

Biography

Jack Wise, artist, poet, teacher, and long time British Columbia resident, found great solace in the painting process. A deeply spiritual man, he believed in the importance and meaning of individual brushstrokes and that each stroke "has a unique singular voice" and tale to tell (ibid). He was extremely well read in many subjects including physics, world religions, and Asian art. Along with his friend and mentor, Lin Chien-Shih, he hoped to reduce the gap between East and West. This desire is reflected in his art, which often takes images from the natural surroundings of the Pacific Northwest, and other inspiration considered to be Western, and approaches them with a technique based upon the strokes of Chinese calligraphy.

Jack Marlowe Wise was born on April 27, 1928 in Centerville, Iowa. He completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at Washington University, St. Louis. In 1955, Wise received a Master of Science degree in Art done at Florida State University. Once out of university, he started teaching and lecturing about art and producing abstract expressionist paintings. Wise met Toni Onley while living in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico from 1958-1961 (George Woodcock, "Dragons, Mandalas, and Secret Writings: Paintings of Jack Wise," *Artscanada* (October 1976), 1). Onley was the first person to tell him of British Columbia. Upon his return from Mexico, although successful, he quickly became unhappy with what he was producing and gave up painting for a few years. At this point he took a position as an art director at an advertising firm in San Francisco. (ibid.) Shortly after, in 1963, he immigrated to British Columbia, and decided to try living off the land in the interior of the province.

Unable to stay away from painting for long and having gone through a catharsis (Bill Porteous interviewed by Angela Andersen, 02/01) as the result of the physical labour of homesteading, he had his first Canadian one-man show at the New Design Gallery in Vancouver in 1965. The following year he was recipient of a Canada Council Senior Fellowship for travel and study of Tibetan Art in India. During the year overseas, he travelled to a Zen Buddhist monastery in Japan, to Delhi, and to Tibetan refugee camps in Northern India. The visit to India left an indelible mark on Wise's artwork and exposed him first-hand to Asian art techniques, works of art, thought, and religion. (George Woodcock, "Dragons, Mandalas, and Secret Writings: Paintings of Jack Wise," *Artscanada* (October 1976), 1). In 1967, Wise started a longstanding exhibition relationship with the Bau-Xi Gallery in Vancouver. He travelled to Europe after receiving a Canada Council Senior Arts Award for Residence in Europe in 1969. He spent much of his time in Spain and exhibited at galleries in Edinburgh, London, and Heidelberg.

With his wife, Mary, Jack had three children in the early seventies (Andrew Scott, "Jack Wise," *Arts West*, 1978, 19). After several years living between various homes in Victoria and on islands off the coast of Vancouver Island, Wise moved to a cabin on Denman Island for the final years of his life. Wise spent the final years of his life with Marilyn Hausman. Surrounded by nature and secluded in his home, Wise was able to meditate and paint uninterrupted. His health swiftly declined and he died at the age of 68 in November of 1996.

Jack Wise rejected art as a social commodity believing it to be a form of social communication. Unfortunately, in order to survive Wise needed to sell his art. In particular, he regretted having to sell some of his mandalas, as they were intended to be unsigned gifts (Rimmer, *Jack Wise: Language of the Brush*, 1998). He left an immense and impressive body of work that is rooted in his great spiritual education and understanding.

Jack the Teacher

Jack Wise was devoted to learning and creating, but he also often took on the role of teacher. The arts community was able to share in his knowledge, skill and inspiration, while at the same time benefiting from the foundation of programmes that continue today, such as the Victoria College of Art. He was involved in showing the work of other artists and both edited and wrote the forward for the catalogue of the *Mystic Circle* exhibit, held in Burnaby, B.C. in 1973. He also wrote an introduction to a portfolio of prints by Lin Chien-Shih that same year, sharing his knowledge and insight through text, rather than his powerful images or technical demonstrations. Wise moved to Mexico in 1958, to San Miguel de Allende. There, he lived with other artists, and taught classes in textile work for the local peoples. He left this situation in 1961 and moved to British Columbia, initially giving up painting for farming, but eventually giving classes in Nelson.

