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## Lifetime of Devotion: The Art of Fred Martin

Ming Ren

Fred Martin was an outstanding painting professor and scholar who worked at the San Francisco Art Institute for over 50 years, during which he served as the President of the San Francisco Art Institute for over 20 years. He was a renowned painter, art critic, and art educator in the United States, and was also one of the important figures in American modernist abstract painting.

Early in his career, he studied painting with renowned artists such as David Park, Mark Rothko, and Clifford Still at the San Francisco Art Institute. His works seem to embody the philosophy of color in geometric abstraction and the rhythmic form of musical notes, as well as the romantic abstraction that expresses naivety and fun. The inner spirit of the works materializes into shapes and lines with the use of lines and colors to convey the harmony of forms and their relationships, which is enough to touch and shock the viewer. In a strict sense, this is not just the result of superb painting skills, Martin's painting is based on the principle of being able to touch the human soul, mainly by returning to the "original" innocence and finding the true

expression through his works. Viewers can also see the "traces" of the cross-influence of these early works by his mentors, but that is just a "trace". His works have a unique imagination that is both "familiar" and "new". The free-form lines, shapes, and colors are harmonious in the multi-dimensional space of the picture, making the energy they release extraordinary. His compositions are full of passionate biological energy, with unique and individual watercolor blending, and you can still find more colorful new aesthetics features in these decades-old "original" works.

Professor Martin's works have been exhibited at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art since 1949, and over the past 60 years, his works have been displayed at major museums across the United States, including the famous Whitney Museum in New York. During this time, he has won many prestigious awards, such as the 183<sup>rd</sup> Annual National Academy Prize in New York, the gold award at the annual oil painting and sculpture exhibition of the Oakland Art Museum, and so on. In fact, Martin's fame comes not only from his works, but also from his art criticism, writing on art history, and



Figure 1, 2. Artist and educator Fred Martin (1927-2022) was among a group of students at the China Academy of Art in Hangzhou Zhejiang province in 1988. Photo provided from Ming Ren.

speeches. He is widely recognized as a well-known art critic, and has published many art works to date, including: “2008, 2009, and 2010 Painting and Working Records” “Classical Soil” “Holy Land”, and more. He has also written a large number of art reviews and essays for many American art magazines and special issues.

Professor Fred Martin is also an old friend of China. During his tenure as president of the San Francisco Art Institute, he made outstanding contributions not only to the exchange of Chinese and American art and culture, but also to the training of art talent in China and to the research and development of contemporary art in China. He started leading the team of teachers and students from the San Francisco Art Institute to the China Academy of Art and other art colleges in China for academic exchange as early as 1986. To this day, nearly 30 years have passed. Many famous Chinese artists have

gone to the only pure art institute in the United States for further studies in the 80s and 90s. The San Francisco Art Institute thus became the earliest art institute for exchange between China and the United States.

The exhibition features works by Martin, who had a strong interest in Confucian culture of China from a young age and showed elements of Chinese culture in his works. The works showcase Martin’s artistic development and style in different periods and serve as a tribute to his artistic contributions and legacy. Martin’s art has left a valuable spiritual wealth for the world.

*Feb. 5, 2023*

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## Notes About the Role of China and Chinese Art in My Work

Fred Martin

An astrologer told me once, fate is what happens to you; destiny is what you make of it.

We are each one of us a separate tree of life in the great forest of life that is the Earth itself. And for that different tree that each one of us is, it is where the seed was planted—the soil, the water, the air and light and season—that is the first thing that happened to us, that is our own first stroke of fate.



Figure 3. Fred Martin. *Sketch*. Watercolor paper, 1958.

And it is for each of us who our parents were and their strokes of fate and the destinies that they made of them that now surrounds us as our own second stroke of fate.

And so it is that from this place and from these people in it, it is from these fates—from this environment of lives—that we each begin to make our own unique destinies, our own individual trees of life within the vast nearly infinite forest that is the whole earth.

My seed was planted in San Francisco in 1927. My father was an electrical engineer working for the Pacific Telephone Company. He designed switchboards for offices... He was from a little town on the banks of the St. Lawrence River in upstate New York. When a very young man he had run the electrical generator for the town (a lonely job all night) and to pass the time he taught himself to play the violin and the flute. Fate is what happens—a long job running a generator on the dam all night—destiny is what we make of it—learn music and get a degree in electrical engineering. And so in later years he taught his son to understand science and classical music: Mozart and Rossini and Opera. Always stubborn, when I grew up I went for Wagner and Mahler, Tchaikovsky and Sibelius.