

CHINESE-AMERICAN ARTISTS

Artistry in the Land of Opportunity

Two of the master artists at the Plein Air Convention & Expo will demonstrate the varied styles of painting employed by highly trained Chinese artists who immigrated to America in the 1980s.

By Molly Siple

The hallmark of Chinese artists, above all else, is their technical proficiency. They are expert draftsmen, masters of value and color, and skilled craftspeople, thanks to the high quality and demanding standards of their art education in China. Their styles have roots in two strains of traditional Chinese brush painting that date back more than 6,000 years, as well as the influence of the European methods of painting that came through the Russian academies. At this year's Plein Air Convention & Expo, to be held in Monterey, California, from April 10-14, Timothy Tien will join Zhaoming Wu for a live demonstration of their landscape painting techniques.

By the early 20th century, Chinese art schools were teaching European painting methods with a lineage reaching back to the Paris art academies of the mid-19th century. Such teaching made its way from France to Czarist Russia, which held French culture in high esteem, and, in turn, Chinese artists traveled to Russia to learn how to paint representationally in the European style. They then returned to China to teach others. A case in point: Mian Situ, Huihan Liu, Shugiao Zhou, and Ruo Li took instruction from Shaogang Guo, who studied at the Repin Institute in St. Petersburg.

Social Realism In China

Representational art gained even more support with the advent of Communism. In Russia, traditional representational art had evolved into Social Realism, the government-approved style for Communist posters and murals. Subsequently, Social Realism also became the official style in China. By the 1970s, art students in China were required to have academic training to prepare them for creating realistic works in support of the



Overlooking the City Lights

Zhaoming Wu

2011, 12 x 12 in.

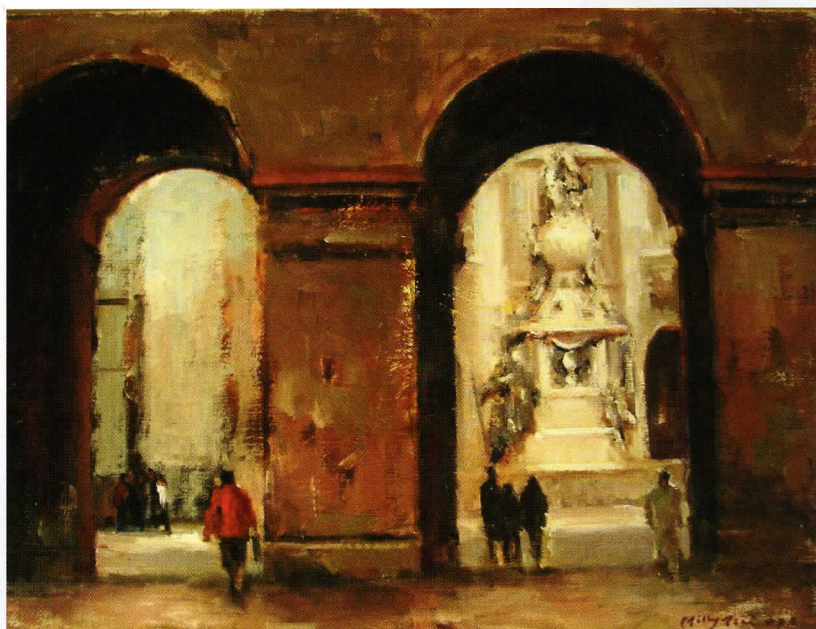
Courtesy Astoria Fine Art Gallery, Jackson, WY