Jack's students reveal that he had a quiet way of teaching, using a few, carefully chosen words to guide and instruct them. It was the process of using the brush or undertaking a mandala that were emphasized, and his comments were intended to guide rather than criticize. His spiritual and transcendent approach was, at times, coupled with the very analytical way in which he could examine the world. Jack's friend Bill Porteous commented:

He was very intellectual, very analytical. His class at the Detroit College of Art, that HE wrote, and HE titled, was called not "Nature", but "Nature Analysis". That tells you something, I think. Most people would go "Well, if Jack wrote a title for a class, he would never say Nature Analysis. That sounds too scientific." Analyze: pick it apart. That's what he titled it: Nature Analysis, and when given the opportunity, Jack was fairly erudite. (interviewed by Angela Andersen, 02/01)

In 1974, Jack Wise helped found the Victoria College of Art. It was intended to function as a non-profit, post-secondary institution for art education, that would allow students to work outside of the college and university system. He taught classes there, and many of his students went on to further study of the brush work that he focused on.

In 1984, a group of Victoria-area artists, including Robin Hopper, Flemming Jorgensen, Carol Sabiston and Rhona Murray began the Metchosin International Summer School of the Arts (MISSA). It was intended for artists and educators looking for further inspiration to allow them to develop in a more satisfactory way, in the setting of Pearson College of the Pacific, in Metchosin, B.C. Flemming Jorgensen contacted Wise, who taught at the school for 5 summers, with the increasing burden of failing health. Wise focused on brush work in these classes, teaching mandala painting only once. Wise continues to be listed as an ambassador for the MISSA programme, and brush work courses in his calligraphic, experiential style are taught each year by former student Lorne Loomer.

Potter and MISSA founder Robin Hopper explains the process of the brush work instruction: *Students would go down to the wood pile and select pieces of bark from fir trees, generally, or cedar trees, and they'd pound one end of it until it became fibrous and like a brush, and that's what they used for making marks with, which is probably one of the earliest forms of brush that was ever used. The whole process from finding your piece of wood to pounding it with a rock and so on was a meditative process. It got you into a headspace to be able to work with that tool, and ink, and paper, to develop your art. (interviewed by Angela Andersen, 02/01)*

Wise was an artist in residence at the University of Calgary, where he influenced other artists in connection with Lin Chien-Shih's circle. He led extremely popular workshops on Chinese brushwork in many locations, but rarely took private students.

It seems that Jack Wise made many of his life experiences into a lesson of some kind, whether it was how to focus energy into the tip of the brush as it crossed the paper, how to meditate on the creation of a mandala painting, or how to view the events of daily life, as Bill Porteous explains:

Jack and I would go out for Chinese tea - we liked going to China town. We'd take turns buying lunch, because neither of us had a lot of money, but we enjoyed each others company and I looked up to him and he, I think, appreciated what I was doing. We were out at a restaurant and I was complaining about something, it doesn't matter what, and Jack said, "Well, Bill, can you show me what you are upset about?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, can you put it on the table here, so I can see it?" I said "no." He said, "Well, then what is it? What are you upset about? Are you upset about being upset?", which is a very Zen kind of approach to things. So, he was kind of tapping me on the shoulder, like they do in Zen, and saying, you know, "Wake up. Your consciousness is drifting, here." And I said, "Thanks." That was good, and I learned something from that. (Bill Porteous, interviewed by Angela Andersen, 02/01)

Jack the Student

Jack Wise entered a fine arts programme as an undergraduate student in the Midwest, attending Washington University in St. Louis. He completed his Masters of Science in Art at Florida State University in 1955. This formal education was only a small part of the lifetime of enlightenment that Jack Wise pursued. His voracious appetite for reading in philosophy, physics, geometry, religion and the sciences, his experiences with other artists, travel to Tibet and India on Canada Council grants, and audiences with spiritual figures such as the Dalai Lama and Lobsang Phuntshok Lhalungpa of Tibet shaped both his view of the universe and his art.

Jack Wise had a profound command of Chinese calligraphy (Lin Chien-Shih [Jack Wise, A Decade of Work](#)) and had been doing brush stroke work for many years before he began his training with his teacher, Lin Chien-Shih. Chien-Shih assisted Wise in understanding the technique and the meaning of this intricate form of brush work and confirmed the validity of his work, and Wise referred to his great friend and instructor as his mentor. Chien-Shih was a master of Chinese calligraphy, a poet, seal carver, ceramicist, and sculptor who immigrated to Canada with his family in 1970. In spite of the language barrier between them, Wise and his teacher found that they were able to communicate because of the common visual expression they shared.

