CHU TEH-CHUN (Zhu Dequn, 1920–2014) spent most of his career in Paris, but never relinquished his Chinese heritage, writing of his painting:

"With the Western colour relationships and abstract lines of calligraphy, I hope to mould a new style of abstract painting: one that expresses the ineffable qualities of classical Chinese poetry and abstract conceptions that can only be felt."\(^1\)

Tagged with labels and categories, Chu Teh-Chun is called, variously, a master of Lyrical Abstraction, Metaphysical Landscape, Abstract Expressionism and the "extra-figurative".\(^2\) He was all of those things, but the individual perception he constantly sought to express overrules classification.

Chu Teh-Chun was born in the town of Baitu, Xiao County, then in Jiangsu province, but since 1950, part of Anhui. His father and grandfather were doctors, but also collectors of Chinese art, so Chu Teh-Chun’s experience and appreciation of traditional culture started young. He was tall and athletic, and hoped to play basketball, but was persuaded against such a career by his family. In 1935, he entered the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou.\(^3\) Lin Fengmian (1900–1991) was the first principal of the Academy. Lin, Wu Dayu (1903–1988) and Fang Ganmin
(1906–1984), who had been among the first wave of Chinese artists to study in Paris during the early 1920s, taught Western art in those years. Traditional artist Pan Tianshou (1897–1971) taught Chinese art. When required to choose one stream or the other, Chu Teh-Chun chose Western painting.

Zao Wou-ki (Zhao Wuji, 1921–1947) also entered the Academy in 1935. That same year, Chu Teh-Chun met an engineering student named Wu Guanzhong and introduced him to painting. In 1936, against his family’s wishes, Wu also began studying at the Academy. He always maintained that without Chu Teh-Chun, there would have been no Wu Guanzhong (1919–2010). Chu, Zao and Wu were dubbed the “Three Musketeers” of modernist Chinese art. Zao Wou-ki moved to Paris in 1948 and spent the rest of his career there. Wu Guanzhong went to Paris in 1947, but returned to China in 1950, where he lived most of his life. The “Three Musketeers” would not all be together again for fifty years.

During the Sino-Japan War (1937–1945), the Academy moved inland, settling in Chongqing, Sichuan. In 1941, Chu graduated and was named assistant professor of the Academy. In 1944, he became Professor of Architecture at the National Central University of Nanjing, which had also moved to Chongqing in wartime. Chu Teh-Chun made propaganda posters and painted anti-Japanese murals. He made studies of Sichuan horses and, in Yunnan, of daily life in the Miao minority areas. Sadly, none of this work survives. Travelling to Nanjing after the war, he was amazed by the Yangzi River gorges and began to explore the relationship between nature and painting. Back home, he married Liu Hanfu. They left Nanjing for Taipei, arriving in December 1948, where their daughter was born the following year. Before leaving China, Chu entrusted his

2 Chu Teh-Chun. La Mer, 1954, oil on canvas, 45 x 53 cm. After Rémy, 2006, p. 53

1 Quoted in Christie’s Hong Kong catalogue, Asian 20th Century Art, November 26th, 2017.
3 Founded in 1928 under the auspices of Cai Yuanpei (1868–1940), the Academy was China’s first art university and graduate school. Originally called the National Academy of Art, its name changed six different times over the following decades. Relocated several times during the Sino-Japan War, it was re-established in Hangzhou in 1945 under Pan Tianshou. Since 1993, it has been called the China National Academy of Fine Arts, or the China Academy of Art for short.

3 Chu Teh-Chun. Amours Océanes, 1964, oil on canvas, 81 x 54 cm. After Amours Océanes, 2015, pp. 14–15
paintings and drawings with a friend, but never recovered them.¹

In Taipei, Chu taught first at the School of Industry, then in the Fine Arts Department at the National Taiwan Normal University.² His earliest surviving works are from the Taiwan years and clearly reflect the influence of the European artists he had studied: Picasso, Matisse and, above all, Cezanne, whose style and structural representation of nature are immediately recognisable in a 1933 French scene of figures in landscape (1). However, Chu's Chinese cultural home is evident from the title—Mount of Eight Immortals. A representational seascape of 1954 prefigures the spatial divisions of later marine works, although the horizon shifts to the centre in the increasingly abstract seascapes of later decades (2, 3). His early figural themes include the "History of China since Sun Yat-sen's Revolution of 1911", commissioned by the National Museum of History of Taiwan, which is still in its collection.

