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The Calligraphy of Distant Lands: Abstract Expressionist Paintings of John Way

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Abstract

American Abstract Expressionist painting successfully shifted the center of contemporary art from Paris to New York in the mid-20th century. This achievement was not only due to the growing international influence of the United States' power, but also to its inclusive and humanistic values. John Way, originally trained in traditional Chinese literati education as a seal carving artist and calligrapher, boldly transitioned into the realm of Abstract Expressionist painting. He conducted a series of freehand abstract experiments from the perspective of calligraphy. His practice, in many respects, differs entirely from the American artists' appropriation of Eastern traditional forms. This not only enriched the expressive dimensions of American Abstract Expressionism but can also be seen, from the perspective of a pioneer of Abstract Xieyi Expressionism, as a contemporary interpretation of the literati painting concept.

Key Words

Abstract Expressionism, Morphological Expressionism, Asian American, literati, calligraphy, John Way

Calligraphy, in the course of 20th century modernist art development, was often viewed as a unique category through which the West perceived Eastern art. In this process of viewing, the artistic value of calligraphy has been subject to both broader interpretations and misreadings, the greatest misunderstanding being the perception of calligraphy as a form of Eastern abstract art. In the West, the word is primarily regarded as a tool for recording information, while Chinese calligraphy has long undergone continuous transformation and theoretical development in terms of its artistic value. When Western abstract art emerged, calligraphy garnered the attention and influence of many artists, much like the interest in unconsciousness, primitivism, and African art. The mystical aesthetic of pictographic elements in calligraphy naturally attracted attention, and this was no coincidence. However, Western abstract artists cannot approach calligraphy from a genuine cultural understanding or a linguistic perspective. Their appropriation of calligraphy is primarily inspired by a certain emotional and formal aesthetic, similar to their reception of African art. In

contrast, John Way (魏樂唐, 1921–2012), who was deeply versed in calligraphy and dedicated decades to creating Western Abstract Expressionist art, engaged in a series of dialogical practices that addressed this cultural gap within avant-garde art.

1. The Life and Art of a Shanghai Tycoon Turned Chinese American Artist

In 1921, John Way was born into a wealthy merchant family in Shanghai. The Way family originated from Yuyao County in Zhejiang Province. His father, Wei Yiqing, made his fortune in shipping and assisted the United States in competing with Britain for the commercial shipping market on the Yangtze River. He was also a well-known collector of paintings and calligraphy in Shanghai at that time and was one of the early patrons of Zhang Daqian. As the eldest son, John Way had five younger brothers and one sister.

At the age of ten, John Way became a disciple of the calligrapher Li Jian¹ (李健, styled Zhongqian, 1881–

1956) to learn calligraphy. He also studied seal carving, painting, and epigraphy, receiving traditional Confucian education and guidance from Yu Youren. Li Jian was the nephew and direct disciple of Li Ruiqing² (李瑞清, 1867–1920). As the founder of the Li school of calligraphy, Li Ruiqing was known for his studies of seal script, Han clerical script, and Wei stele inscriptions. He also conducted research on the characters from the Yin ruins, as well as those from the Zhou, Qin, Han, and Six Dynasties periods. In addition to John Way, Li Jian's disciples included Wen Fong (方聞, 1930–2018), Cheng Shifa (程十發, 1921–2007), and Yang Zhiguang (楊之光, 1930–2016), among others. In 1937, at the age of 16, John Way held his first solo calligraphy exhibition titled “John Way’s Calligraphy Sale for the Aid of the Anti-Japanese War” at the Daxin Company Gallery in Shanghai to raise funds for the war effort. His father’s friends in the art community, including Zhang Daqian, Yu Youren, Wu Hufan, Wang Yiting, and Huang Binhong, all came to support the exhibition. Huang Binhong even wrote a critique of John Way’s use of the “stains from a leaking roof” technique in his calligraphy: “The ancients, when they practiced calligraphy, employed a method likened to ‘stains from a leaking roof.’ He Yansou learned [this method from] Yan Lugong; Qing Daoren, in turn, learned [it from] He Yuansou. In his youth, brother John has shown talent and wisdom by practicing calligraphy in his spare time. Within just a few years, his work already radiates a feeling of elegance. It gladdened me, recently, to see this scroll. To advance from this [level of] accomplishment and travel upstream to the source [of

