

Jiang Tiefeng

Jiang was born in 1938, in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, in China. Even as a child he displayed a great love and talent for painting and drawing, and early on he knew the course his life would take.

In 1959, in a highly competitive exam he won admission to the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. From 1962-64 he studied with the famous Chinese artist Huang Yong-yu, who first exposed him to the paintings from the Dunguang caves. In 1964 he earned his Bachelor of Arts degree. This was the last class to graduate before the cultural revolution. Jiang also learned about traditional Chinese art, an influence which would remain with him. Upon graduation in 1964 Jiang and a small number of other artists volunteered to go down to the Yunnan province. This turned out to be a blessing. This beautiful province is on the Vietnamese border. It is lush and tropical, filled with exotic flora and fauna, and is home to more than 20 different minority peoples.

His new home allowed his talents to burst forth. Jiang's talent was so obvious that from 1966-73 the Chinese Government assigned him to produce "Socialist Realism" propaganda posters and sculptures during the Cultural Revolution. He even painted the famous large red-faced poster of Chairman Mao. But this sterile exercise did nothing to release the emotional side of Jiang's nature, and at night he worked in his small room, on his bed, to create his own style. The natural beauty of the Yunnan province inspired him. With two other artists, He Neng and Liu Shaohui, Jiang secretly formed the nucleus of what was first called the "Heavy Colorist" school and is now known as the "Yunnan School," began.

Jiang's work quickly gained prominence and even the repressive authorities had to concede his talent. He became one of the most well-known illustrators of children's books in China. In 1974 he illustrated "Two Little Peacocks." In 1976 he designed the animated cartoon of the same book. In 1978, Jiang began to teach as an Associate Professor at the Yunnan Art Academy, where he would continue until 1983. In 1979, the Chinese Government commissioned him to paint a mural representing Yunnan Province for the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. The project took seven months and used six full panels of silk. This was the "Stone Forest" mural, one of Jiang's finest works. Jiang himself says: "This mural was the first time I had ever let my own true style show publicly. The color, energy, and fantasy of my painting was not appreciated by the government during Mao's Cultural Revolution. While I was painting "Stone Forest" an official came by and said I shouldn't do it that way. I said "Okay" as if I would change it. But I didn't change a thing. Later he came back and said "Oh, that's much better." He didn't know what he was talking about. He was just comforted to think that he, a government official, had control over this strange, dangerous art."

For Jiang, success followed success. In 1979 he illustrated "The Secret of Jinchun Tree," which won the first prize as the best illustrated book out of Jiangsu Province. His painting "The Legend of the Water Sprinkling Festival of the Dai" was featured in the documentary film "Yunnan Scene." In 1980 the illustrated books "Little Red Riding Hood"; "The Ugly Duckling"; and "A Shi Ma" were published. For "A Shi Ma" Jiang was awarded Second Place in an international United Nations competition of illustrated books. In 1981, Jiang's work was featured in the "10 Artists From Yunnan" show in Beijing, and then, in 1982, was prominently featured at a show in Hong Kong, which also featured the Yunnan artists as well as some of their followers.

But as early as 1981 the Chinese Government had returned to its repressive policies. Government officials publicly stated that they feared China was losing its "socialist morality" and becoming "morally polluted." Art officials favored a return to Socialist Realism painting and they expressed their displeasure by refusing to select paintings by Jiang, Liu Shaohai, or He Neng for the permanent collection of the National Art Gallery. Jiang was the prime target of their wrath--his paintings were excluded from television coverage and a seminar was even officially organized to criticize his work. His work was criticized as "...too daring and audacious...a nightmare." Jiang did have defenders. Liu Shaohai said that he would be glad to have nightmares every night if he could paint like that. The President of the Central Academy of Art and Design, Zhang Ding, wrote an article praising Jiang's work but withdrew it on the eve of its publication at his wife's urging, who remembered how Zhang Ding had been beaten and publicly humiliated during the Cultural Revolution. Even so, Zhang Ding did on a number of occasions speak out and express his admiration for Jiang and some of the other young artists.

All of this was making life increasingly difficult for Jiang. In 1982 a National Geographic reporter who was doing a story on China saw Jiang's paintings, and brought some back to the U.S. A friend of the reporter brought them to the Fingerhut Gallery in Minneapolis, where Jiang's work met with great success. In 1983, Jiang came to the United States as part of a cultural exchange program with the University of Southern California, where he became a visiting Professor of Art.

Under the sponsorship of Allan Fingerhut, Jiang moved to Minnesota with his wife Zhaolin. For Jiang, success in America quickly followed. His rich, strong color, and exotic but intimate imagery struck an immediate response with the American public.

Jiang's talent and uniqueness quickly brought his work to the attention of critics and museum curators nationwide, and this resulted in many public exhibitions. In 1984, Jiang had an exhibition at the University of Southern California Gallery; in 1985 at the New England Center of Contemporary Art in Connecticut; in 1986 at the Portland Museum in Virginia; in 1987 at the Springfield Art Center in Ohio; in 1988 at the Connecticut College Art Gallery; in 1989 at the Museum at Northwestern University in Massachusetts; and in 1990-91 at the Everson Museum in New York; the Springfield Art Museum in Ohio; the Michelson Reeves Museum in Texas; the Valdosta Museum at Valdosta State University in Georgia; the Art & Cultural Center in Florida; and the Olin Fine Art Center in Pennsylvania. During this period Jiang also had 52 one-man gallery shows in cities all over the country.

Jiang's colors are of unsurpassed richness. A colorist, Jiang's intention was to reverse the trend of the stale Chinese tradition of painting in gray, black, and white. Jiang says: "Chinese art had reached a sick level due to its lack of color."

Jiang's use of imagery. As noted above, Jiang is a storyteller. His paintings are steeped in Buddhist and Chinese mythology. Each figure has a symbolic meaning. The paintings have so much complexity and visual fascination that the viewer is constantly seeing something new. Jiang says "For every picture there is a story, and for every story there is a picture."

Jiang's vision has continued to grow and expand. Probably because of his personal experience in two cultures he has increasingly seen the world as a single system, as a meeting place of diverse forces. This is reflected in the number of environmental and ecologic themes which have recently begun appearing in his work, notably in such pieces as "Nature Suite," "Genesis," "Lovers Trees," and "My World."

The secret and essence of Jiang's work is best expressed by the artist himself:

"An artist is not a photographer; my work is my understanding of life. It is difficult for me to remember what distances I have traveled, how many mountains I have climbed, how many rivers I have crossed, and how many villages I have passed through. I can only recall the countless joyous moments and hardships of the past years from the many pictures I have painted. My deep love of the colorful earth and for Xishuangbanna, a region of the Yunnan Province, has encouraged me to explore and create unceasingly. Such a mysterious land blessed with unique beauty offers innumerable subjects to be painted. My paintings are not only pictures: they are also music and poetry that is bewitching, sweet dreams that are being dreamed."

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