Plein air



Composition With Golden Gate Bridge

Timothy Tien
 2011, oil, 8 x 10 in.
 Private collection
 Plein air



Old Town, Wuzheng

Milliy Tsai
 2008, oil, 20 x 24 in.
 Collection the artist
 Plein air

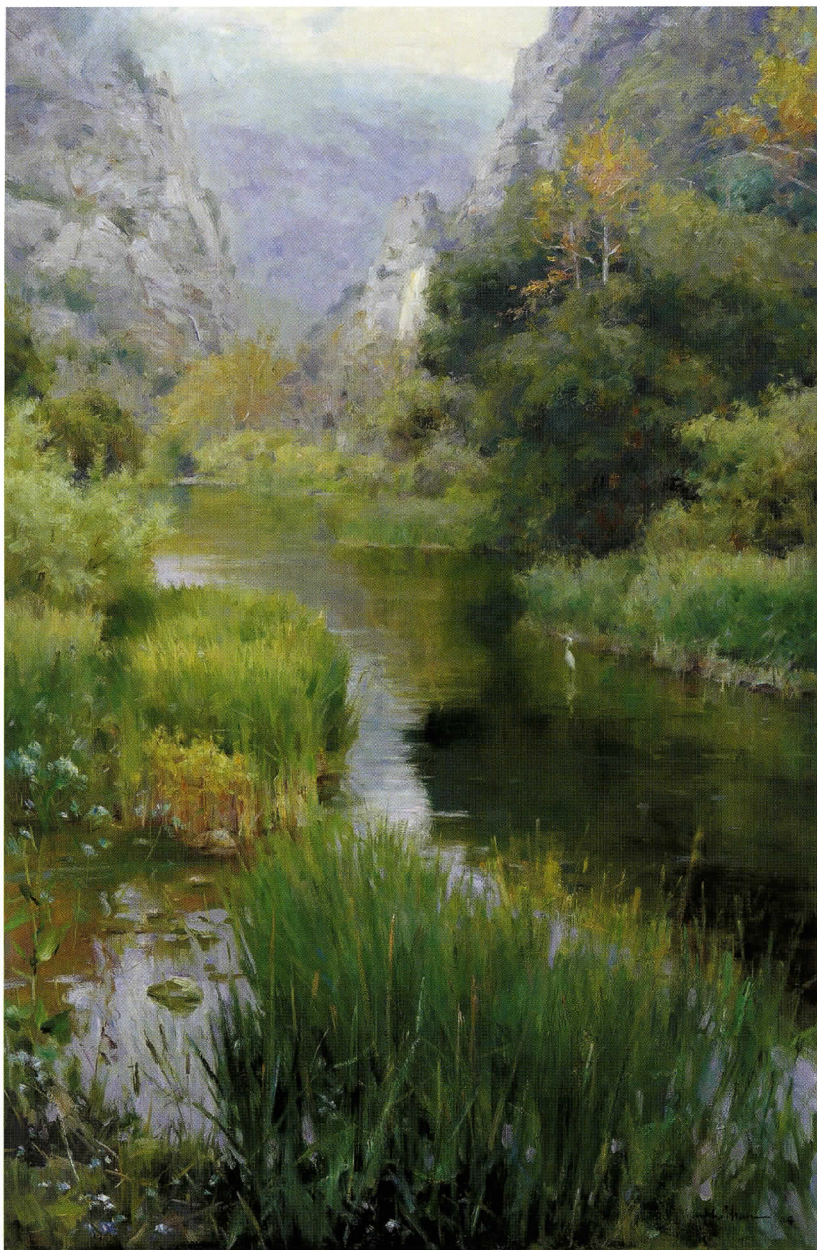
Malibu Canyon

Hiuhan Liu

2004, oil, 36 x 24 in.

Private collection

Studio



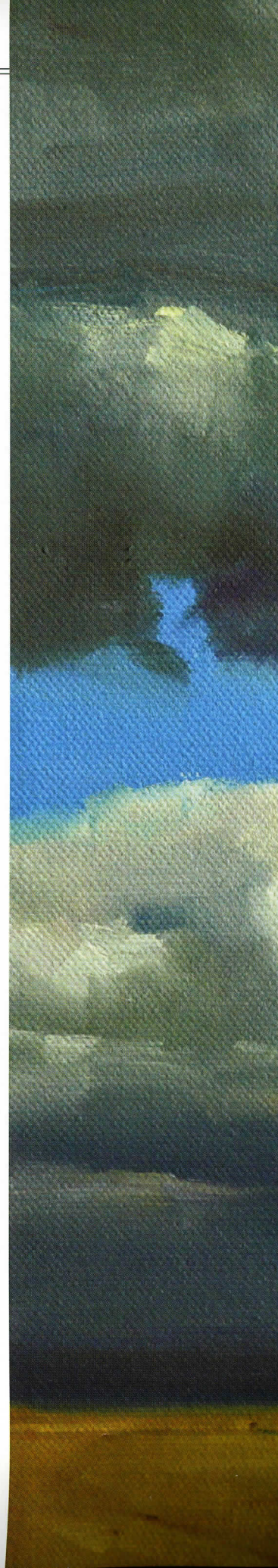
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Zhaoming Wu

2012, oil, 12 x 12 in.

