



The Walt Disney Family Museum Presents Special Exhibition
[Water to Paper, Paint to Sky: The Art of Tyrus Wong](#)

At age 102, Wong is the oldest living Chinese-American Artist

May 28, 2013, San Francisco, CA – From August 15, 2013 to February 3, 2014, The Walt Disney Family Museum will present the exhibition *Water to Paper, Paint to Sky: The Art of Tyrus Wong*. Organized by Michal Labrie, the museum's director of collections, the exhibition will focus on the life and work of Chinese-American artist Tyrus Wong—a celebrated painter, muralist, kite maker, lithographer, Hollywood sketch artist, calligrapher, ceramicist, and Disney Legend. At age 102, Wong is still a practicing artist today.

This retrospective features more than 150 works including paintings, sculptures, works on paper, painted scarves, kites, and more. Although he never met Walt Disney, it was the ethereal beauty of Wong's Eastern influenced paintings that caught Walt's eye and became the inspiration for the animated feature *Bambi*, which changed the way animation art was presented, and continues to be an inspiration to contemporary artists.

Overcoming adversity, poverty, and racial discrimination, Wong used his passion and interpretation of the bold art of the Sung dynasty, and his experience working as a Depression- era muralist, California watercolorist, and film production illustrator, to become one of the bohemian artists whose creativity and drive helped shape the cultural, artistic life of Los Angeles during the 1930s and 40s.

In 1938, Wong took a job at the Walt Disney Studios as an inbetweener, one who goes through the tedious process of making "in-between" drawings that filled out the movement of the characters between the animators' key drawings. He recalled "At the end of the day, I thought my eyes were going to pop out," as he flipped through countless drawings of Mickey Mouse and stared at the light in the drawing board. When he heard that Disney's next feature-length film was going to be *Bambi*, he saw an opportunity to present his work.

Wong read Felix Salten's *Bambi* and "thought the story was very, very nice—the feeling—you could almost smell the pine," and made sample sketches creating the lush mountain and forest settings, inspired by Sung dynasty landscape paintings. He had a different approach and one that had never been seen before in an animated film. He explained, "I tried to keep it very, very simple and create the atmosphere, the feeling of the forest." Tom Codrick, the film's art director, was impressed with his sensitive style, which was vastly different

from the more ornate style of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, which preceded it. Tyrus's Chinese-inspired sketches and paintings set the look and tone for *Bambi*, and were some of the most strikingly beautiful art ever produced at the Walt Disney Studios.

In 2001, Wong was named a Disney Legend, and his work continues to inspire and influence the leading animators of today.

The exhibition also includes paintings, hand painted ceramics and silk scarves, original greeting cards, works on paper, and his latest work including handmade and hand-painted kites, which range in size from six inches to 100 feet.

About Tyrus Wong

Wong was born in Canton (now Guangzhou), China in 1910. In 1919, he and his father immigrated to America leaving behind Wong's mother and sister, whom they never saw again. Arriving in the United States, they were initially held on Angel Island because of the Chinese Exclusion Act. After their release from Angel Island, they settled in Sacramento, later moving to Los Angeles's Chinatown neighborhood.

Early Years

Wong's interest in painting and drawing emerged at an early age. Though they were poor, his father encouraged his talents by having him practice calligraphy by dipping his brushes in water and "painting" on newspaper. Indifferent to school, he dropped out of Benjamin Franklin Junior High in Pasadena, CA to attend the Otis Art Institute on a full scholarship. There he received formal western art training while studying the art of the Sung Dynasty at the Los Angeles Central Library in his free time.

Despite graduating in the midst of the Depression, Wong led an active life as an artist. He exhibited work throughout the country, including a 1932 group exhibition at the Chicago Art Institute that featured Pablo Picasso. Wong and other young Asian artists including Hideo Date and Benji Okubo gained recognition by exhibiting as the "Orientalists." Wong was also hired as part of the Federal Arts Project, a branch of the New Deal-era Works Progress Administration (WPA). His work during this period was heavily influenced by his friend, the highly regarded modernist painter Stanton MacDonald-Wright, best known for his use of rich harmonious colors (a style referred to as "synchrony") and his integration of Chinese compositions.

