



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Fay Chong, 1965
February 14-20

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Fay Chong on February 14 and 20, 1965. The interview was conducted by Dorothy Bestor for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

DOROTHY BESTOR: This is a tape recorded interview in the home of Fay Chong on February 14, 1965, and the interviewer is Dorothy Bestor. Let's look at this picture of the staff of the Seattle group of workers on the Art Project, if we might first, and you might tell me who was in it, and what you remember about the whole experience.

FAY CHONG: Well, this picture was taken on the project about 1939, I believe, and not too many of the members are here. Well, many of them are painters. I think, let me see here - Bill Cumming, Ranson Patrick, he is a professor at the university I think somewhere in Michigan; Julius Twohey, he was an Indian. I think he did some murals for some hospital in Tacoma at that time. Then we have Jacob Elshin, he was on the project; then two other fellows, one I think did the Index of American Design, and George Glenn, I believe he was on the project but I wasn't sure what he was doing except that he may have been a coordinator or something in public relations. I believe that is what I have here. Salvador - I think it's Gonzales - I've seen his paintings now and then, not as much as some of the other painters. And let's see who else have we here?

DOROTHY BESTOR: Where are you?

FAY CHONG: Oh, I'm way, way in here. It's not shown too much.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Who is she?

FAY CHONG: Ah, Mrs. Thyng, she was one of the secretaries of the project. I think she passed on, and Miss Kirsch also passed on. I think this is Clementine; I think she is still around some place.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Clementine who?

FAY CHONG: I don't remember her last name. Irene McHugh passed away some years ago, and Hans Bok also passed away. I don't know, I have no contact with the others except I've seen him now and then - Lubin Petric.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, Bill Cumming mentioned him. They used to live together.

FAY CHONG: Good friend so, ah.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Is he still in Seattle?

FAY CHONG: Oh, as far as I know he still is in Seattle. And that's about all I can tell you on this picture.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, that's awfully interesting. I have some of these names to look up and I'll try to find out what I can about some of the others. Well, let's go back and if you'll tell me what your training had been before you started working on the project, I think that would be interesting.

FAY CHONG: I had just finished high school about '33 although I didn't get onto the project until about 1938. I went to China for a year and studied calligraphy, then came back around '35 and then for three years I was just doing some paintings, and not very much else, until I got onto the project.

DOROTHY BESTOR: What kind of painting were you doing? Watercolor?

FAY CHONG: I was doing mainly, really very little watercolors. I was doing more on block-making - print-making until I got on the project, and I spent about two years on the project doing print-making before I started painting in water color.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I see.

FAY CHONG: Which was about 1940.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Do you remember how you got on the project? Were you in competition or did you just apply?

FAY CHONG: Ah, I applied, and Morris Graves at that time was on the project, and he at that time told me how I was progressing toward getting on.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

FAY CHONG: And so I finally got on in, I think it was '38; I think you had to prove that you had to have a job of this type that you were not capable of doing any type of work except art work. And in fact you had to be starving before more or less.

DOROTHY BESTOR: That must have been rather awkward to prove.

FAY CHONG: Yes, awkward to prove, yes that's true. However, it was not – it was a rather difficult thing to get on, but after you got on, it was fine. But I think there were certain periods you had to get off and then lay off for a certain length of time, then they hoped that you would find a job in the meantime and if you couldn't, then you could apply again to get on, which I did, and I was there until '42.

DOROTHY BESTOR: So you were there from 19--?

FAY CHONG: '38

DOROTHY BESTOR: '38 to '42 with some intermissions.

FAY CHONG: Yes.

DOROTHY BESTOR: And what did you actually do on it?

FAY CHONG: Well, I worked with the block-printing for about two years, then I started the watercolors from '40 to '42.

DOROTHY BESTOR: What was done with your block prints? Were they exhibited as samples of WPA art work, or were they used as designs for other things?

