



Name in English: Tyrus Wong
Name in Chinese: 黄齐耀 [黃齊耀]
Name in Pinyin: Huáng Qíyào
Gender: Male
Birth Year: 1910
Birth Place: Taishan, China
Current location: Sunland-Tujunga, California

Profession (s): Animation Artist, Painter, Muralist, Kite Maker

Education: Bachelor of Fine Arts, Otis Art Institute, 1935

Awards: 2009, Hope of Los Angeles Award, City of Los Angeles; 2005, Winsor McCay Award, Association Internationale du Film d'Animation; 2001, Historymakers Award (arts), Chinese American Museum; 2001, Disney Legends, The Walt Disney Company; Outstanding Alumni, Otis College of Art and Design

Contribution (s): Tyrus Wong was a pioneer in animation that received little recognition for his achievements in the field until quite late in his life. He was born in Taishan, China in the final years of the Qing Dynasty which collapsed in 1911. In 1919, when he was nine years old, he was brought to the United States by his father, leaving behind his mother and sister. He would never see either of them again.

At Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay, he was separated from his father and underwent interrogation. Under the strict rules of the Chinese Exclusion Act some Chinese immigrants were held for years and some committed suicide out of despair over the prison-like conditions on the island. Wong didn't know where his father had gone, and he couldn't ask the officials about his father's whereabouts since he didn't know any English. Since he was the only child among the immigrants he also had no playmates or toys to pass the time. Because he was crying a guard gave him a piece of chewing gum and warned him with gestures that it wasn't for eating just for chewing. Wong chewed the gum until it had no flavor then put it on top of a hot radiator to melt, caught it with a piece of paper, and repeated the process over and over again just for something to do.

The tricky questions posed by the three immigration interrogators that interviewed him were designed to trip up would be immigrants to get them deported. Wong had spent a month memorizing pages and pages of answers from a coaching book in preparation as a paper son, assuming a fictional identity as the legitimate son named Look Tai Yow of an American born Chinese. At only nine years old Wong was scared half to death knowing that the consequences of a single wrong answer could lead to deportation. He later said about the traumatic experience, "They know it was fake. I'm sure they're not that dumb. They know it's fake. They just make it hard for you." Nevertheless, he passed, possibly because his father had bribed the inspectors, and was joyfully reunited.

Growing up in Sacramento and Pasadena, Tyrus Wong, with the encouragement of his father, would practice calligraphy and painting every night before going to sleep using water, a brush, and discarded newspapers since they couldn't afford ink and paper. He proved to be an indifferent student who especially despised math, but had a distinct talent for sketching that was noticed. A junior high school teacher in Pasadena arranged a summer scholarship for him with the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles (now the Otis College of Art and Design.) The experience proved to be so attractive that Wong dropped out of junior high school and worked as a janitor at Otis in exchange for an education there while also earning scholarships and receiving support from his father who borrowed money to help finance his son's education. When he graduated in 1935 he worked for the Federal Arts Project, a program of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) created by President Roosevelt as part of the effort to employ artists during the Great Depression. Wong created two paintings a month for exhibition at public libraries and government buildings.

In 1938, he joined Walt Disney Studios, during what came to be known as Disney's "Golden Age of Animation." In those years the company functioned like an extended family where workers familiarly knew the boss as "Walt." However, Wong was never introduced to Walt Disney and never spoke a word to him in the 3 years that he worked there.

His biggest work for Disney was as art director on the legendary film, *Bambi*, which was inducted in 2011 into the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress. The paintings that he made for the film were approved by Walt Disney and were used by other Disney artists and animators as blueprints for scenes in the movie. On the Disney History webpage about Tyrus Wong his importance to the film is clear, "As legendary animators Frank Thomas and Ollie Johnston point out in their book about the making of the motion picture, 'He set the color schemes along with the appearance of the forest in painting after painting 'Paintings that captured the poetic feeling that had eluded us (artists) for so long' Ty Wong not only inspired the other visual artists, but he created a standard that was met by musicians and special effects too.'"

Wong's vision was inspired by Chinese art where the focus was on simplicity. "In contrast to the paintings that showed every detail of tiny flowers, broken branches and fallen logs, Ty had a different approach and certainly one that had never been seen in an animated film before. He (Ty) explained, 'Too much detail I tried to keep the thing very, very simple and create the atmosphere, the feeling of the forest.'"

Pay disputes over movie bonuses in 1941 poisoned relations within Walt Disney Studios and led to a studio strike. In addition the onset of World War II and the closure of lucrative European film markets, and the financial disappointments of *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia*, (both films would only find financial profitability upon subsequent re-releases in theaters and on video) led to more arguments over pay leading many artists to leave the studio. Wong left that year before the release of *Bambi* in 1942 and joined Warner Brothers as a film production illustrator. Until 1968 when he left Warner Brothers, he drew set designs and storyboards for such memorable hit films as *Sands of Iwo Jima*,

Rebel Without A Cause, April in Paris, Auntie Mame, Around the World in Eighty Days, Harper, and The Wild Bunch.

His official retirement at the age of 70 didn't mean that Tyrus Wong stopped working. He exhibited and sold watercolors, designed cards for Hallmark, some of the Christmas ones selling over a million copies, illustrated magazine covers for Reader's Digest, and hand painted ceramics for Winfield Pottery in Pasadena that sold through Neiman-Marcus. His major efforts though were devoted to the many kites he built that he regularly flies at Santa Monica Beach and fill his house, some of them over 200 feet long.

As Walt Disney prepared to make the 1998 film, *Mulan*, set in Ancient China, they invited Wong to work for them again as an inspirational sketch artist after an absence of over 50 years from the studio. He declined the honor though, saying his work with animated films was no longer an important part of his artistic life.

In 2003-2004, the Chinese American Museum featured an exhibition of his art entitled, "Tyrus Wong: A Retrospective." In 2007, Wong was featured in "The Art of the Motion Picture Illustrator: William B. Major, Harold Michelson and Tyrus Wong," an exhibit at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Grand Lobby Gallery in Beverly Hills. In 2012, his art and some of his kites were featured at the Vincent Price Art Museum at East Los Angeles College in Monterey Park, California.

External Links:

<http://articles.latimes.com/2012/feb/09/local/la-me-angel-island-20120209>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5rz5whByOts>

<http://www.aiisf.org/stories-by-author/587-wong-tyrus>

<http://disney.go.com/disneyinsider/history/legends/tyrus-wong>

http://www.otis.edu/alumni/outstanding_alumni/tyrus_wong.html

http://articles.latimes.com/1989-07-20/news/we-5043_1_kite-man