Courtesy Astoria Fine Art Gallery, Jackson, WY

Plein air







Sunset in Venice

Jove Wang

2011, oil, 16 x 20 in.

Photo courtesy American Legacy Fine Arts,
Pasadena, CA

Plein air

regime. Mastering pencil drawings of plaster casts, painting only in black and white for a year or longer, and working from the live model were staples of the curriculum. The government established six art academies in various regions of the country, with thousands of hopefuls applying for the few student openings. Many of the Chinese-American artists now living in California attended the Guangzhou Academy of Art in Guangdong Province, in the south of China. Both Zhaoming Wu and Weihan

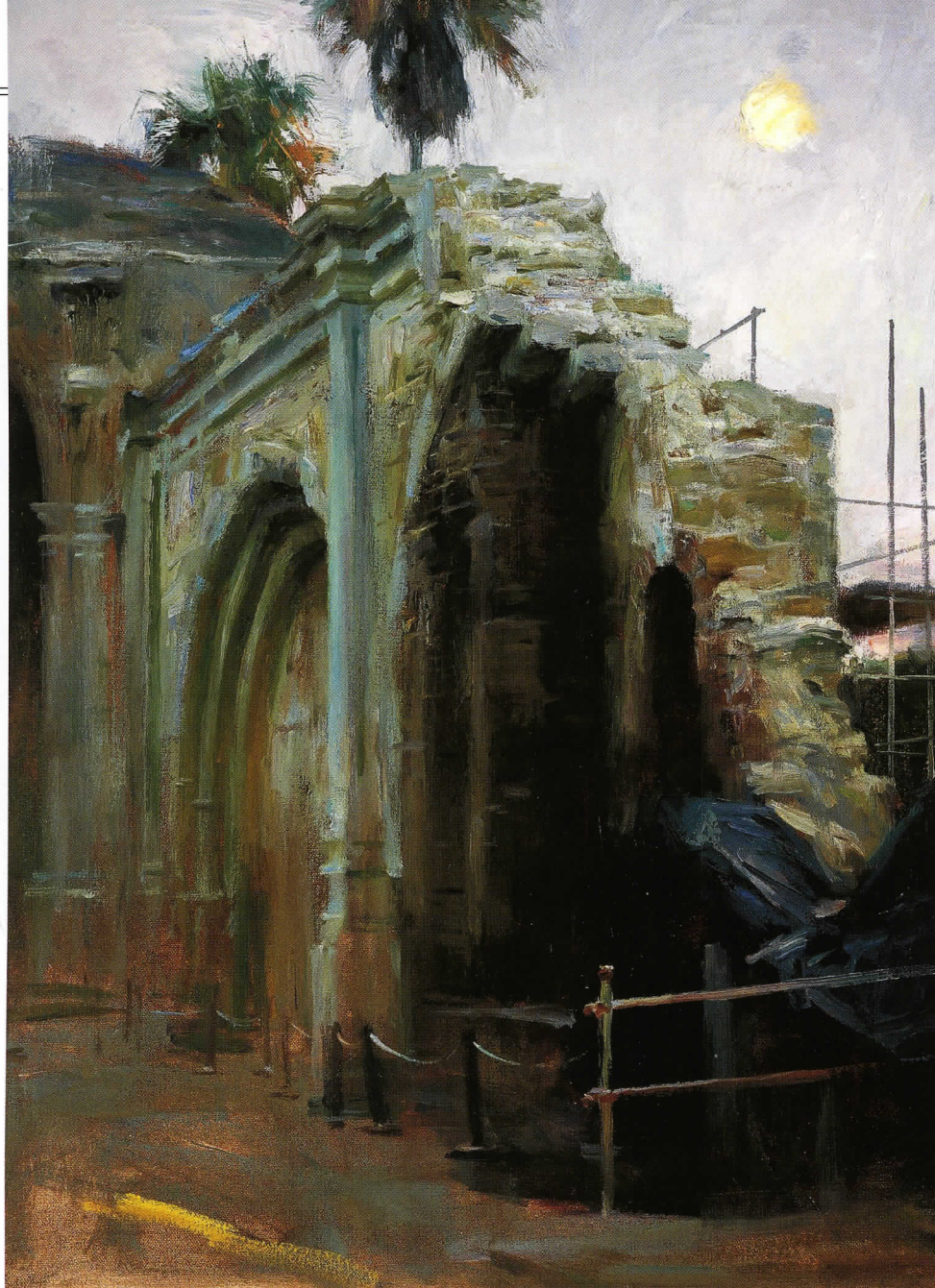
Liu, now instructors at the Academy of Art University, San Francisco, as well as Mian Situ, attended Guangzhou and later became instructors there before immigrating to the United States.

