# Biography of John Way



# Where Perseverance Opens the Stone

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# Chapter 1
# A Young Oracle Bone Calligrapher from a Scholarly Shanghai Family (1921–1937)



魏乐唐作品

In 1921, John Way (Wei Letang) was born into a family in Shanghai deeply immersed in the arts. He was the eldest child, with five younger brothers and one younger sister. His father, Wei Yiqing, was a wealthy businessman who had built his fortune in shipping and was also a renowned collector of Chinese painting and calligraphy. He maintained close friendships with leading artists and calligraphers, including Yu Youren, Zhang Daqian and Wu Hufan. Yu Youren was also John Way's godfather.

Growing up in such a family, Way enjoyed considerable advantages from birth. Yet the family's greatest inheritance was not merely financial wealth but a profound reservoir of cultural knowledge. At the age of ten, he began studying calligraphy under Li Zhongqian, a nephew and disciple of Li Ruiqing. Known by the sobriquet Qing Daoren, Li Ruiqing was among the most celebrated calligraphers of the late Qing and early Republican periods, renowned for the archaic strength and boldness of his brushwork. Under Li Zhongqian's guidance, Way studied not only painting, calligraphy and seal carving but also epigraphy, archaeology, Chinese history, philosophy, literature and classical poetry, receiving a comprehensive education in traditional Chinese scholarship.

In 1937, at just sixteen years old, Way held his first major solo calligraphy exhibition at the Daxin Company Gallery in Shanghai. Distinguished artists and calligraphers, including Yu Youren, Zhang Daqian, Huang Binhong, He Xiangning, Wu Hufan, Zhao Shuru, Liu Haisu and Li Jian, contributed inscriptions in his honour. In his preface to the exhibition, Yu Youren wrote: “I have known Mr. Yiqing for many years. His distinguished son Letang has studied diligently since childhood, learning calligraphy under Mr. Li Zhongqian. He has studied regular, cursive, clerical and seal scripts, and has already demonstrated remarkable artistic accomplishment.” Huang Binhong praised the young artist through reference to the technique known as “traces of rainwater on a leaking wall”:

“The ancients employed the method of traces left by rainwater on a leaking wall in calligraphy... Brother Letang possesses outstanding intelligence at a young age and devotes his leisure to practising calligraphy... From this foundation, it should not be difficult for him to trace the art back to the Shang and Zhou dynasties.”

At sixteen, Way had already received collective recognition from some of China's most distinguished painters and calligraphers. Yet he did not allow the glory of early success to distract him from further study.

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# Chapter 2
# The Path of Epigraphy: From Oracle Bone Script to the Hang Seng Bank Signboard (1937–1949)

What distinguished John Way was his decision to pursue a path considerably more demanding than that of a conventional calligrapher: the study of epigraphy and ancient Chinese writing systems.

At the time, oracle bone studies remained a relatively new academic discipline. Scholars such as Luo Zhenyu, Guo Moruo and Dong Zuobin were working to decipher inscriptions carved onto turtle shells and animal bones more than three thousand years earlier. At twenty-four, Way began studying Luo Zhenyu's Yinxu Shuqi, a collection of oracle bone inscriptions from the Yin ruins. At twenty-six, he met Guo Moruo and studied oracle bone inscriptions with him in Shanghai three times a week. At twenty-nine, his work Collected Couplet Compositions in Oracle Bone Script by Wei Letang was published in Hong Kong. He collected and studied writings on oracle bone inscriptions by prominent scholars such as Luo Zhenyu and James Mellon Menzies. After reading Dong Zuobin's Examples of Research on the Dating of Oracle Bone Inscriptions, he began seriously investigating oracle bone calligraphy and epigraphy.

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Way is regarded as one of the modern artists who practised oracle bone script calligraphy and as a pioneer in incorporating its forms into painting. At nineteen, he created the calligraphic signboard for Hong Kong's Hang Seng Bank. The familiar sign that remains visible on Hong Kong's streets was the work of an artist who had not yet reached the age of twenty.

In 1949, Way moved to Hong Kong. During his seven years there, he encountered Western painting and concentrated on realistic portraiture. His works were described as “capturing both physical likeness and inner spirit, with vigorous and powerful lines.” For five consecutive years, his paintings were selected for the annual exhibitions of the Hong Kong Art Association. For the first time, the precision of Western realism and the expressive power of Chinese calligraphic lines began to interact within his artistic practice.

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# Chapter 3
# Across the Pacific: An Engineering Student at MIT and an Engineer at RCA (1956–1973)

In 1956, John Way made the most important decision of his life: he immigrated to the United States with his family and settled in Boston.

For an artist who had already achieved considerable distinction in Chinese calligraphy and epigraphy, the decision represented a complete personal reinvention. He entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to study Mechanical Engineering while also taking courses in Form and Design at MIT's School of Architecture, systematically exploring modern artistic theory.

At MIT, Way encountered a body of knowledge fundamentally different from the traditional scholarship he had pursued during the preceding thirty years: the precise calculations of engineering, the formal principles of modern design and the theoretical foundations of abstract art. His classmates could scarcely have imagined that the quiet Chinese student among them was already an accomplished epigrapher who had created an oracle bone script signboard for a major Hong Kong landmark before arriving in America.

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After completing his studies, Way joined RCA as a mechanical engineer, working on design projects related to nuclear energy and space technology. During the day, he worked with engineering data in the laboratory. In the evenings, he devoted himself to painting, exploring the possibilities of abstraction.