culture and calligraphy] in the Shang and Zhou periods, will not be difficult! Huang Binhong so inscribed.”³ From 1938 to 1941, John Way studied at the Leciester Institute of Technology in Shanghai, where a Russian national taught him English. His experiences as a young man indicate that he came from a well-off family and had a certain influence in the cultural community, which in turn shaped his experiences and insights.

The years from 1937 to 1941 were marked as the Isolation Period in Shanghai, particularly after the occupation of the Shanghai concessions in 1941. The city’s complete downfall led to a rapid economic decline, and John Way’s studies were consequently forced to come to a halt. From 1942 to 1945, during his time working at the Shanghai Commercial Bank, John Way began to collect and study various calligraphy manuals, as well as works on epigraphy and archaeology, including research on oracle bone script by scholars such as Luo Zhenyu (羅振玉) and Dong Zuobin (董作賓). Based on this research and study, he started practicing calligraphy in oracle bone script and designed and created some innovative seals. He also maintained academic exchanges with scholars like Dong Zuobin and Guo Moruo (郭沫若). Clearly, John Way’s exploration in calligraphy was more about creative expression based on research rather than merely copying existing works. From 1946 to 1949, John Way worked in the Client Relations Department of the Central Bank of China in Shanghai, where he was responsible for settling the assets of Japanese banks after the war. During this period, he held his second solo exhibition of paintings, calligraphy, and seals at the Chinese Painting Academy in Shanghai in 1946, and his works were included in the 1947 edition of the “Chinese Fine Arts Yearbook.” He remained committed to his research in oracle bone script and epigraphy. However, his passionate engagement in art and research, which some might consider “unproductive,” further strained his relationship with his father, who was involved in business. John Way also achieved personal and economic independence at an early age. His calligraphy, infused with the spirit of epigraphy, reflects the ancient saying that “the character is like the person”.

In 1949, John Way moved to Hong Kong. There, he was first introduced to Western drawing and oil painting through correspondence courses from the London Art College. He also joined the Hong Kong Arts Association, participating in the association’s annual exhibitions each year and eventually becoming one of its presidents. In Hong Kong, John Way began to make a living from art, initially writing articles on calligraphy and epigraphy as a freelance contributor for the magazine “Today’s World”. Over time, he gradually began to receive commissions



Figure 1. John Way (left) at the RAC exhibition site in the United States in 1968.



Figure 2. John Way. *Lightning*. Oil on canvas, 25×79cm, 1960.

for calligraphy and seal carving, and to this day, Hang Seng Bank continues to use the inscriptions written by John Way.

In 1956, with the assistance of Edward Bryant, the then U.S. Deputy Consul General in Hong Kong, John Way immigrated to Boston, USA, as a refugee, bringing his wife and children with him. Although he felt a profound connection between Eastern and Western art when he saw an exhibition by the Italian abstract artist Afro Basaldella in the U.S., he needed to make a living. In 1957, at the age of 36, John Way enrolled at Northeastern University again. After obtaining a degree in engineering, he worked for a long time as a design engineer in the fields of nuclear energy, space exploration, and nuclear defense, serving as an engineer at Bechtel and Lockheed companies. During his studies, he also enrolled in a Bauhaus-style form and design course at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's School of Architecture. John Way's life in the United States was primarily marked by a dual career as both an engineer and an artist. Shortly after getting married, he discovered that his wife was suffering from a serious illness, yet he remained devoted to caring for her for over sixty years without leaving her side. In his spare time, outside of work and caring for his ill wife, he dedicated himself to creating the abstract paintings he loved. His artistic practice was not influenced by market demands or commercial needs, reflecting the state of freedom and self-cultivation characteristic of Chinese literati painting and calligraphy. It was not until 1992, after retiring at the age of 71, that John Way fully immersed himself in his creative work.