FAY CHONG: Well, as I remember it, we had to make twenty-seven prints of the block and twenty-five prints we had to submit to the project. And we kept two of the twenty-seven prints for ourselves, and the twenty-five prints were used to distribute, I think to various government places for display or exhibit or whatever it would be. And Mr. Inverarity was a director at the time, and he was a print-maker himself, so he was very particular as to how we made the print, and there were some other members of the group who did some print-making, too, and I was one of them. So he was very particular in getting the exact shade and the exact tonal value, and so on for the prints, so I've learned something from that. I did a lot of print-making before I went in there, so that's how I got on, just in print-making.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Were other people doing print-making with you at that time, or were you the only one?

FAY CHONG: No, there was Richard Correll, that is this man right here, he did some printmaking at the time, and so did Julius Twohey. Ah, this Clementine and Miss Kirsch and Mrs., ah, Mr. Fletcher, they did the American Index of Design, early American Index of Design at that time; and Bill, I think, was doing easel painting at the time, I think – Bill Cumming.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, he said he was, mainly.

FAY CHONG: So until 1940 I was doing this printmaking. Then from there on I started on watercolor, and I started on using this Chinese rice paper and the ink.

DOROTHY BESTOR: That was a fairly new technique for Seattle artists at the time, wasn't it?

FAY CHONG: Ah, yes, I think rice paper was fairly new at the time. Since then, of course, a great number of people have used it and at the present time I still use the rice paper in different kinds and different sizes, and so on.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Had you already studied with Mark Tobey when you got on the project?

FAY CHONG: I was, yes, I think so, I was studying with him in, I believe, 1937 or so. At the same time I think he was with Ranson Patrick. He and I started about the same time, more or less from a lecture class – did not really do much painting. So I met him about that time, which was quite a long time ago. And then I believe he came on the project in something like '40 or something – 1940, I'm not sure of the exact date, but he wasn't there very long. He was more or less an assistant director, and he left.

DOROTHY BESTOR: There was a movement to make him director, wasn't there, at one point, if he wanted to be?

FAY CHONG: That I don't know. I think he could have been, yes. He didn't want to take the responsibility, I imagine.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Did you find it was an easy group to work with, or was there too much interplay of temperament and personalities?

FAY CHONG: I found it, oh, I found it very interesting to work with and I thought the people that I worked with were very good. I enjoyed it very much and I felt that I learned quite a bit on the project because I was very young at that time and new, and there were other painters who were established already by then, Jacob Elshin, for instance, he was already established I think by that period, and Morris was on his way up at that time, so was Twohey, and so I was very fortunate to meet these people at the time and I learned a great deal.

DOROTHY BESTOR: When you were doing the watercolors what was done with them? Were they sent to Washington, or were they in the traveling shows that the art project sponsored or...?

FAY CHONG: Well, I think they were sent to the various government buildings for display. And of course, doing the watercolor, there's only one of each and they would take, I think - I believe it was a requirement of doing one a week or something like that. And we were permitted to work outside, or outdoors, or work in our studio so we were very free at that time, too, which to us was a very good thing.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, some of the artists said they had to report every day to the Bailey-Gatzert School and work there, and that they were checked up on for the amount of time they put in, even the amount of time they took off for lunch or to go to the washroom, and they felt it was sort of too restricted an atmosphere.

FAY CHONG: that may be, but I didn't feel that way about it.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You didn't?

FAY CHONG: No. I recall that we were quite satisfied at the Bailey-Gatzert School, and we were also at the Latona School, I believe. And also over on, oh, there was an old school over in Ballard the last time and, but first - when I first started - it was in the Maritime Building on First Avenue, Western Avenue, or some place. So from there on we moved to these various places.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Did you have any contact with the classes? Did you teach any of the classes that were run by the project?

FAY CHONG: No, I didn't teach any classes at that time.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Do you have the feeling that the project served to awaken the interest of the Seattle public in art more than it had been? That, of course, was one of the purposes, as well, as helping individual artists.

