

By JEAN CHARLOT



## The art of Tseng Yu-ho



Tseng Yu-ho's seal

At the Academy of Arts yesterday afternoon there was a gathering of friends who wished heartfelt god-speed to Dr. and Mrs. Gustav Ecke before their departure for a year in Europe.

Dr. Ecke retires as curator of the Oriental Collections of the Academy. One of his major works, "Chinese Art in Hawaii," is a record in two volumes of their growth under his expert care.

Mrs. Ecke, under her given name, Tseng Yu-ho, is the internationally known painter.

I was a student, albeit a mature one, of both Dr. Ecke and of Tseng Yu-ho. Dr. Ecke taught me as much as I could absorb of Chinese art history.

I audited his courses, which means, in academic parlance, that he did not have to give me a grade.

This was just as well: I could neither pronounce nor write the names of the old masters we studied.

Tseng Yu-ho patiently at-

tempted to teach me Oriental calligraphy. Though I was as zealous a student as any, my accomplishments were on the dull side.

My hand and wrist proved quite as obtuse in the matter of ink painting as had been my tongue in pronouncing Chinese names.

Yesterday's gathering marked the opening of a showing of the most recent group of Tseng Yu-ho's paintings. At the close of the show the pictures will be packed and sent to Munich.

They will tour German Museums at the invitation of the Kunstverein, Germany's Museums Association.

For most Honoluluans it will be a first and last chance to view these works. If precedents stand, they will soon be scattered in European museums and private collections.

## First show at at Waikiki

Tseng Yu-ho's first show in Hawaii was in 1950, at Gump's in Waikiki. Much of this early work had been painted in China, before the Ecke's flight from Peking under the mounting pressure of political storms.

Her first show did not go decisively against the grain of what a Westerner expects in matters of "chinoiserie." (I choose on purpose the French term that implies a Westerner's reaction to things Chinese rather than Chinese art seen through Chinese eyes.)

The repertory was the traditional one. Vertical cliffs contrasted with horizontal river scenes. Gnarled tree trunks opposed crochety age to the youthful grace that stemmed from orchid leaves.

Tseng Yu-ho's evolution since then has taken her through difficult paths towards what could be labeled abstractions.

To understand the paintings that she paints today, it is worth retracing the road that led her there.

Her story is that of other displaced masters. The ob-

vious parallel is that of El Greco.

Born in Crete, he took new roots in Spain, where he acquired his surname. But to the end he signed his pictures proudly in Greek, his mother tongue, and with his true name, Domenico Theotokopoulos, Cretan.

As El Greco with Greece, Tseng Yu-ho's memory gives to her China even more substance than when China was all around her. Her past is very vividly a part of her present.

Dr. and Mrs. Ecke chose to build their house in Nuuanu Valley, on the edge of the forest reserve. For neighbors they have great pine trees and a waterfall, its foamy whiteness divided as it courses over black boulders.

To the natural setting a single rock was added, and a single plant with multicolored leaves.

Plant and rock, pines and waterfall are a microcosm of the beloved land both were exiled from.

Tseng Yu-ho looked in Hawaii for points of contact with her native land.

The Oahu valleys of the early fifties were not unlike China's own. Houses were

few. They mused up the natural beauty hardly more than had, in China, the lone pavilion erected by the sage as a shelter from which to view, undisturbed, the mountains.

Hawaii changed swiftly. A few years after the artist's arrival, houses filled the once empty landscape. An ocean of cement rose along its hills.

Today real estate maculates even the highest skyline.

In a folding screen owned by the Academy, Tseng Yu-ho, half humorously, half sadly, acknowledged the change. Her subject is a valley.

## It has a sea of houses

Whereas Chinese masters would cast in its concavity an imponderable cushion of clouds, Tseng Yu-ho casts in this one a sea of houses. Its title: "Settlement."

Nature, the nature of the sage, of the artist and of the poet, is going, going, gone. The profit motive won its battle against nature.

As we barbarians say, money talks. And money, pitted against the meditative silence of the artist, wins the argument every time.

Faced with this destruction of natural beauty, Tseng Yu-ho became less explicit in her search for subject matter. Her new style comes close to what Westerners call abstraction.

This term applies only loosely to her art. The Chinese artist never was overburdened by problems of realism. True realism plagues only the Western artist.