In 1959, John Way participated in his first exhibition at the Nucleus Gallery in Boston's North End, where he met Joan Peterson, who would go on to be his agent for

the next twelve years. In 1963, 1967, and 1970, John Way held solo exhibitions at the Joan Peterson Gallery, and in 1968, he had a solo exhibition at the MIT List Visual Arts Center. Before moving to Los Altos, California, in 1973, John Way participated in various group exhibitions, including the "Today's New England Art Show" (1963), the "Turning to Peace Exhibition" (1963), the "Boston Arts Festival" (1964), the "No Brush Painting" exhibition (1965), and the joint exhibition at the DeCordova Museum in Massachusetts, among others. During this period, his abstract painting underwent several shifts. After completing his courses at MIT, his works were primarily based on geometric shapes, yet they incorporated traditional Chinese elements in terms of color and texture. As Joan Peterson remarked on John Way's early works: "His paintings displayed in 1959 at the Nexus Gallery indicated a decisive turn from a representational interpretation of Chinese art to an emphasis on its abstract beauty. In the current exhibition, one can find the color scheme of ancient Chinese murals and ceramics, the subtle rhythms of Chinese paintings, and the balance and movement of Chinese calligraphy. Deriving from traditional Chinese art and the inspiration of 'Nonobjective' painting in the United States, John Way consolidates in oils elements of both Oriental and Occidental arts."⁴ During this stage, John Way's work reflected his attempts to harmonize Bauhaus design principles with traditional Chinese art, illustrating the contrast between Western rationalism and Chinese literati traditions. After 1963, John Way began experimenting with oil paintings on paper, further transforming the creative process of Western easel painting into that of traditional Chinese studio works. However, his paper-based creations served as drafts for easel paintings for an extended period.



Figure 3. John Way. *Garden of Eden*. Mixed media on canvas, 32×81cm, 2001.

After moving to California in 1973, John Way's renewed encounters with Zhang Daqian and Yan Yiping reignited his passion for in-depth research in calligraphy, epigraphy, and seal carving. Over the following 27 years, he published a series of studies on Chinese calligraphy, held two solo calligraphy exhibitions in mainland China and Taiwan, and authored several books, including *Mou Kun Ting: A Chinese Imperial Document of Three Thousand Years Ago* (1981, Hong Kong), *The Mou Kun Ting* (English version, 1983, Taipei Art and Literature Publishing Company), *John Way's Collection of Oracle Bone Inscriptions* (Wei Le Tang shu jia gu wen ji lian, 魏樂唐書甲骨文集聯, 1986, Hubei Fine Arts Publishing House), *John Way's Cursive Thousand-Character Classic* (Wei Le Tang cao shu Qian Zi Wen, 魏樂唐草書千字文, 1991, Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House), and *John Way's Copy of the Epitaph of the Yicang Crane* (Wei Le Tang lin Yi he ming, 魏樂唐臨瘞鶴銘, 1999, Shanghai Calligraphy and Painting Publishing House). The primary readers of his works came from overseas universities and museums, which established him as an academic painter and helped promote traditional Chinese culture abroad. His abstract expressionist paintings also drew more inspiration from his studies in calligraphy, resulting in increased exhibition opportunities.

In the 1940s, it became common for American abstract expressionist artists like Jackson Pollock to create works using a variety of mixed media. John Way also frequently experimented with different materials to explore color and texture in his paintings. For instance, in 1968, he utilized Lexan resin for backlighting in his oil paintings. After 1995, he began using pastel enamel on copper and silver plates, firing them multiple times

at 1500°F, and then assembling the accidental colors of the enamel on wood panels and canvas before applying oil paint. Beyond composition and color, he often emphasized the brushwork in his paintings, where one can always see deconstructed Chinese characters or the forms and meanings of calligraphy. Through the various creative elements, such as paper, enamel, brush techniques, and studio practices, it is clear that John Way's abstract expressionist painting consistently sought to find its roots in Chinese cultural heritage.