The American fine art scene over the past several decades has been greatly enriched by the arrival on our shores of highly trained artists from China. At the same time, the careers of these artists have flourished, thanks to the political and cultural environment that living in the United States affords. Some have built national reputations, their work highly sought after by top art collectors. All have taken top honors at important art exhibitions, and a good number have become revered art instructors with a loyal student following. The list of artists includes Mian Situ, Z.S. Liang, Jove Wang,

Zhaoming Wu, Huihan Liu, Shuqiao Zhou, W. Jason Situ, Michael Situ, Calvin Liang, Dali Higa, Ruo Li, Timothy Tien, Xiangyuan Jie, and Sai Ping Lok. The majority live in Southern California, a center of artistic activity offering benign weather and varied natural beauty.

Opportunity Beckons

There was virtually no opportunity under Communism to develop as an artist, and no art market. Consequently, when the Chinese government began to allow student visas to the U.S., beginning in the early 1980s, a number of Chinese artists headed for California. However, at that time, given the popularity of contemporary art, the work of these master artists was not in demand. To survive, some of today's luminaries took jobs washing dishes, doing



warehouse work, working as bill collectors, copying classical paintings for shop owners, or painting portraits in public parks. Fortunately, hard work and patience were never foreign to these stalwarts, and eventually they established successful careers.

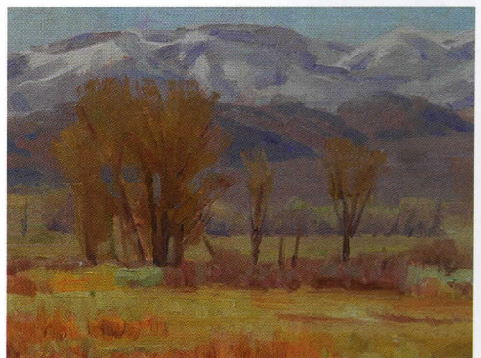
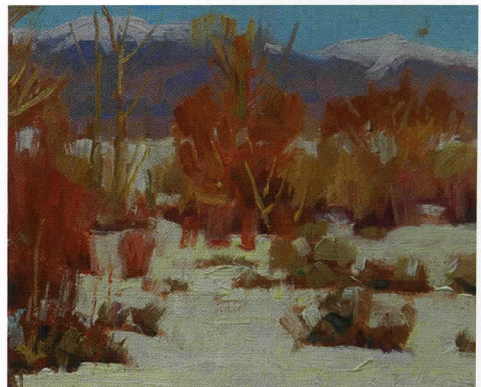
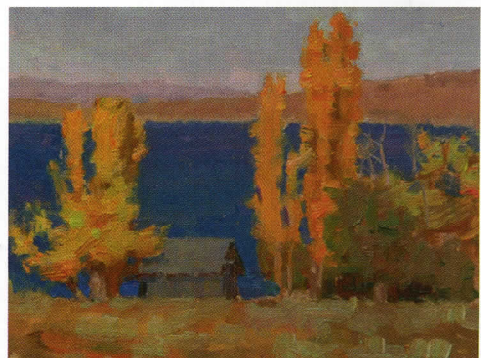
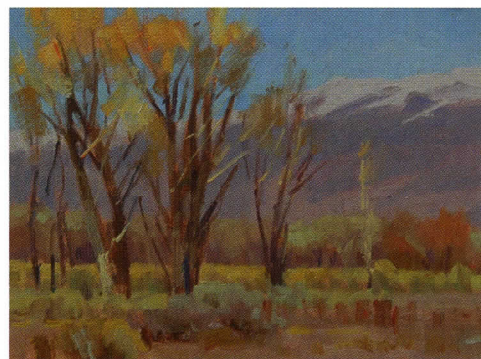
As these artists will tell you, being in America also, and most importantly, brought them financial stability, giving them the opportunity to develop their own individual styles of painting and self-expression. As landscape artist Jason Situ says, "I got freedom, my dream to do art by myself. After a few years, I can use my skills and make a living. This is wonderful!" Being in the U.S. also has an effect on painting styles. The artists learned from art books, the work on display in art galleries, and museums full of European art, a newfound

