round strokes of earlier paintings; signs replaced pictures; and finally, from 1958 onward, completion dates served as names of paintings. Few recognized it at the time, but today this dramatic change on the part of the artist is generally regarded as his attempt to fuse the two great cultural and artistic traditions of the East and the West, one Chinese, the other European.

The first reaction of the public was disappointing - his dealer Galerie Pierre failed to sell any painting by Zao Wou-ki for two years. But Zao persisted until, with the painting of *Homage to Edgar Varèse* in 1964 and *Nous deux encore* in 1972, the greatness of the artist and his art was finally recognized. From 1972, his reputation in the Western art world assured, Zao Wou-ki would return to his roots and experiment, once again, with Chinese wash drawing and, in the words of the art critic Daniel Abadie, "placed it face-to-face with the modern language it had failed to create for itself." Abadie went on to say that Zao Wou-ki's wash drawings were "not a pastime secondary to the main body of his painting, but its culmination." Francois Cheng goes further. In praising Zao Wou-ki and his art, Cheng has written,

"A long period of waiting seems to come to an end. Chinese painting had been waiting for more than a century; now for the first time a new symbiosis is achieved, one that always seemed destined to occur between China and the West."

Thanks to Zao Wou-ki, the hundred years of solitude and waiting in the Chinese art world was over in the 1970's. A new era of fusion, fission and frenetic creativity had begun. His pioneering role in all this was quickly and universally recognized. In 1981, Paris, the city of his choosing, paid homage to him with an exhibition of his work at the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais. In 1983, China, the country of his birth, mounted a similar exhibition at the Fine Arts Museum in Beijing. Two years later his professional life came full circle when he was invited to serve as honorary professor at the National School of Fine Arts in Hangzhou. This is the school where he had studied as a teenager and where the portrait of the artist as a young man first took shape.

Today Zao Wou-ki's paintings and wash drawings grace many galleries, exhibition halls, and private collections around the world. There have been more than 160 exhibitions. His works hang on the walls of the Tate Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Guggenheim Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Art, the Musee National d'Art Moderne in Paris and another forty-five or so museums and art galleries in all six continents. His first biography appeared as early as 1957 and since then he has been a subject of serious academic study in no less than twenty publications and almost as many languages.

Mr. Chancellor, for his work as an artist, painter and innovator *par excellence*, for his attempt to fuse the two great artistic traditions - European and Chinese - for the boldness of his strokes and the delicacy of his mind, for his effort in achieving art "without bounds" as his Chinese name suggests, I present Zao Wou-ki for the award of Doctor of Literature, *honoris causa*.

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