In John Way's abstract expressionist painting, one can trace the thread of his exploration of the commonalities between traditional Chinese art and Western modern artistic concepts. From the perspective of international contemporary art, his reflections and practices raise the question of whether they had a trial-and-error value at the time, as Gao Minglu noted: "We assess whether a concept is contemporary not by its occurrence in ancient times, but by its trial-and-error value. In other words, when we examine whether an ancient theory has contemporary relevance, it is crucial to intersect it with the rhetoric and values of modern theories, even to the point of conflict and contradiction, thus giving it value for critique. This is the essence of trial and error."⁵ Calligraphy began to emerge in various controversial forms within abstract expressionism in the 1950s. As John Way participated in the creation of abstract expressionism as a researcher of calligraphy, he practiced a type of cross-cultural abstract painting based on the various calligraphic theories and styles he had studied and mastered. He arranged the relationship between various pigments and brushstrokes based on the balance of spatial composition and the interflowing fields of color, using the dots and lines of calligraphy to create multiple strokes. This allowed

the relationship of *qi* (vital energy) between Chinese calligraphy and painting to be more fully realized in the oil painting medium. From his experiences, John Way transitioned from being the son of a wealthy merchant to an immigrant self-sufficient engineer and artist overseas. He not only remained dedicated to his beloved art but also embraced the distinct cultural backgrounds of both calligraphy and abstract painting in his practice. Through years of study, he conducted multiple cross-disciplinary experiments, becoming one of the earliest artists to incorporate various calligraphic concepts into abstract expressionist painting.

2. Calligraphic Knowledge in Painting: Chinese-style Abstract Expressionism

Chinese modern art initially developed along two main trajectories: one comprised artists who returned from studying abroad or received new-style education while exploring modern art in China; the other consisted of artists who immigrated overseas. The development of modern art in China was more influenced by, and sometimes constrained by, various social and historical factors within Chinese society, but it also held greater significance for the study of the indigenous culture's development. Artists who immigrated overseas were more influenced by the local culture in terms of social and historical factors. While integrating into the local culture, they often found it challenging for modern minority cultural arts to occupy mainstream discourse. As a result, their more common approach was to seek their own cultural identity within this context, which also facilitated cultural export and exchange. The study of John Way's paintings not only uncovers a richer modern perspective within Eastern art but also enhances the influence of Chinese modern art abroad. Among the many movements of modernism, we have seen numerous classic works that borrowed elements from Eastern art; however, it must be noted that formal borrowing does not equate to a genuine understanding of culture or deep empathy. Moreover, there has always been a fundamental cultural distinction between American abstract expressionism—or more broadly, Western abstract painting—and the abstract painting developed in Eastern countries such as China, Japan, and Korea.

The development of abstract art in mainland China did not synchronize with many capitalist-developed countries, not due to individual cognitive delays, but fundamentally because China's ideological landscape and cultural patterns diverged onto a different, more complex path over many years. This shift caused individual freedom of consciousness to be overwhelmingly sup-

pressed by a collective, dominant ideology for an extended period. The avant-garde culture, which emphasized humanistic enlightenment and independent spirit, was displaced under the influence of the times, only to be rediscovered, accepted, and consciously explored after the reform and opening-up period. However, this does not fully explain a lag in China's engagement with global avant-garde culture. Regions such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau maintained active exchanges with global avant-garde movements during that time, and the large overseas Chinese and diasporic communities abroad continued to find a sense of cultural identity rooted in China through their artistic creations. As a calligrapher and researcher of inscriptions, John Way's foray into abstract expressionism after immigrating to the United States in 1956 serves as a classic example of the integration of Chinese culture into Western avant-garde artistic practice.