The Dragon's Den

Though he exhibited regularly, Wong and his fellow artists struggled to survive. Their answer was the Dragon's Den, a subterranean, trendy, Chinatown restaurant that attracted Hollywood stars such as Peter Lorre, Anna Mae Wong, and Sydney Greenstreet. It stood out among the chop suey joints of Chinatown and was the brainchild of close friend Eddy See. It boasted wall to wall murals and hand painted menus by Wong and his fellow artists. It was there that he met Ruth Kim, his future wife.

Walt Disney Studios

In 1938, following his marriage and birth of his first daughter, Wong said he "needed a job." It was at that time he began at Disney as an "inbetweeners," drawing hundreds of sketches of Mickey Mouse. He found the work tedious and numbing. When he heard that the studio was in pre-production on the feature film *Bambi*, he went home and painted several pictures of a deer in a forest. These small, but

evocative sketches captured the attention of Walt Disney and became the basis for the film's visual style.

Warner Brothers

From Disney, Wong headed to nearby Warner Brothers, where he switched from fantasy to realism. He was hired as a production illustrator and sketch artist where he painted and sketched concept art for hundreds of live-action films, including *Rebel Without A Cause*, *Calamity Jane*, *Harper*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, *Auntie Mame*, *April in Paris*, and *PT 109*. He was frequently loaned out to Republic Pictures where he worked on many John Wayne westerns, a genre that would become a favorite of his. He stayed at Warner Bros. for the next 26 years until his retirement in 1968.

Throughout his years at the studio, Wong continued to paint and exhibit his fine art. In 1954, he was featured in a short film produced by Eliot O'Hara demonstrating Oriental brushwork techniques. His commercial work included designing greeting cards for over 20 years, illustrating magazine covers and children's books, and painting calligraphic style designs on Winfield ceramic ware that sold in high-end department stores.

Kite Building

After retiring, he turned his attention to designing and building hand-made kites. His dozens of designs include multi-colored 100-foot centipedes, flocks of swallow, butterflies, and panda bears. In 1990, he and his kites were featured in the short film, *Flights of Fancy*. To this day, Wong flies his kites every month in Santa Monica.

Water to Paper, Paint to Sky: The Art of Tyrus Wong is organized by The Walt Disney Family Museum.

FREE Special Program

On Saturday, **August 17 from 11am to 5pm**, The Walt Disney Family Museum and the Presidio Trust will host a **FREE** Family Kite Day Festival on the Presidio's Main Post Lawn to celebrate the opening of the exhibition *Water to Paper, Paint to Sky: The Art of Tyrus Wong*. Watch spectacular kites flown high above the Presidio—from acrobatic kites of world champions to the hand-made entries of amateurs.

Enjoy food, games, and fun for the entire family including contests, kite making, and kite flying demonstrations, an antique ladder-climbing demonstration by the San Francisco Fire Department and much more. Free kites for kids will be available at the Make-a-Kite Pavilion so everyone will have a chance to soar!

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ABOUT THE MUSEUM

The Walt Disney Family Museum presents the fascinating story and achievements of Walt Disney, the man who raised animation to an art, transformed the film industry, tirelessly pursued innovation, and created a global and distinctively American legacy. Opened in October 2009, the 40,000 square foot facility features the newest technology and historic materials and artifacts to bring Disney's achievements to life, with interactive galleries that include early drawings and animation, movies, music, listening stations, a spectacular model of Disneyland and much more.

Hours: 10am to 6pm, Wednesdays through Monday; closed on Tuesdays and the following public holidays: New Year's Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

Tickets: \$20 adults, \$15 seniors and students, and \$12 children ages 6 to 17.
Admission is free for [members](#).

Where: The Presidio of San Francisco, 104 Montgomery Street, San Francisco, CA 94129

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