Chu Teh-Chun was determined to work in Paris, a creative hotbed of post-war art (the other was New York). In March 1955, he sailed for Europe, travelling by way of Hong Kong, Vietnam, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Egypt, disembarking at Marseilles in May. On the boat with him was Tung Ching-Chao, one of his students in Taiwan. They went on to Paris, which he called home for the rest of his life (4).⁵ They married in 1960 and had two sons.

Many works survive from Chu's early years in Paris. A range of female nudes in ink, pencil or sanguine (red chalk) demonstrate his study of Picasso and Matisse. These 1955–1956 drawings are mostly signed "Chu Tehchun" or "Chu Tehchun à Paris"; only a few were signed in both Chinese and French at that time. Other representational paintings from 1955 are Paris street scenes or still lifes: Still Life with Grapes is a vivid ensemble whose composition presages the colour blocks of Chu's future abstractions (5, 6); and Rue de Mouffetard à Paris, also dated 1955, shows each building as a colour block, the lines and patterns emergent in later works.⁶ In 1956, Chu painted a classical portrait of Ching-Chao, which won the silver medal in the next competition of the Salon of French Artists (7). Other portraits made in 1956 were to be his last realistic figural works.

Chu's life and art were changed forever that same year by a retrospective exhibition celebrating Nicolas de Staël (1914–1955), the French abstract painter. De Staël's family fled the Russian Revolution for Poland; he then went to study art in Belgium. He settled finally in Paris in 1943, where his paintings grew less figurative and more abstract expressionist, using flat blocks of colour in startling landscapes with simplified, but recognisable, forms. In works like Paysage Méditerranée (1954), it is easy to see the profound impact he had on Chu Teh-Chun.

⁵ Chu Teh-Chun, Still Life with Grapes, 1955, oil on canvas, 26 x 57 cm. After Rémy, 2006, p. 54.
Chu’s work at this time also shows a powerful sympathy—philosophically and artistically—with Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), the Russian-born Abstract Expressionist who worked in Munich, where he co-founded Der Blaue Reiter (the Blue Rider, 1911–1914). Kandinsky believed that abstract forms and colours express the artist’s inner life; Chu Teh-Chun’s abstraction, as quoted above, combined colour with calligraphic line to express what “can only be felt”. Kandinsky’s notions of colour and form would surely have been known to Chu Teh-Chun. An early example of his move away from the figurative to the abstract

5NTNU. Originally founded under the Japanese as Taïwan Provincial College, it was reorganised by the Kuomintang in 1946 as Taiwan Provincial Teacher’s College. It has been known by its present name since 1967. Many of Taiwan’s best-known artists studied or taught there, including Pu Ru (Pu Xinyu, 1896–1963, cousin to China’s last emperor, Pu Yi), who taught contemporaneously with Chu Teh-Chun.
6Chu became a French citizen in 1980.

7 Chu Teh-Chun, Portrait de Ching-Chao, 1956, oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm. After Rémy, 2006, p. 59.
is Heavy Red and Light Green (1959), painted with intense, flat colour and geometric, rather than calligraphic, lines (8). The dominant forms are triangular, the shape Kandinsky used to represent the life of the spirit. (8)

During the 1960s, Chu moved away from geometry toward landscape, painting the mountains he loved. Three examples illustrate the development of forms and depth in Chu’s work. The 1965 work, Composition No. 195, is flat and frontal, with a strong central focus and features formed in intense colour blocks (9). The mountains in the distance tell us that this is a landscape. Composition en Rouge, from 1969, moves closer to recognisable nature, mountains defined by brushstrokes, and depth realised by the contrast of white against red and other colour spaces (10).

Another canvas from the same year uses even more white for depth, with powerful and varied brushwork for delineation of the mountains (11). In this painting, the admixture of ideas in his work becomes apparent. Kandinsky famously said: “Lend your ears to music, open your eyes to painting... Just ask yourself whether the work has enabled you to ‘walk about’ into a hitherto unknown world. If the answer is yes, what more do you want?” This sounds very much like a modern version of Guo Xi’s dictum: “You must choose a subject that can be wandered about and lived in.” (9) The stunning scene in Composition No. 325 certainly invites you to wander through it, with Guo Xi’s prescribed distinction of near, level and deep distances, and a variety of natural forms to explore.