In 1957, John Way was introduced to Franz Kline's abstract expressionist paintings, which deeply moved him with their bold yet simplistic black-and-white brushwork. When Kline rose to fame in the 1950s with his pitch-black, broad, intersecting strokes, some critics debated whether he had been influenced by Japanese calligraphy (as Japanese culture had disseminated in the West earlier than Chinese culture). However, Kline preferred to interpret his inspiration as stemming from the "unconscious", as this notion not only underscored the distinctly avant-garde nature of abstract expressionism at the time but also embodied originality, modernity, and individual consciousness. Clement Greenberg also wrote in an article: "In fact, the original 'abstract expressionists'—especially Kline—had only a rather superficial interest in Eastern art. The roots of their art lie entirely in the West: perhaps one can find something akin to Eastern sentiment in their work, at most merely a case of arriving at the same effect by different paths, or even just a coincidence."⁶ Western modernist painters' understanding of Chinese calligraphy often remains confined to the aesthetic structure of visual art, with little recognition or comprehension of the phonetics, shapes, and meanings of Chinese characters, and even less understanding of the principles of calligraphy. In the 1950s and 1960s, the presence of calligraphic elements in abstract expressionism was not limited to Kline; artists such as Dusti Bongé, Mark Tobey, Robert Motherwell, and Sheila Isham also incorporated calligraphic aesthetic forms in their works. Notably, Isham lived in Hong Kong from 1962 to 1965, where she studied calligraphy with the calligrapher Feng Kanghou (馮康侯), who was active in Hong Kong at the time. Some of her abstract paintings from this period even feature direct brushwork of a few



Figure 4. John Way. *Manuscript*. Oil on canvas, 91×35.5cm, 1959.

characters in cursive script or reinterpretations of her understanding of the I Ching and various poems.

Isham is a true American artist who engaged in an inclusive practice between abstract expressionism and Eastern culture, and she is far more advanced in her understanding than Brice Marden, who later repeatedly emphasized the influence of Chinese calligraphy while having little knowledge of Chinese characters. John Way found an opportunity for his creative expression in this phenomenon, as he understood the significance of “using white to represent black” in Chinese painting and calligraphy. At that time, he realized that the cross-cultural coincidences appearing in Kline’s forms were fundamentally unrelated to calligraphy. In China, calligraphy has always been cultivated as a form of refinement for scholars; it is an art that embodies a profound understanding of the “Dao”, often described as “mysterious and profound” and as the “gateway to all wonders”. When viewed merely as a skill to be learned, practitioners often fall into shallow interpretations of form and meaning due to limited cognitive understanding. Without a deep-seated connection to traditional calligraphy, any creation based on calligraphy will inevitably be superficial imitation. This phenomenon is prevalent in contemporary Chinese calligraphy, and in the abstract works of many Western artists, we can only observe simplistic borrowings. The absence of the cultural, character, and contextual nuances inherent in calligraphy makes it exceedingly difficult to establish a resonant dialogue with the scholarly aspects of the art form. As Li Xianting stated: “Calligraphy has never been abstract art in the modern sense. Although Chinese calligraphy has influenced modern abstract art, the two are fundamentally different cultural outcomes. ... Throughout history, Chinese calligraphy has never escaped the realm of ‘character forms.’ The so-called regular, cursive, seal, and clerical scripts were defined and highly refined during the Jin and Tang dynasties. All subsequent calligraphic schools and individual styles emerged within the framework of these four script types. Certainly, even without understanding the meaning of a cursive character, we can sense certain emotions and inclinations of the author through the spaces between the characters. From this perspective, it is no different from modern abstract art. However, for the writer, connoisseurs, and anyone with cultural knowledge, it is impossible to transcend the norms of character forms.”⁷ When we view John Way’s abstract oil painting *Manuscript* from 1959, we can see that although he uses oil paints on canvas, it resembles a calligraphic couplet. It is evident that his brushwork in the painting has a sense of structure and employs layers of textured oil paint.