Many of the lessons Wise learned from Chien-Shih came from observing the master at work. Lin Chien-Shih had a wide circle of friends, but he took on very few private students. Once, he assigned a single calligraphic stroke to a student to practice, saying, "I want you to do this a thousand times". She returned in two weeks, bringing the thousand strokes to Chien-Shih. He was looking at all these works, and finally he got to one and he said, tapping on his choice, "That's the one". The student just about fell over, and she said, "Well, Chien-Shih, I was putting my brush away. After doing this, I was completely exasperated, and I was just exhausted with trying to do this, and it never felt right, and my brush fell on the paper". That was the one. He was saying that's the way, to, translated from the Chinese, 'do without doing'. (as told to Angela Andersen by Bill Porteous, 02/01)

Chien-Shih once said that it had been the artist Mark Tobey who had told him that he should come to the West Coast. (Diane Carr, interviewed by Angela Andersen, 03/01) Chien-Shih was living in Europe at the time, having spent time with Picasso, Braque, and Tobey. Chien-Shih and Tobey resonated because they were both pushing into a field that was unexplored and bridging Eastern and Western culture, but Chien-Shih was more experienced because of his Tao discipline. He decided to explore this Western connection in Vancouver, where he met Wise.

Jack Wise wrote of his mentor's black and white paintings, embodying elements of Zen Buddhism and Taoism, in the West Coast Review. In a piece entitled: "From Cross-cultural Fertilization to Interface: A comment on the painting of Lin Chien-Shih" (Vol. 7, April 1973, 9-10). Wise explained

His paintings seem to grow ... this rhythmic progression unfolds as informal a space as that which we observe in wood grain, waves of water, stones or cellular structure, all woven together as naturally as a spider's web. Clearly, to the attentive eye, these paintings come from a man who, while in the act of creation, embodies a oneness with the forces of nature which no amount of calculation or contrivance can hope to achieve. We look not at a thing, but at a process.

The respect between teacher and student was mutual. In an essay for the catalogue of Jack Wise: A Decade of Work, Chien-Shih wrote "I find that he has surpassed Tobey" (Lin Chien-Shih, AGGV, Victoria, 4.), indicating that Wise had exceeded the calligraphic accomplishments of Mark Tobey, an artist born in 1890, in Centerville, Wisconsin. Tobey had moved to Seattle and demonstrated a great interest in Chinese and Japanese calligraphy, preceding Wise in attempting to embrace Chinese calligraphy within a western context, blending Abstract Expressionism and Asian inspired brush work in a similar manner.

For Wise, his teacher was an inspiration. The two men were following the ancient tradition of initiating a disciple through a Master. Wise may just as easily been describing his own work when he wrote of Chien-Shih's painting that "an acknowledged master of traditional Chinese calligraphy has transcended tradition by painting works which are ... startlingly contemporary and deeply knowledgeable of International style." (Wise, West Coast Review, 10). Perhaps more important than their relationship of student and teacher, Lin Chien-Shih and Jack Wise formed a bond of friendship and family. They hoped that they would one day meet in another life as monks, to spend their days in meditation and painting in Chinese caves (interview of Bill Porteous, Angela Andersen, 02/01) Wise said, "He was like an older brother to me." (D. Rimmer, *Language of the Brush*, N.F.B., 1998).

Local Influences

Jack Wise created work that appears to have encouraged many art critics to place him in categories with other painters working at the same time and in the same region. Some of these associations come from philosophies he shared with his peers. Some of the connections to "schools" or groups of artists were made through his unique blend of contemporary and ancient styles and techniques, and some are simply the result of living amongst the natural surroundings of Canada's West Coast. Wise was an artist, a teacher and a student, and he lost no opportunity to use the knowledge he avidly acquired through friendships, reading and observation, in his distinctive approach to creating art.

Wise is placed along with Lin Chien-Shih and Mark Tobey in what has been labelled the Pacific Northwest School of Abstract Calligraphic Painting (Shiara Alwis, "[The Pacific Northwest School of Abstract Calligraphic Painting](#)", *The Art of Jack Wise*, Victoria, 1998, 21-24). These artists combined American Abstract Expressionism with Asian aesthetics and doctrine. For them, art was a meditative process and, as phrased by Chien-Shih, they felt a sense of freedom working outside of the strict rules imposed by the academic world (*ibid.*), both as calligraphers and painters.