luxury they treasured. As Huihan Liu recalls, "My eyes were totally open. I felt gratitude for everything I saw."

They also learned from their new American artist friends. As Zhaoming Wu says, "In school we did some landscape painting, usually as preparatory work for a required yearly studio project. But in California, even though my focus has always been the figure, the painters we met pushed us to do more outdoor landscapes, and this led to a great change in how we painted. We began to pay more attention

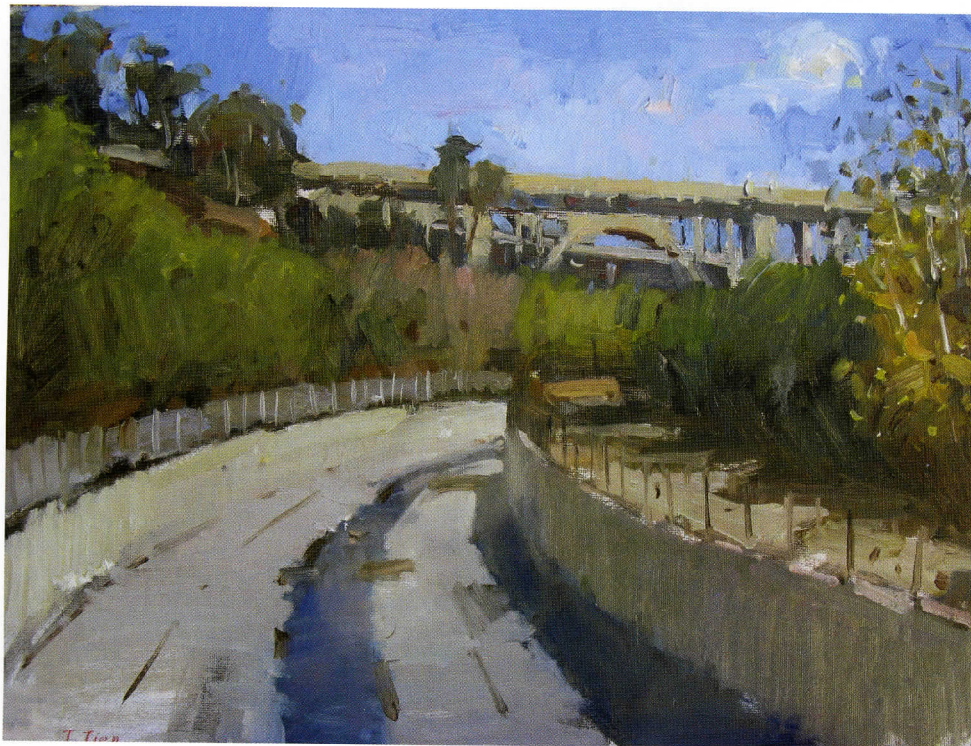
Silence of the Mission

Huihan Liu
2012, oil, 24 x 18 in.
Private collection
Studio



Four Plein Air Sketches from Bishop, California, near the Sierra Nevada

Simon Lok
2003, oil, each sketch 6 x 8 in.
Private collection
Plein air



Under the Shade at Arroyo Seco

Timothy Tien
2011, oil, 11 x 14 in.
Private collection
Plein air

Firewood Gang

Mian Situ
2012, oil, 32 x 45 in.
Private collection
Studio





The Hopeful

Ruo Li

2009, oil, 22 x 33 in.