Figure 5. John Way. *Abstract Oil Painting*. Oil on paper, 46×60cm, 1966.

Moreover, due to the vertical orientation of the painting, turpentine flows down from the top, further integrating the act of writing into the artwork. In this piece, Chinese characters become a significant component in constructing the painting's abstraction, distinctly different from the coarse black strokes in Klein's works. Klein sought to break away from earlier representational art; therefore, his black strokes lack any specific references, and this expressive abstraction gives his work meaning within the context of Western modernist art. In contrast, John Way's writing-based abstraction reveals that each character structure carries concrete significance, rooted in the training of literati traditions. This should convey the essence of traditional Chinese calligraphy rather than a complete detachment of form within a Western context. The meaning reflected in this work does not originate from concrete images or symbols but from the pictorial nature of Chinese characters, transmitting a language and cultural system that is entirely distinct from the Western Indo-European framework.

John Way began experimenting with abstract expressionism on paper in 1963. His canvas works were typically created in a vertical orientation, where he often used thick oil paints to explore certain "silhouettes" of Chinese calligraphy in a Western painting style. In contrast, his paper works were more commonly created in a horizontal position, which aligns with traditional Chinese painting techniques. He not only dripped and splattered paint on the paper but also diluted black oil paint with turpentine or other mediums. The thick paint approached the texture of ink, and he would then use flat brushes to create dynamic, calligraphy-style strokes that he was more familiar with from traditional Chinese brushwork. For example, in John Way's 1966 work titled *Abstract Oil Painting*, one can see the flying white strokes commonly found in Chinese painting and feel the representation of "ink separating into five colors" in the black paint—something that was not present in the works of American abstract expressionist artists at that time. The relationship between black and white is not formed

through repetitive tracing or layering; instead, it naturally leaves white spaces on the white paper through the method of “ink application.” Simply put, John Way is painting an oil painting using the techniques of Chinese brushwork, yet this piece contains no specific imagery and bears no traces of Chinese characters, only layers of calligraphic brush strokes. In fact, such a fully abstract form would have been entirely untenable within the traditional language of Chinese painting at that time and lacks any historical context akin to today’s contemporary Chinese art. However, when placed within the framework of American abstract expressionism, this attempt not only enriches the methods of abstract expressionism but also represents a form of cross-cultural acceptance.

However, the development of abstract expressionism in the United States only embraces a form of modernity that represents the American mainstream demographic, while excluding many groups that should be included. As Michael Leja noted in his sociological study of the New York School, this ideology, later shaped by state actions, had already undergone a selection process during its development. “Even though the term ‘modern man’ superficially fails to reflect its rejection of certain groups (for instance, it does not include African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, or Latinx Americans within the broader category of ‘Americans’), we can see quite clearly that it excludes women.”⁸ Even though later scholars have repeatedly emphasized the contributions and achievements of minority groups within this type of art, the stereotypical New York School and the abstract expressionist group is still largely represented by figures like William de Kooning, Adolph Gottlieb, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still—essentially the archetypal “American” group. This realization evokes a sense of regret or outrage among many scholars today, but it also provides numerous amendable narratives for the art history we are continually rewriting.

3. Two Abstract Forms of Expressionism and Morphological Expressionism

Abstract Expressionist artists consistently rejected the representational art they collectively opposed, yet the concept of “representation” runs throughout the history of Western art. The development of modernist art continuously sought to strip away the original naturalistic, realistic methods until reaching the indescribable realm of the unconscious—where all figurative methods and real-world elements were overturned. In this, we can observe numerous rebellious expressions against representational issues. Even later movements like Con-

ceptual Art sought to trace ideas through images, symbols, and representations. In fact, every transgression against established notions inevitably leads to a narrative of reflection. Eastern artists do not share the same cultural foundation of representational issues. For instance, in John Way’s artistic background, his understanding of Western painting was more about engaging with a different culture rather than being rooted in a deeply ingrained tradition. His tradition emphasized the “spirit resonance” of literati painting and calligraphy, rather than a focus on representational art.