FAY CHONG: Well, I think it has. I think it helped the individual very much. I know that it helped me a lot, and I think it helped others too for the start, you know, for them to get started, and I think it helped Seattle in general too, helped to bring the various arts of today to what they are today. I think more so than maybe in some of the other cities.

DOROTHY BESTOR: It seems to have been quite active in San Francisco, and quite influential there. I don't know how much it was in some of the Midwestern cities.

FAY CHONG: Well, during one of the weekends we drove down there to San Francisco - Bill Cumming, Lubin, and I.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh yes, he mentioned that.

FAY CHONG: We drove down - it was just after sketch class - for the fun of it, and we visited the art project down there. It was much larger than the project here, and of course there are more people there, and therefore it was on a much larger scale than we have here. We had someone show us the different places where some of the murals had been executed, and I thought it was a real good thing.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You, yourself didn't have anything to do with any of the murals?

FAY CHONG: No, no, I didn't do any murals, no.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You speak, of visiting the San Francisco project. Did you ever visit the Portland one, or the Spokane one, or have any contact with them?

FAY CHONG: No. All I remember was Guy Anderson was on the Spokane one, and so was Morris Graves – not Morris Graves – but Carl Morris and Hilda Morris were on the Spokane one at the time. I think later on Fitzgerald, James Fitzgerald was there.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, I haven't talked yet with any of the Spokane people but I hear that that was a very lively project and that lots of people on the Seattle one wanted the Seattle project to be run the way the Spokane one was. Have you any impression about what made the Spokane one so good? Or so much better than ours, of it was better?

FAY CHONG: No, I don't. Of course, we had some top people there. It might have done something that way, but I don't know.

DOROTHY BESTOR: How did you happen to get off the project? Did you stay with it as long as it was running here, or did you find you had commissions and other things to do so you didn't want to continue on it?

FAY CHONG: Well, I think that one reason was that the project was about to end because of the war, which started I think in '41, or something like that, and by '42 I think it continued for a short time. But I left the project because I was doing some work in a naval architecture firm at that time so I didn't stay, although I wanted to stay on the project, but I felt that since it was coming to an end I thought it was best to try to do something else then. But I felt that the project really did a lot of good for many people here.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You think it was the experience and the educational background?

FAY CHONG: Yes, I think so very much.

DOROTHY BESTOR: And then it was after leaving the project that you went to the University of Washington, was it? Or had you been there before?

FAY CHONG: No, after I left the project I was with this naval architecture firm for about two years, and I spent a year at Boeing. Then I spent another year in the architectural firm, and I taught at the YMCA school for the next seven years; then I came up to the university. I started school at the university, I think it was '54, so that was my first time at the university.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Do you think if it hadn't been for the project you might not have continued as a painter, or that you would have continued anyway, but that just gave a sort of boost.

FAY CHONG: Well, I think the project really gave me a boost. Yes, I probably would have continued the art, though with some form of painting, but it might not be the same way, yes. However, I think it was also during the war that I was down at the Little Gallery of Frederick and Nelson. Mrs. Harrison was there. Do you – oh, you don't know Mrs. Harrison?

DOROTHY BESTOR: No, I don't.

FAY CHONG: Well, she started a gallery. It was on the fourth floor at the time, and she ran the gallery for a number of years, and Louise Gilbert took over when she went back to Oregon.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, I've met Louise Gilbert.

FAY CHONG: Then, of course, ah, who is running it now?

DOROTHY BESTOR: The woman from Mercer Island who uses casein – Larrie Howe.

FAY CHONG: Larrie Howe, yes. And I think she's done a good job too. But it was one of the few outlets for paintings at that time, you know. There weren't many galleries here.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, really?

FAY CHONG: No.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Seattle has so many now that –

FAY CHONG: Oh, there are too many, I think.

DOROTHY BESTOR: It's becoming rather a tradition.