Chu Teh-Chun experienced another revelation on his first visit to Amsterdam in 1969, where he is said to have spent hours looking at Rembrandt’s 1642 masterpiece, The Night Watch. His works throughout the 1970s show the striking effects of light and shadow, contrast and balance, in compositions with greater depth. (11) A fine example from 1974 is Telluride, where light seems to appear from different angles (12). The painting is nearly 2 metres tall. The central vertical form is sectioned in different colours by long brushstrokes, with the varied rock and tree formations in the near distance. For this viewer, it immediately calls to mind Fan Kuan’s (circa 950–1032) monumental masterpiece, Travelers Among Mountains and Streams. Chu greatly admired Fan Kuan, and elaborated on his notions of learning from nature and the human heart to explain that “abstraction” had existed even in Fan Kuan’s time—painters just hadn’t called it that. (12)

Although best known for abstract oils on canvas, Chu Teh-Chun’s practice took varied forms in many mediums. He painted in ink, gouache and acrylic; he also made drawings, lithographs, engravings, ceramics and textile designs. A series of winter landscapes demonstrates the virtuosity of Chu’s practice. Travelling by train from Geneva to Paris in 1954, the artist was transfixed by a snowstorm in the Alps. Over the next five years, he created series of snowy abstractions in various mediums—each revealing unexpected effects.

The acrylic (13) and oil (15) were painted in 1985; the
lithograph, an artist’s proof, is undated (14). The acrylic is dominated by black and white, the snow dots and lines are bold and intense, and the composition’s forms spread across the painting. The lithograph’s composition is more focused, as in some of the earlier oils (10, 11), with colourful natural forms picked out in the centre and mountains in the distance. The big surprise is the oil painting: soft, subtle and luminous, more like a watercolour. This work illustrates one of Chu’s great innovations: the thinning and distilling of oils to make them transparent, producing the gorgeous colours and ink wash effects of many later works.13

Chu’s styles and ideas developed over the course of decades, as his works got larger, lighter, brighter, more spontaneous and more calligraphic. Crucial to these developments was his return to China in 1983, having been away for thirty-five years. He was invited to be an external examiner by the Fine Arts Department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, following which he travelled to Bei-

---


10 Music was important to both Kandinsky and Chu Teh-Chun. Kandinsky felt he was actually painting music. (“Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings.” Ibid., p. 27). Chu said he painted poetry to music.


12 He also absorbed the works of Goya and El Greco in his exploration of light and shadow.

13 Quoted in Ravenel, Spring Auction 2016, Hong Kong, catalogue note, Lot 25.

jing, Shaanxi and Datong, for the Yungang Caves. He felt profoundly reawakened by this journey—artistically inspired and deeply moved by the situation in China after the Cultural Revolution. He returned to Hong Kong in 1986, then to Taiwan in 1987, which, too, had changed enormously since his departure in 1955. Over the coming decades, he travelled throughout Asia, painting and participating in group and solo exhibitions.

Even before his first China sojourn, Chu began experimenting with plain ink or ink with colours on paper. These works clearly emerged from Chinese tradition, rather than the East-West synthesis of the abstract landscapes. A 1982 ink painting of flowers is a carefully controlled exercise in wet ink washes (16). Just two years later, in the example here, Chu’s composition is abstract, the splashed ink is dark and intense, and the lines are wildly calligraphic (17). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Chu created a great many ink paintings, often with flashes or dots of colour, exhibiting fantastic variations of line and brushstroke.

From the 1990s until his last working years, Chu Teh-Chun painted poetry in motion—that is, he copied his favourite classical texts, each with its own rhythm. Unlike his works in other mediums, which he signed in both French and Chinese, these are signed only in Chinese and are stamped with traditional seals. Chu’s style and energy have led these works to be compared with various eminent cal-

12 Chu Teh-Chun, Telluride, 1974, oil on canvas, 195 x 130 cm. Courtesy de Sarthe Gallery, Hong Kong
13 Chu Teh-Chun, Abstraction Neige I, 1985, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 50 x 68 cm. Courtesy Sotheby’s, Hong Kong

14 Chu Teh-Chun, Snowstorm, undated (AP), lithograph, 59.5 x 79.5 cm. Private collection

15 Chu Teh-Chun, Synthèse Hivernale, 1985, oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm. Courtesy Artcurial, Paris
16 Chu Teh-Chun, untitled, 1982, ink on paper, 33 x 33 cm. Private collection