If we carefully examine John Way’s oil painting creations, his abstraction is not about distancing itself from the figurative elements of Western painting tradition. Instead, it is an expressive creation in the style of Chinese literati art, utilizing the fundamental medium of oil paint. Liu Xiaochun, in the development of his formalist criticism, proposed the concept of Abstract Xieyi Expressionism in response to Western Abstract Expressionism. He argued: “‘Xieyi’ (寫意) and ‘expression’ belong to the same artistic form, which I call the ‘Xieyi-Expressionist’ form. Its artistic concepts include, first, imagery-based shaping, and second, the direct expression of emotions through brushwork. The second point is its core concept.”⁹ Under this conceptual framework, fellow Chinese-American artist Zhao Chunxiang (1920–1991), who also immigrated to the U.S. and lived in New York, began to be influenced by Abstract Expressionism in the 1960s. He later achieved recognition for his color ink paintings created with acrylics on Xuan paper. His artistic journey evolved from abstract color ink works to more freehand, expressive color ink paintings. Although scholars often interpret this shift as a return from abstraction to representation, we can observe the blending of Abstract Expressionism and Chinese freehand painting in his later works. Earlier celebrated artists such as Zao Wou-Ki (1921–2013) and Chu Teh-Chun (1920–2014) were quickly recognized by the French critics of the time and labeled as “Lyrical Abstractionists”. However, the term “lyrical” doesn’t fully capture the dynamic brushwork filled with vitality in their paintings. Perhaps the term “xieyi” (freehand) would better express the Eastern spirit inherent in their works. These three accomplished Chinese abstract artists, including Zhao Chunxiang, show more of the freehand forms found in traditional Chinese painting. Zao Wou-Ki’s Oracle Bone series, for example, conveys cultural symbolism through hidden metaphors. In contrast, John Way’s works demonstrate more of an exploration of abstraction through calligraphy. Taking two of his works on paper as examples, the influence of Mark Rothko is evident in the color base, while his 1972 piece incorpora-



Figure 6. John Way. *Abstract Oil Painting*. Oil on paper, 53×66cm, 1972.

tes a freehand structure reminiscent of the character “water” from seal script. In his 1977 work, we can see the integration of Chinese character brushstrokes into the colors. As his work matured, his calligraphic strokes became sharper and more direct, increasingly embodying the spirit of expressive brushwork.

Although John Way practiced Abstract Expressionist painting in the U.S., it’s likely that he, too, could not fully understand the celebrated artists of the New York School. This is similar to how many critics of the time were unable to accurately assess those artists who were fascinated by mystical concepts such as psychoanalysis, primitivism, and other esoteric terms. These artists rejected all forms of figuration because what they sought was the ineffable—something belonging to the individual, yet filled with a sense of the sublime and unconscious symbols or totems. The Abstract Expressionist artists in New York, though often grouped as a movement, did

not share a unified artistic philosophy or style like the modernist movements that developed in Paris. The only common ground they held was that their art was largely about human consciousness and experience. In some ways, John Way’s work similarly reflects an emphasis on personal consciousness and experience. However, as an immigrant artist from a foreign land, he had to downplay the individualistic undertones and instead highlight his Chinese artistic and cultural background. He used Abstract Expressionism—a form more readily embraced by the avant-garde of that time and place—as a way to integrate Chinese culture into this inclusive artistic system.