FAY CHONG: Yes, well there were very few then. The Little Gallery was one and there was another gallery, I think on Broadway, and the other was called the Skewes Furniture. Mrs. Noon was in charge of that little gallery, but

there isn't a gallery there now. It seems that just in the last few years we have so many galleries all over the city.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Why do you think there are too many? Can there really be too many?

FAY CHONG: Oh, I think the more the better, but then at the same time we have the purpose, the main purpose, to make sales of paintings. I think there are too many for this area.

DOROTHY BESTOR: They compete with one another too much?

FAY CHONG: I think they do. If it's like New York, then that might be a different story, because it's a much larger city, and there are many more people who could specialize, or painters who would be specialized, and certain people who like certain type of work. But here I think there are not enough people to buy such specialized paintings.

DOROTHY BESTOR: To get back for a minute to your actual work on your project, were you dictated to at all as to your subject matter or your manner of treating it when you did the wood blocks or the watercolor paintings?

FAY CHONG: No, fortunately I was very free to do what I wanted to do as far as subject matter; I had my choice, which was very good, and the same way with my printmaking. I think I had a choice there, too, but there was of course a time requirement that we had to produce so many prints or so many paintings in a certain time, you see, but I suppose that is a necessity for a project or for any kind of organization.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, possibly. Well, thanks very much. Is there anything else you think you should get on the record about the way the project was run or the feeling of satisfaction or lack of it of the people who worked on it, or are there any other names you remember from your contacts on the project that I ought to look up?

FAY CHONG: Well, I can't, off-hand, think of any other names at this time, but I think, as I said before, the project did a lot of good to a lot of people. And I sometimes hope that there will be another art project like this.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I was wondering about your feeling about that. There was this symposium which you may have heard on "The Federal Government and the Arts" here in December, sponsored by the Argus magazine, and some people who spoke at that thought that the government should have a continuing interest in the arts in America. Not that it should necessarily always financially support artists, but to be a sort of center of excitement and inspiration.

FAY CHONG: Yes, probably the operation might be different than the art project of the other years. I think perhaps it could be that the government could in some way support the artists. The artists would not necessarily have to be starved in order to get on, just to get on if they have some potential talent.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Something like the Guggenheim Foundation.

FAY CHONG: Something like that I would say; yes, I think so.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, do you think you can have government support without having government control over the arts?

FAY CHONG: Well, that's something like the school system, isn't it? The government is in a way supporting some schools, and yet the government is not controlling the schools, so I think it's possible.

DOROTHY BESTOR: What kind of person do you think they should have to direct it? Should they be an artist or an administrator, or can there be someone who's both?

FAY CHONG: Well, it's very difficult to say. I think an artist would be - wouldn't be able to -

DOROTHY BESTOR: He wouldn't want to bother to take the time?

FAY CHONG: And an administrator might be too practical in some ways, so you have to be half and half in some ways, maybe you'd have more than one director or something, but they'd have to get along some way which is not too easy.

DOROTHY BESTOR: No! No, it isn't. Not everyone got along too well, I gather, with this project, but you seem to have gotten on all right.

FAY CHONG: I didn't seem to have any trouble; of course, maybe I wasn't aware of it or something, I don't know.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, thank you very much. They'll transcribe this in Detroit and send it back to you, and

then you can edit it or add anything that you may not have thought of, when you see the transcript.

[END OF SESSION]

[SECOND SESSION – FEBRUARY 20]

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, now that we're recording again after we both had a chance to listen to the tape, had you thought of anything else you'd like to add to what you said last week, Mr. Chong?

FAY CHONG: I can't think of anything at all, unless you have some questions.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, there are a few things I forgot to follow up at the time. For instance, you talked about the block prints that you did. What kind of subjects and sizes and colors and treatments did you do in the block prints?

FAY CHONG: Oh, at first I did it just in a single color like black; the subject matter of course mainly was landscape, and I used linoleum rather than wood. That was more easily available at the time, and also I thought it was easily cut with the tools that I had, but later on I also did some color blocks using five, six different blocks to make five, six different colors. I also used a watercolor in that case for printing, something similar to the Japanese method of printing.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, do you have any of those block prints left? I know you said you could keep two out of the twenty-seven; do you still have those two?