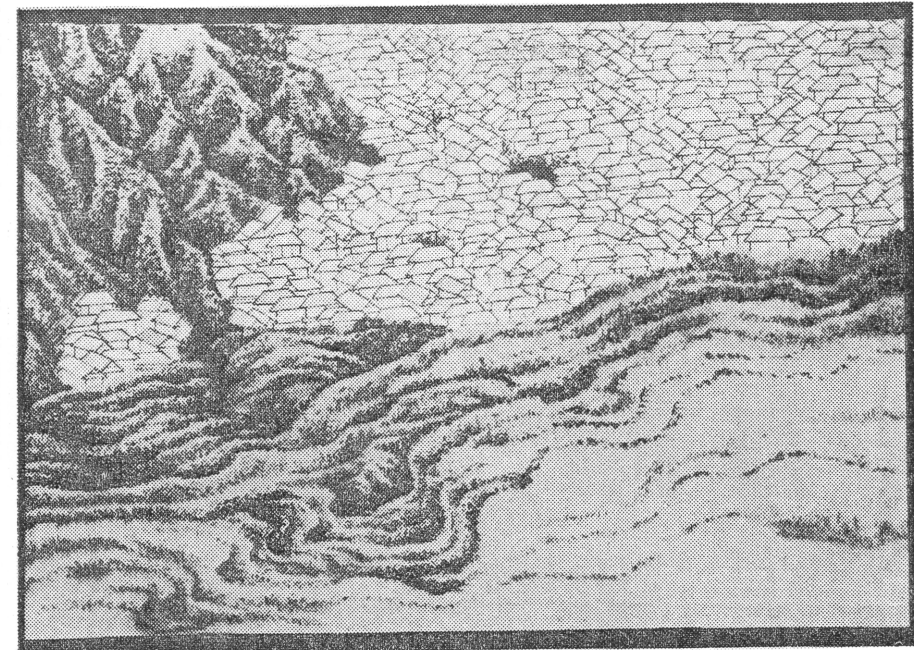
In Chinese painting, subject matter never was a must. Perhaps because calligraphy, the sister art, is so obviously abstract.

Chinese painting is also writing. The beauty of the brush work allows the eye a choice.

Now you see the thousand-year-old pine tree, overhanging a void. Close your eyes. Open them. The pine tree has disappeared. The picture has become abstract beauty.

The strokes of the ink-loaded brush slash the paper in contrasting directions. Values glide smoothly from velvety blacks—as deep as any by Rembrandt—to airy grays so lightly washed that they barely tint the paper.

Nature and abstraction cohabit in the work of every Chinese master. Unlike the



"The Settlement" by Tseng Yu-ho

Western artist who must brake violently with natural sights to enter the world of abstractions, the Chinese artist glides effortlessly from the one into the other.

As proof of this one may find in Tseng Yu-ho's realistic style premonitions of her abstract style.

An early panoramic view of fishermen's boats and a curving river is latent in the newly painted "Waterland," where a dark vertical courses between abstracted fields. This simplified river still retains a dotting of ghost boats.

In the painting, "Woodland," illustrated on this

page, the contorted gnarled trees the artist loved to paint become naked Y shapes.

The serried folds of hills are now schematic parallel lines alternating gray and gold.

The more one delves into Tseng Yu-ho's abstract style, the more do the resemblances between her art and our modern art fade out. Instead a sense of deep antiquity replaces surface modernism.

Straight lines, circles and dots, irregular rectangles are nearly her only means. The colors are few and subdued. The trees in "Wood-

land" are as simply stated as Hawaiian petroglyphs.

Having absorbed both cultures, of the East and the West, the artist achieves a peak of sophistication by rejoicing in undiluted simplicity.

Tseng Yu-ho's new work is done in the "dsui" technique, on sheets of metal, aluminum or gold.

Art lovers fond of French terms describe "dsui" as "assemblage." I prefer to translate it by the more homely term of "patchwork."

The metal leaf shows seams that divide the surface in irregular squares. Notwithstanding its high esthetic and spiritual content, "dsui" painting has some visual affinity with certain New England quilts.

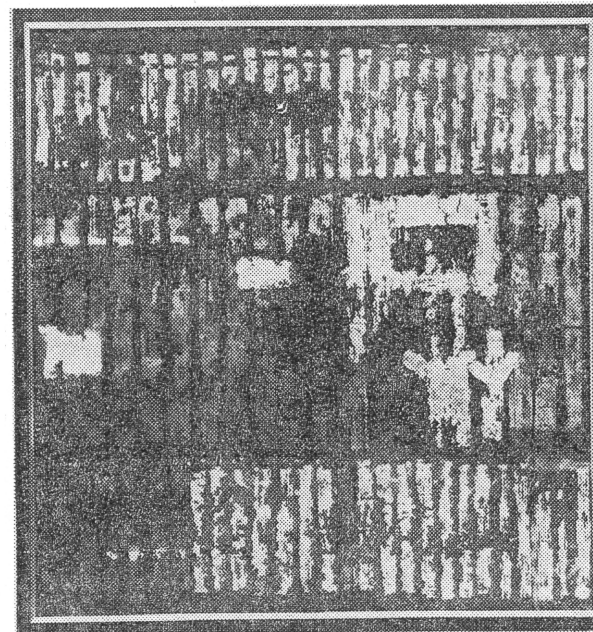
This humble image is contradicted by the splendor of the material used.

Tseng Yu-ho's new technique reminds me of the liturgical robes worn by Buddhist abbots in some mendicant orders.

The vestment simulates a beggar's tattered rags. It is torn and patched as an obvious symbol of poverty.

But in honor of God, the garment is made of splendid material, of varicolored silk threaded with gold and silver.

Spirituality emerges in Tseng Yu-ho's latest pictures. Having reached peace the hard way, her art deserves to be clothed in the tattered splendor of her very own "dsui" technique.



"Woodland"