17 Chu Teh-Chun, untitled, 1984, ink on paper, 34 x 46 cm. Private collection

18 Chu Teh-Chun, The Remembrance of Red Cliff, 1991, ink on paper, 65 x 100 cm. Courtesy Sotheby's, Hong Kong

19 Chu Teh-Chun, Homecoming, 1995, ink on paper, 80 x 240 cm. Courtesy Sotheby’s, Hong Kong
ligraphers from the Tang dynasty (618–907) to the Ming (1368–1644), but such comparisons seem irrelevant. The style is his own: the characters are wild, unevenly spaced and sized, practically illegible sometimes—but the whole is emotionally expressive and accessible, even to viewers without a word of Chinese. Chu greatly admired Su Shi (1036–1101), the Song dynasty (960–1279) poet-official, and in 1991, wrote out part of his great work, *The Remembrance of Red Cliff*, written at a time of personal hardship about the heroes of that ancient great battle (18). It looks like music.

The other calligraphy shown here, Tao Yuanming’s (Tao Qian, circa 365–436) *Homecoming*, is elegant and vast—nearly 2.5 metres wide (19). The prose poem recounts Tao’s decision to quit government service and retire at home. The lines in the early part of the text (right side) and the individual characters within each line are wild and varied, displaying Chu’s mastery of *kuangcao* (cursive calligraphy); the second half is downright restrained by comparison.

In the 1990s, Chu also expanded the practice of painting diptychs and ever-larger works. *Enlightening Thoughts*, a 1992 diptych is 2.6 metres wide and nearly 2 metres tall (20). The soft pinks and greys blend into each other, more like ink wash than oils.

Many works were much larger—sometimes 5 metres wide. Chu’s largest work—and, in his opinion, his best—was executed for the fifth anniversary of the Shanghai Grand Theatre in 2002–2003. An abstract landscape of intense blues and other glorious colour forms, it decorates a wall of the central lobby (21). It stands 7.3 metres long and 4.3 metres high. He painted it on scaffolding, listening all the while to Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony*.

Chu’s last protracted project was a residence at the Sèvres Porcelain Factory in 2007–2008, where he painted vases by hand in blue and white, highlighted with gold (22). Fifty-six of them were exhibited at the Musée Guimet—the first time a contemporary artist’s work was shown there.15

Chu suffered a stroke in 2009, and was thereafter unable to work. He passed away in 2014. In that year, to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between the People’s Republic of China and France, the de Sarthe Gallery presented an exhibition celebrating “Pioneers of Modern Chinese Painting in Paris”. This spectacular gathering included the works of the first generation

---

of pioneers, including Chu’s teachers, Lin Fengmian and Wu Dayu, but also the other “Musketeers”, Zao Wou-ki and Wu Guanzhong, each of whom had also recently died.

Zao Wou-ki had been in Paris since 1948, arriving seven years before Chu. Having trained together in China, many of their early inspirations and ideas follow sympathetic lines. Zao, too, was influenced by Picasso and Cezanne, and was inspired by Paul Klee, as Chu was by de Staël and Kandinsky. Both created innovative abstract landscapes, mixing European modernist and traditional Chinese elements, and both worked in varied mediums. The results were markedly different—but that should be the subject of an entirely discrete article.

Wu Guanzhong, on the other hand, went to Paris in 1947, but returned to China in 1950 to serve the Revolution. He taught at the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, Tsinghua University and Beijing Fine Arts Normal College, his painting subject to the political circumstances in China. He suffered during the Cultural Revolution and destroyed many of his own paintings. He was finally permitted to paint again in 1972 (23), and from the late 1970s, he worked and travelled at home and abroad, developing a unique, increasingly abstract style (24). He and Chu Teh-Chun were reunited in China for the first time after about fifty years (25). Wu wrote perceptively about Chu’s painting:

“Chu Teh-Chun’s works are Western paintings when people look at them from a distance because of their structure and different effects, while his works are Chinese paintings when people look at them closely because of the great attention to the texture of his refining strokes.”

Chu was the last of the “Three Musketeers”, who stimulated and transformed modern Chinese painting. He has been celebrated in many retrospectives and received numerous awards and international accolades. He was the first Chinese member of the Académie des Beaux Arts, Paris, was made a lifelong member of the Institut de France and received the European Gold Order of Merit. More im-
Important than prizes, his influence lives on in the next generation of creative pioneers. Artists, such as Hong Ling (born 1955), owe a clear debt to his work. *Chu Teh-Chun: Music for 4 Pianos*, a composition by J. Heyes in 2017, was inspired by one of Chu's abstract landscapes. A forthcoming *catalog raisonné*—finally—will give us the full story of Chu Teh-Chun's work and legacy.

---


---

**Bibliography**


