

## G. T. Chan biography

by Victor Chan and Elisa (Chan) Heaton ( younger son and daughter)

Goon T. CHAN ( Shek-kwan)

Born 1893 Tai Shan, Guangdong province, CHINA

Left China 1907 to Montreal for schooling.

School at Museum of Fine Arts Boston October 1917 to 1928. Winner of 8 scholarships.

Academie De la Grande Chaumiere Paris 1928

Florence Academy 1929 - 30

Art show in Boston, Myles Standish Gallery and Museum of FA 1930

Professor of Art and Head of Sculpture Department Guangzhou School of Art and Sheung Kun University 1931 to 1937

Refuge in Hong Kong from Japanese bombing of Guangzhou August 1937.

Success in Hong Kong 1937 to 42. Winner of First Prize Hong Kong Art Club exhibition White Peonies in Oil, 1938 and sculptured many dignitaries.

Escaped from Hong Kong to Guangzhou Wan after refusing to sculpt for the enemy early 1942.

1942-45 Guangzhou Wan with Hui Oi-chow

1945 to August 22 1951 Prolific work in paintings and sculpture.

He had been a student at the Museum School from 1917 and graduated in 1928, having spent almost 12 years there.

During that period of time, he started with drawing but repeated the class as he felt he could learn more from the live drawing class. He spent more time at the school than any other student. He went through all different aspects of art offered at the school, including painting in water colour, oil, design and sculpture. His main sculpture teacher was Charles Grafly. Grafly was instrumental in introducing Dad to an artist group in Rockport where, he acquired a small house on Bear Skin Neck. He would go up by boat to Rockport from Boston in the spring from March onwards and conducted, later in his student years, courses in sculpturing at his studio in Rockport. The house is named Gull's Perch.

Among his school mates was Miss Amelia Peabody who recognized his potential. Father was known for his persistence and perseverance in search of perfection. He did not seem ever to be totally satisfied with a piece of work. He would feel there was still some more improvement to make the next work even better. He was awarded 7 consecutive scholarships for sculpture. He was known to pursue art for art's sake as best exemplified by the marble head of the boy in Florence. After graduating he visited Europe, partly funded by the school, and attended the Academie De la Grande Chaumiere in Paris (Rodin's academy) and studied under Bourdelle, a noted pupil of Rodin. He then went on to Florence Academy where he did the marble head of a young boy.

This young Italian boy lived next door to his pension. Father felt that his features were exquisite and convinced the boy to sit for him. He started with a block of marble and did all the rough chiseling and cutting himself rather than entrusting this to a stone cutter. During that time, he took a trip to the Isle of Capri. On return to Boston, gave a show at the Museum and at the Myles Standish Gallery. He was very well received by the critics. F.W. Coburn wrote "In quality, the marble head of the boy should rank among masterly works of the age." At the Museum of he showed his works together with his teacher Philip Hale's.

After leaving Boston, he returned to Isle of Capri Italy where he married our mother. Fascist ideas were being promoted by Mussolini who was Minister of State. Marrying a Chinese was probably not the most political thing to do at the time. Practically the whole island came to the wedding, as she was born there, the granddaughter of a previous Governor of the Island, Majore Guiseppe De Maria. Many sailboats accompanied the married couple out to sea from Capri to Naples where they boarded a Japanese steamer on the long journey to China. She

had no idea then, that it would be at least 20 years before she would return.

On their journey, with many stops along different places to Hong Kong, there were new sights and sounds for our Mom and even for our father. It was a 25 year away from China. His purpose of coming to North America was to respect his mother's wishes of coming and learning western medicine but he was more interested in Art than Medicine.

Father became a professor of Art in two universities in Guangzhou, one established by the city, the Canton School of Fine Arts and the other provincial Shun Kun University. He was soon well received by society in Canton; the Mayor, high government officials, rich merchants, foreign dignitaries such as General F. Lindermann, (military advisor to the Chinese government early 30s), literary figures, all sought after him to do their busts and full size or greater bronze statues. This was the best period of his career. (1931 to 1937). In 1937, the Japanese attacked China and bombed Canton and the family took refuge in Hong Kong.

Through his work for the Mother Superior of the Sisters of Our lady of the Angels, an order from Quebec, Canada, the family took refuge in her convent and my sister joined their school.

Father, between 1937 and 1941, again became very well known as a sculptor and painter and his commissions were many during the time of unrest in the world. He made notably, the bronze bust of the Governor of Hong Kong Sir G. Northcote and many of the noted people, including Sir Robert Kotewall, Duncan Sloss Vice Chancellor of the University and many noted English and Chinese scholars and military men including Major McFadyen. He had done the memorial bust of Dr Sun Yat Sen. He published a book in 1941 of his works. His painting of white peonies won first prize at the 1938 Hong Kong Art Club exhibition.

When the Japanese conquered Hong Kong the conquering General ordered father to sculpt to glorify their victory. As he refused, he was obliged to run away during the night to China, just above Indochina. After leaving in early 1942, he was not heard from until late 1945 and mother had information that he had died during that time.

After peace from the Second World War father returned and once again picked up on his work. A good friend and fellow artist, Yang Sin Sum when he was 92 years old, told me father was always working and

always conscientious, was considered one of the best sculptors of China. Between 1946 and 1951 he was very busy doing commissions for Sir Arthur Morse, Chairman of the Hong Kong/Shanghai Bank, Sir Robert Hotung and many others. He also painted flowers and water scenes of sailing junks and Hong Kong's water front. He returned with an assistant Ah Sing who became part of the family. He helped with the heavy work of casting Both the clay and the bronze were of inferior quality compared with pre war, necessitating a lot of clean up. Father returned to Canton in 1949 after liberation. He gave his last exhibition in 1950 in Hong Kong. Critics praised the quality of his work. The Governor of Hong Kong Sir Alexander and Lady Grantham and Sir Robert Hotung were among the notables that attended. In mid August 1951 he suffered a stroke and died on 22 August 1951 leaving us memories of his unusual life, his undying dedication to his art and his precious works.

Dean Deborah Dluhy SMFA Boston welcomed Judy and I and showed great interest as I narrated the career and life of G.T. Chan, using father's booklet of works (1941) and the CD of his works photographed by my brother Anthony. **“Portrait of a Boy” was received by Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 2009 and resides fittingly in father's art school library.**

**2010 May: Retrospect Exhibition GT Chan (Shek kwan) Vancouver Chinese**

**Cultural Centre Museum “First Generation Chinese Return Sculptor”.  
Museum Curator Paul Yeung.**