

Georgette Chen's Still Lives and the Poetry of Everyday Life

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Sotheby's EST. 1744

By Marian Ang | Jun 14, 2023

Famed as a pioneer of the Nanyang school of art, the still life paintings of the visionary 20th century female painter Georgette Chen tell of an extraordinary individual whose life traversed the world from the bright lights of Paris to the paradise she found in Southeast Asia.

Georgette Chen (1906-1993) gained renown as a 20th century Singaporean painter whose sensuous and remarkable practice combined Asian subjects with Western styles and techniques. Her approach would go on to influence generations of Southeast Asian artists through Chen's role as the first female educator at Singapore's Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts. An active member of École de Paris, Chen's practice made particularly innovative use of the still life genre, drawing on Chinese, Southeast Asian and Western motifs and influences that mirrored her fascinating peripatetic life between Mainland China and Paris, as well as her love for her adopted homeland of Singapore in later life.



Georgette Chen, *Lychees and Peaches* . Estimate Upon Request

The sublime *Lychees and Peaches* (circa 1940-45) showcases Chen's rightful place as visionary heir to still life masters such as the French Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne. Using multiple perspectives within a single composition to represent the true experience of sight, Chen's bold and confident brushstrokes created a strong integrity and rhythm of form, imbuing her paintings with a subtle dynamism. Paris's influence was undeniable in Chen's training as an artist: born in Zhejiang in 1906 to a progressive businessman who dealt in Asian art and antiques, Chen's privileged early life between her motherland and the museums and streets of Paris and New York cultivated a deep love and understanding of Western art from a young age. Between 1926 and 1927 she attended art classes at the Art Students League of New York but, missing Parisian life, she returned to study art at the Académie Colarossi and Académie Biloul, where she was influenced by the visions of the Post-Impressionists. These artists prized emotional and psychological responses to the world, with Cézanne in particular adopting the still life genre as a vehicle for expressing the poetry of everyday objects. Upturning still life's associations with art's simplest and lowliest forms, Cézanne found himself drawn to fruit as a metaphor for humanity's sacred relationship with the earth. Extolling its virtues to a friend, he remarked:

“They [fruits] love having their portraits done...They exhale their message with their scent. They reach you with all their smells and tell you about the fields they've left, the rain that made them grow, the dawns they watched. When I'm outlining the skin of a lovely peach with soft touches of paint, or a sad old apple, I catch a glimpse in the reflections they exchange of...the same love of the sun, the same recollection of the dew, a freshness.”

Quoted in Joachim Gasquet, *Cézanne: A Memoir with Conversations*, London, 1991, p. 220.



Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with a Curtain*, circa 1898. Collection of the Hermitage Museum.

Lychees and Peaches weaves an allegorical tale of the sun-filled, “deathless” days of Chen's marriage to her beloved first husband, Eugene Chen Youren, the former Chinese Foreign Minister, amidst the shadows of death and destruction. Peaches, ancient Chinese symbols of longevity and fertility, are paired with red, heart-shaped lychees, a symbol of love since the 8th century when the Emperor Li Longji infamously had the fruit delivered day and night to his favourite concubine at great expense. Married in 1930 in Paris, the couple's early years together were the epitome of marital bliss. Chen's star was on the

ascent: that same year two of her paintings were selected for inclusion at the prestigious Salon d'Automne for the first time, and by 1937 Chen was included in two major exhibitions in Paris, at the Palace of Painting as part of the Paris World Fair, and the Women Painters Exhibition at the Musée du Jeu de Paume. Eugene supported his young wife's artistic career, sitting patiently as her model and becoming her single most featured subject. In her personal diaries, Chen muses about love, the possibility of motherhood and searching for fruits for her still life studies. The short and hesitant strokes of Chen's early still lifes blossom into bold, gestural marks on canvas during this period. Preferring to use semi-ripened fruit as models, Chen's clashing Fauvist-esque colour harmonies – warm magentas and cool duck egg blues – bring a feminine sensuousness and arresting emotional intensity to the Western tradition of the still life genre.