Private collection

Studio

to the drama of lighting in nature, not just classic light on form. And because we were on the West Coast, we started to paint with a lighter and more colorful palette, because of the special atmosphere and intense, bright colors of California.” One plein air artist from Southern California, Michael Situ, has become particularly well-known for his richly colored landscapes.

Calligraphic Brushwork

Yet signs of their training are visible still in the painting style of these Chinese-Americans – not just in their command of drawing and composition, but in telltale brushwork. As Zhaoming Wu explains, “In China, all students when they were young, from preschool to elementary school, had some training in Chi-

nese calligraphy, a discipline that was practiced in one of two styles — tight and exact or looser and more expressive. For many of the Chinese artists who immigrated to America, the way they first learned to use a brush carries over into how they handle paint to this day.”

Two artists who make the most of beautifully free and lyric brushwork are Huihan Liu and Jove Wang. Huihan Liu remembers his father teaching him calligraphy at an early age, and how forming Chinese characters, stroke by stroke, was like creating little drawings. Wang often uses calligraphic brushstrokes when adding the last details to a painting. In his classes he often refers to these strokes as “music.” In contrast, Shuqiao Zhou, who paints scenes of traditional Chinese life and dress with great exactness and finesse, admonishes students struggling with their painting, saying, “Make more perfect!”

The American experience also supplied these newcomers with fresh subject matter. Mian Situ has gained great recognition for his classically composed scenes telling the story of the Chinese

immigrant in America, whether the workers in the Sierra building the railroad or a sailing ship with Chinese immigrants on deck, entering San Francisco Harbor. Similarly, Z.S. Liang, while living in Boston, discovered the touching history of the Woodland Indians of the Northeast. “I had started my own portrait studio,” he says, “but I was always looking for more. Then I discovered the Wampanoag Tribal Museum. I got to know the Indians there and learned about their life, and by now I’ve studied the cultures of about 10 Woodland tribes, including the Mohegan and Pequot. I do these paintings to promote and preserve their culture.” Such multi-figure scenes are a Chinese specialty, the fruit of exceptional figurative training.

Other Chinese-American artists have turned to landscape, inspired by the scenery of America’s West. Calvin Liang, who designed sets for the Canton Opera Institute and grew up in landlocked Guangdong, never gets his fill of sea air nor of painting California coastal scenes, whether Newport Beach, San Diego Harbor, or his favorite, Catalina Island. Ruo



Good Day

Ruo Li

2010, oil, 28 x 44 in.

Private collection

Studio

Li, who taught at the Fine Art Department of Henan University, also paints seascapes, superbly executed scenes where giant boulders meet crashing waves. Sai Ping Lok, an animator with Walt Disney since 1993, portrays the grand vistas of the Sierra eastern slopes and unique aerial views of Los Angeles, with its criss-cross patterns of streets. And Xiangyuan Jie, also a former Hollywood animator, paints landscapes, traveling out from his studio in Atlanta, Georgia.

Timothy Tien is another award-winning plein air artist. He originates from Hong Kong and first pursued a career in architecture, only later turning to fine art and designing his own course of studies with individual artists in Los Angeles. He takes a more contemporary approach; as he explains, "I don't try to copy a scene or photo. I first decide what I want my painting to express and then I orchestrate the elements within the picture to say what I'm thinking. I don't want to make pretty pictures. The way I paint is very direct." At this year's Plein Air Convention & Expo, to be held in Monterey, California in April, Tien will join Zhaoming Wu for a live demonstration of their landscape painting techniques.

Bridging Cultures

Such artists are now fellow members of our art clubs and familiar faces at paint-outs. They have also become a bridge to Chinese culture. West Coast living makes a trip to China an easy commute. Dali Higa returns to paint fishing villages and the architecture and dress of China's remaining traditional historic towns. She then exhibits these canvases back in the U.S. Other Chinese-American artists organize painting trips to China for their students and painting buddies. Off they go across the Pacific for the chance to paint, conversely, the visual delights of China. 



Look for more work by these Chinese-American artists in the expanded digital edition of *PleinAir*.

MOLLY SIPLE is an artist and writer who studied painting with several of the Chinese-American artists mentioned in this article. She divides her time between homes in California and Mexico and is an artist member of the California Art Club.