4. Conclusion

We will continue to find ourselves trapped in the lyrical depth of art and historical propositions, leading to two



Figure 7. John Way. *Abstract Oil Painting*. Oil on paper, 49×61cm, 1977.

kinds of one-sided misunderstandings of meaning. First, an increasing number of artists are falling into a form of isolated personal language exploration, obsessed with “novelty” and proprietary imagery. Second, there is an effort to dedicate art to a mission of a particular historical perspective, forcibly pushing creation to prevail in historical contexts through cultural speculation, political opportunism, and technological advancements. We often praise the empathy found in the style and culture of an artist’s work, which should be seen as a recognition of a modern way of life. This recognition combines personal lyricism with the clash of modern society, allowing the sense of liberation to achieve resonance between lives in various silent ways. This phenomenon is particularly evident in modernist art and avant-garde culture, filled with ideological opposition and cultural repression. Ultimately, it still revolves around each individual who exists and practices within this process.

John Way understands calligraphy and can compreh-

end the development of abstract expressionism in aesthetic art; however, he does not necessarily agree with the ideological representations of American abstract expressionism. The concepts of the unconscious and primitivism represent the output of ideas related to freedom and individual consciousness, reflecting the acceptance of new knowledge regarding humanity, consciousness, and the human condition within the transformation of American modernity. This is the result of the development of global influence and the deepening of cultural inclusivity. As Michael Leja believes, abstract expressionism “is neither based solely on its pure aesthetic achievements nor because the American empire used their works as political weapons during the Cold War, even though people have viewed these two opposing factors as the main history of the New York School. In fact, the successful promotion of this art is built upon both the artistic quality of the works and national actions.”¹⁰ Moreover, this cultural inclusiveness at the



Figure 8. John Way. *Abstract Oil Painting*. Oil on paper, 49×61cm, 1974.

time was more reflected in the acceptance of Eastern classical art and culture, as contemporary Chinese culture in the mid-twentieth century was entirely distinct from the ideological framework of the capitalist camp. Without the endorsement of common and friendly nations, the impact of Chinese individuals as independent entities in the arts had to achieve recognition from society and academia alongside the abstract expressionist group. This required not only finding cultural identity within their traditions but also incorporating the developed system into the existing foreign context. Therefore, today, John Way's abstract paintings can be defined both as one of the earliest practitioners of Abstract Xieyi Expressionism from the perspective of calligraphy and the tradition of Chinese literati, and as an important experiencer and

developer from the angle of enriching the American Abstract Expressionist discourse through the lens of the dissemination of Chinese tradition in a foreign context and its contemporary development.

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ENDNOTES

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Shanghai University, Daxia University, Shanghai Law and Political Science College, Shanghai Academy of Chinese Learning, Chengming College, and Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts. He was among the first group of members at the Shanghai Research Institute of Literature and History and also one of the first painters at the Shanghai Academy of Chinese Painting.

2. Li Ruiqing, a native of Wenzhen Town, Jinxian County, Nanchang City, Jiangxi Province, was a poet, educator, artist, and calligrapher during the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China. He became a Jinshi (successful candidate in the highest imperial examination) in the 21st year of the Guangxu reign (1895). Later, he served as a compiler at the Hanlin Academy,

Educational Commissioner of Jiangning, Superintendent (Principal) of the Liangjiang Advanced Normal School (the predecessor of Southeast University, Nanjing University, and Nanjing Normal University), and Jiangsu Provincial Administration Commissioner.

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異域的書學：魏樂唐的抽象表現主義繪畫

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摘 要：美國的抽象表現主義繪畫在二十世紀中葉成功將當代藝術的中心從巴黎遷至紐約，這其中的因素不僅在於美國國力所體現的國際影響力壯大，同樣在於其充滿包容性的人文理念。魏樂唐作為一位接受過中國傳統文人教育的金石書法家，卻大膽地轉入了抽象表現主義繪畫的創作實踐當中，並從書法的角度進行了一系列寫意式的抽象實驗。他的實踐從各個角度來看，完全有別於美國本土藝術家對東方傳統形式的借鑒，這不僅豐富了美國抽象表現主義繪畫的表現維度，同樣也可以從中國抽象寫意主義先行者的視角定義為一種當代的人文繪畫理念。

關鍵詞：抽象表現主義；抽象寫意主義；美國亞裔；文人；書法；魏樂唐