This dual professional identity continued for nearly two decades. In 1973, Way moved to the southern part of the San Francisco Bay Area in California. He retired from engineering in 1992 at the age of seventy-one. After retiring from RCA, he “continued painting without interruption, achieving a level of accomplishment far beyond that of an amateur.”

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# Chapter 4
# Calligraphic Abstraction: The Fusion of Eastern Lines and Western Colours (1960–2001)

John Way's artistic exploration reached its first major peak during the 1960s.

In 1960, he held a solo exhibition at Nexus Gallery in Boston. In 1968, he presented another solo exhibition at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's art museum. In 1965, he participated in Painting Without a Brush, a group exhibition at the Boston Museum of Modern Art featuring internationally renowned contemporary artists, including Hans Hartung and Andy Warhol. For a Chinese-American artist from Shanghai to exhibit alongside a leading figure of Pop Art and a pioneer of European abstract expressionism was itself a recognition of the international character of his artistic language.

Way's artistic style was later described as “a perfect combination of the colours of French Impressionism, the compositional structures of American Abstract Expressionism, and the spiritual vitality of Chinese calligraphy.” His paintings displayed “the distinctive flowing lines and archaic brushstrokes of calligraphy, interwoven with the intense contrasts of colour found in Western Abstract Expressionism, resembling the way glazes intermingle on Tang dynasty sancai ceramics.” Robert Flynn Johnson, a curator at the Fine Arts

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Museums of San Francisco, had already collected Way's works in 1995 and 1997, “demonstrating that he had long been recognised by the international art world.”

Among pioneering overseas Chinese abstract painters, Zao Wou-Ki, Chu Teh-Chun, John Way and Chen Yinpi have been described as the “Four Heavenly Kings” of Chinese abstract painting. Unlike Zao Wou-Ki and Chu Teh-Chun, whose approaches began primarily with Western abstract artistic languages, Way remained firmly rooted in Chinese calligraphy and epigraphy. He gradually moved “from recognisable calligraphic characters towards the expression of pure fields of colour and physical energy,” ultimately developing a distinctive artistic language of calligraphic abstraction.

Another distinguishing feature of Way's career was his scholarly writing. During the 1980s, he completed an English-language monograph on the Mao Gong Ding, presenting his research on ancient Chinese bronze inscriptions to an English-reading audience. He also authored works on the Inscription for the Burial of a Crane and the Thousand Character Classic in Cursive Script. These publications combined the scholarly depth of epigraphy with the visual sensitivity of a practising artist.

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# Chapter 5
# The San Francisco Years: From Engineer to Full-Time Artist (1973–2012)

After moving to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1973, John Way entered a more independent and creatively unrestricted phase of his artistic career. In 1984, he held a solo exhibition at the gallery of the San Francisco Art Institute. Another solo exhibition followed at the Riemann Gallery in San Francisco in 1994. In 1997, his works entered the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. His paintings were also collected by the Stanford University Art Museum and the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

In 2001, at the age of eighty, Way received one of the most significant honours of his artistic career: a major retrospective exhibition at the Shanghai Art Museum entitled John Way: An Eightieth Anniversary Retrospective. Sixty-four years had passed since his first solo exhibition as a sixteen-year-old at the Daxin Gallery in Shanghai in 1937. That same year, the exhibition catalogue John Way: An Eightieth Anniversary Retrospective was published.

In 2006, his calligraphy and oil paintings were exhibited at the Honolulu Academy of Arts in Hawaii. In 2010, a retrospective celebrating his ninetieth year was held in Beijing.

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# Chapter 6
# Concluding Reflections: A Bridge Between Two Civilisations

In 2012, John Way died following an illness in San Francisco, at the age of ninety-one.

His life represented a remarkable journey across disciplinary boundaries. Yet his interdisciplinary pursuits were never superficial explorations. In every field he entered, he established deep and lasting foundations.

He was an epigrapher who studied Yinxu Shuqi at twenty-four, conducted research on oracle bone inscriptions with Guo Moruo three times a week at twenty-six, and published an academic work on oracle bone calligraphy at twenty-nine. He was a calligrapher who created the signboard for Hang Seng Bank at nineteen and held a solo exhibition in Shanghai at sixteen, with inscriptions contributed by such masters as Yu Youren, Huang Binhong and Zhang Daqian. He was an engineer who studied Mechanical Engineering at MIT and worked on nuclear energy and space-related design at RCA for nearly two decades. He was an abstract painter who exhibited alongside Andy Warhol in Boston and whose works entered the collections of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and the Stanford University Art Museum.

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These four identities were connected by a profound internal relationship. Epigraphy gave him an understanding of the origins of written language. Calligraphy developed his mastery of line. Engineering taught him precision and structure, while abstract painting provided the freedom to transcend conventional boundaries. In oracle bone inscriptions, he perceived more than writing from three thousand years ago. He discovered an archaic quality of brushwork, a pure force of line that existed before the formal rules of later calligraphy. That force ultimately found new life in his abstract oil paintings.

From the Daxin Gallery in Shanghai to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, from the Hang Seng Bank signboard to his English-language monograph on the Mao Gong Ding, and from RCA's engineering drawings to exhibitions alongside Andy Warhol, John Way devoted ninety-one years to constructing a distinctive bridge between two civilisations, two languages and two systems of knowledge. His legacy consists not only of his paintings and scholarly publications but also of a complete answer to a profound question: how can an individual enter an entirely new world while carrying the full richness of his own cultural traditions?

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