

CULTURES, ONE UNIQUE TALENT



ARTIST PROFILE

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Symbols Landscape #1 by Kai

Artist combines
Chinese heritage
with influences
from his new
homeland

World class artist Yi Kai, 50, stands in front of two of his art pieces at his studio in Pomona.

Photos by Thomas R. Cordova/Staff Photographer

By Diana Sholley | Staff Writer

YI KAI sat on a small, worn couch in his humble Pomona art studio and spoke of a future that almost didn't happen.

When Kai was 15, he was forced to make a career decision about the rest of his life. China had given its native sons two choices and Kai wasn't thrilled about either.

"In that time in China, there was a cultural revolution," said Kai, now 50 and a Rancho Cucamonga resident. "When children graduated middle school, they could go to the countryside and be farmers or they could join the mili-

tary. I think, if I choose farmer, maybe sometimes there will be no food, no clothes, hard work and be poor. In Army I get food, clothes and could learn trade."

Kai joined the military and worked in its library as a projectionist, traveling from town to town showing military films. During this time, Kai developed a talent for drawing and painting. He cultivated his new passion with practice. His talent was noticed by higher-ups and Kai created military posters, signs and other propaganda work.

Those early, rudimentary works are a far cry from the award-winning pieces and collections Kai has painted since 1981. And that's just by luck.

Until the late 1970s, higher educational opportunities were scarce. Kai got lucky in 1979 when an army art college, the Art Institute of P.L.A. China in Beijing, decided to host a national art competition.

Because programs offered through the army were free, more than 4,000 potential students made proposals asking to be chosen as a contest entrant. Only 350 were chosen to compete for 35 spots.

"A lot of army officials wanted to send their children to this school," Kai said. "I did not think I had a chance."

To his surprise, Kai was chosen to take the test.

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INLAND VALLEY

Daily Bulletin

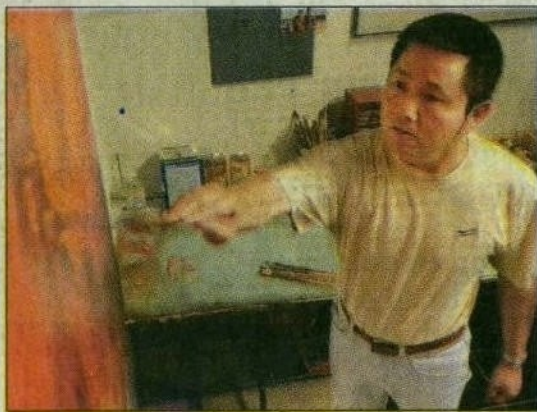
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LONG JOURNEY

Rancho resident and artist combines his Chinese heritage with influences from his new homeland



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All of the artists' works were scrutinized by 29 judges. To garner one of the spots, at least 15 judges needed to agree the artist's work was worthy.

Kai not only got in, he was the top choice and the only artist to get the nod from all 29 judges.

"The first four years I studied traditional Chinese painting," Kai said.

Kai earned his Bachelor of Fine Arts at the army college and went on to teach there for two more years.

However Kai wasn't satisfied to stay status quo. The more he painted, the more stagnation set in and Kai knew he needed to move on.

He was accepted at the University of Nationalities of China, Beijing. He earned his Master of Fine Arts in three years and taught there for an additional two.

Kai might have lived out his days painting and teaching in Beijing, but life took a violent turn.

"Where I live I could hear the shots from Tiananmen Square," Kai said, referring to the June 4, 1989, incident when protesters and the Chinese military clashed and hundreds were killed. "I just thought, 'There is no future for me here.' I wasn't afraid, I just say, I work so hard since I was 15, coming to new place couldn't be any harder."

Kai entered the United States in March 1990, making Minneapolis his home. He rented a 100-square-foot space where he lived, worked and tried to make a living.

"I went through the yellow pages and marked all the galleries," said Kai, who paints mostly in oils and acrylics. "I took buses from one gallery to another taking my paintings to show."

In 2005 Kai appeared on the National Register's Who's Who in Executives and Professionals.

Steadily, Kai built up his reputation. He had earned such awards as best in show at the sixth International Art Competition, in Estes Park, Colo., and Award of Excellence from Beijing Art Exhibition.

"Symbol of Family" was

chosen for the Curator's Choice award from the Minnesota College of Art Design.

When Kai became a citizen in 1998, his adopted country had already made its way into his heart and onto his canvas.

He gained much fame for "Symbolic Impression of America," a 52-inch by 92-inch oil painting on wood.

The painting reflects both sides of Kai's being. He incorporates Chinese symbols such as Yin & Yang with American icons like the cross, the dollar sign and the flag.

"I took the most important cultural symbols of the East and the West and made a cultural mix," he said.

Kai experienced another epiphany when America was attacked in 2001.

"After Sept. 11, everything crashed, everything changed," he said. "I got very confused. I think very seriously about 9/11, about human life and how we approach it. America did so many good things for the whole world, but one thing was not so good."

Kai believes many Americans are too consumed with material trappings.

"The U.S. has 1/20th of the population of the world and we use 25 percent of all the natural resources," he said. "If people can spread more paint and enjoy the process, they will care less for material. Since we were born we were meant to express ourselves by creativity."

Kai's feelings were so strong that in 2004 he joined Global Harmony Through Art, a group that teaches people about art as a universal language. Kai believes in the group's mission, to encourage and promote artists from all countries and cultures to work together, travel together and become friends.

Kai currently teaches art at the Rancho Cucamonga Community Center.

"If we keep going the way we're going, in 50 years we'll be in trouble," he said. "It's my goal to host classes in my studio. I want more people to understand art and the ways of art, and why it's so important to human life."

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