But *Lychees and Peaches*' auspicious subjects are thrown into sharp relief by a fading sun hung low in the sky, their shadows creeping along the wall and across the rattan side table – a harbinger of the upheaval and tragedy that would befall the lovers. The Sino-Japanese War saw the couple arrested in Hong Kong in 1941 and moved to Shanghai in 1942, where they were kept under house arrest due to Eugene's steadfast refusal to collaborate with the occupying forces. Yet Chen never ceased painting, even holding two solo exhibitions in Shanghai at the Metropole Hotel (1943) and the Alliance Française (1947). Though largely confined indoors, her still lifes documented intimate, uncontrived vignettes of daily life in the face of adversity. Deciding at a young age to study the oil medium rather than Chinese painting (as her father had hoped) in order to “paint everything around me, people, food, flowers, salted ducks, sampans, peasants and potatoes”, Chen continually discovered beauty in the most ordinary objects around her. She was particularly captivated by the elegance of the humble woven basket, which would become a lifelong anchoring motif in her still life practice.



ABRAHAM MIGNON, *STILL LIFE WITH PLUMS, PEACHES, APRICOTS, GRAPES AND A MELON, WITH A ROEMER GLASS AND A FLUTE GLASS, ALL ON A DRAPED TABLE, A GOLDFINCH ON THE WINDOW SILL AND A BRACE OF SONGBIRDS* . lot
Sold for 555,000 GBP

“I discovered that by going round and round in different places, especially marketplaces, you would see practically all the baskets there which would represent a particular country. For instance, in China, if you painted a basket, you would know from what district that basket came from. That’s why people used to call me ‘Basket Chen’, and as a matter of fact, I think baskets are very beautiful.”

Georgette Chen

The tumultuous wartime years reached a crescendo when Eugene, suffering ill health, succumbed to a heart attack and passed away in 1944. The warm, intimate luminosity and hopefulness that suffuses Chen’s still life paintings of this period is a leitmotif that Chen would revisit in happier times. Reverting to a “simple, useful, and creative existence” after divorcing her second husband and moving to Singapore in June 1953, where she would choose to spend the rest of her life, Chen set about documenting the beauty and bounty of the tropics with renewed vigour. “Whether I paint a face or a bean, a mountain or a lily, the principle is the same and I could not resist painting all these things of beauty”, she remarked in the note accompanying her solo exhibition at the British Council Cultural Centre in Kuala Lumpur in 1956. Cornucopias of rambutans, bananas and papaya fruits are painted in electric shades of scarlet red, grass

green and mustard yellow with joyful, expressionistic flair. Likening herself to a “real tropical fruit” thriving in a “multiracial paradise of perpetual sunshine”, in the final chapter of her life Chen saw a direct link with the deep love and “deathless” days of her happiness with Eugene:

“I have remade my life, but truly it is not very different from the one I had with dear Eugene. In fact he would feel quite at home were he able to visit me! All the perfume of yesteryear with him is quite deathless and permeates this new existence. Friends marvel at my contentment.”

Georgette Chen



Pan Yuliang, *Chrysanthemums in a Green Vase* . lot
sold for 17,440,000 HKD

Having lived through multiple wars and revolutions, Chen’s still life paintings urge viewers towards a harmonious inner peace and optimism, focusing on the life and love that flourishes amidst the vicissitudes of hardship and global upheaval. Comparing Chen’s understated approach with Van Gogh’s notoriously mercurial moods, fellow Nanyang artist Liu Kang commented, “Subtlety supersedes those bold and unrestrained emotions to express a greater warmth and gentleness”. As a female artist in the 20th century who sought to capture the poetry of everyday life, Chen’s extraordinary journey from Zhejiang to Paris, Hong Kong, Shanghai, New York, Penang and finally Singapore birthed an extraordinarily self-possessed vision. A bridge between Eastern and Western cultures, Chen would become instrumental in laying the foundations for the artistic identity of a new nation.

Chen’s works feature in the collections of the Long Museum in Shanghai, Japan’s Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, and the Centre Pompidou in Paris. In 1982 she received Singapore’s Cultural Medallion, cementing her position as one of the shapers of Singapore’s artistic and cultural landscape and posthumously in 2020, the National Gallery Singapore staged “Georgette Chen: At Home In The World”, the first major museum retrospective of the artist in more than two decades, focusing on her lasting legacy in the development of Singapore’s artistic landscape. Her works are incredibly rare and only a handful of oil paintings remain in private hands.

About the Author

Marian Ang is a Hong Kong-based art writer and researcher, and a regular Sotheby's contributor.