The synthesis of writing and painting in Asian calligraphy, the general interest in Chinese and Japanese culture in North America in the 1940s and 50s, and the Zen Buddhist ideals of simplicity and directness appealed to the Abstract Expressionists, who were yearning to break free from European traditions in art (Barbara Rose, "Japanese Calligraphy and American Abstract Expressionism", *Words in Motion*, Japan, 1984.). This incorporation of the 'void', the open space or unpainted area in Asian traditions, with the often heavy, centrally focused aspect of many European painting styles resulted in this new method of "abstract calligraphic painting", in which the three artists could manifest the tension of the Taoist importance of opposites.

The fusion of Eastern and Western thought and practices was frowned upon during the first part of Wise's career. His initial combination of Asian and Occidental art coincided with the sixties, and his paintings were often berated as superficial representations related to the psychedelic movement. Wise was stigmatised for being associated with this group, and his deep study, understanding and connection to Eastern tradition was largely overlooked until more recent times (Glenn Allison, "*At SFU Gallery Jack Wise A Decade of Work.*" *YVR-Vancouver in Review*. IV (September 1978), 13.).

Many of Wise's early shows in British Columbia took place at the Bau-Xi Gallery, in Vancouver. The Bau-Xi Gallery was established in April, 1965 by Bau-Xi Huang "in order to create a showcase for the many emerging and established Canadian artists in need of a gallery on the West Coast." ("History", www.bau-xi.com, January, 2001) and remains an integral part of the contemporary Canadian art world. This involvement with people and institutions in the arts in British Columbia earned Jack many peers and admirers over the years.

The local influence on Jack Wise was not merely in the context of other artists and scholars. He once said, "We are nature and nature is us." (David Rimmer, *Jack Wise: Language of the Brush*, 1998), and the beauty and power of the natural surroundings of the Pacific coast and the Gulf Islands, where he made his home, did not fail to move him. Although Wise may have chosen to see the universality in the nature that we are all a part of, the unique power of the sea and the purity of the landscape did emerge in his art in a number of ways.

Jack moved to a house on Texada Island, and for years he was surrounded by rocky, glacier-formed beaches. He told his long-time friend Stephen Cummings of time spent beside the ocean, painting the rocks and the driftwood with water-soluble ink for the elements and "the tide to deal with" (Stephen Cummings, "Jack Wise: A Personal View", *The Art of Jack Wise*, Victoria, 1998, 11). Jack made ink from mushrooms (*ibid.*, 12) and used brushes crafted from cedar bark, among other materials found in his surroundings. Wise centred himself and the instruments of his art in the earth, in the Taoist tradition.

From the late seventies to early eighties, Wise became associated with a group of artists known as the West Coast Surrealists or Hermetics. This group included well-known West Coast artists, such as Gary Lee-Nova, Gregg Simpson, and Ed Varney who returned to the style of the Surrealist movement of the 1920's. They attempted to develop an approach to life that made personal experience a more vital part of their work. Surrealism focused on the Freudian concept that each of these artists had an individual psyche, the opposite of Wise's appreciation of Jungian theory, the work of Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1875-1961). In Jungian psychology, all individuals are part of a conscious known as the collective unconscious, shared by humanity and without regard for the barriers of race, culture, and religion. Wise's paintings seem to reflect this philosophy by using several individual strokes to create a unified whole, and through allusions to a god or higher power, a universal belief that exists, in a variety of forms, in all cultures.

Wise's approach did not go through any major changes from the late 1960's to his death. For the most part his works were either calligraphic fields or mandalas; consequently, it can prove to be quite difficult when dating his work. However, he did approach abstract constructions of nature or mysticism using calligraphic brushwork, and certain subjects or themes in series such as the Dorje series. The Dorje series, c. 1985, contains wonderful examples of how Jack Wise simultaneously embraced the richness of colour and the grace and discipline of calligraphy. The strong shapes at the centre are apparent from afar, but the intricacy of the meticulous brush strokes Wise made his life's work reveal entire realms within minute spaces. Dorje is a Tibetan word which may be translated as "indestructible" and "diamond-like". Once these paintings enter the mind, they are like precious gems that, unlike paint and paper, can never be destroyed.