FAY CHONG: I have some but I don't have many. Through various time I think I may have given them away or sold them or something, or misplaced them.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I was wondering if you did have any at all if we could have one or two of them photographed on microfilm for the Archives' records.

FAY CHONG: All right, I'll try to locate some for you.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Fine. Also do you have any correspondence or sketchbooks or sketches that have to do with the project from that period, because if you do, they'd like to have some of those microfilmed too, if you could lend them to us for a while.

FAY CHONG: No, but I think that I might have some of the sketches that some of the other members made at the time.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, that would be very interesting. We'd love to film those.

FAY CHONG: I think I could locate some; and not many years ago some student told me that there were a lot of small paintings and sketches at St. Vincent de Paul.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, my goodness!

FAY CHONG: And how it came about was, I think it was a sort of involved, a long story, but I will try not to give you too much detail, except that I don't know too much about the detail anyway. But I understand that the government had to keep the government property for so long a period, then they could destroy it or throw it away or do something with it, and I understand there were about three truck loads, or carloads of these paintings they were about to destroy or discard, and somebody from St. Vincent de Paul saw this and rescued these paintings and so there fore they were at St. Vincent de Paul and they were for sale.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Who bought, them do you know?

FAY CHONG: Among them there were several of Morris Graves, and this student that I had at my class at the time picked up two of them and told me about it. That was the first time I heard about it and so I went down and this woman was very pleased to know that I was on the project and was able to give some little background of these paintings. And there were some paintings of Bill Cumming, I think, and there were some paintings by Jacob Elshin.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Really?

FAY CHONG: Yes, and I didn't think there were any by Guy Anderson but there were several by Morris Graves and this [pointing to a large painting on his wall] is one of them over there – Morris Graves', the one on the left. Yes, he painted that with the ink, Chinese ink and brush and it was on this wrapping paper, I believe, at this time and I was very pleased to get that.

DOROTHY BESTOR: It's lovely.

FAY CHONG: Yes, and so there were many of the small watercolors that I did were there, so after I gave this woman the information about the project and it was advertised on the radio that these were project paintings and they were sold for five, ten dollars, and they sold all of them, I believe. That was -

DOROTHY BESTOR: What year?

FAY CHONG: Gee, at least eight or ten years ago, maybe eight years ago. And I don't know if that woman is still at St. Vincent de Paul or not. If she is there I don't even remember what she looked like, but it happened there.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I'll go down there and see -

FAY CHONG: Yes, there may be some evidence of some of the things there yet.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Hmm, well that's certainly interesting. It's lucky they were rescued.

FAY CHONG: Yes, I thought so; although they were not really outstanding, it represented that period.

DOROTHY BESTOR: And they were done by all you people who became outstanding later, so that they were of interest, surely.

FAY CHONG: I think Malcolm Roberts was another person -

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh!

FAY CHONG: You have heard of him?

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, I have.

FAY CHONG: He's, I think, doing interior decorating now.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes. Are you still in touch with him?

FAY CHONG: I don't see him except maybe at a distance, or just to say "hello" from a distance and only recently. And so that's about all I know of him.

DOROTHY BESTOR: He's not painting any more, just doing interior design?

FAY CHONG: I think - I have not seen any of his paintings, but I think, oh, I know that he has done some work for some restaurants.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I hope to look in on him soon. One other thing I thought of when I was listening to the tape, do you know what the artists who were already established in Seattle at the time of the project and weren't connected with the project at all, do you know what they thought of the project work? Did they think it was a good thing or did they criticize it?

FAY CHONG: I have not talked to anyone concerning the project. We just say "hello" to each other and probably talk of other things. I don't recall anyone anyway.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, fine. Thanks very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... August 30, 2004