

Pioneering artist blazed trail with blend of East and West

Hong Kong mourns Hon Chi-fun, founder of the Circle Art Group, who has died at the age of 96

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In 2013, the frail but irrepressible Hon Chi-fun said he planned to carry on painting as he always did despite having just turned 91.

"The enemy is at the gates. Death, just like the Japanese army in the war, is coming to get me," he said ahead of his solo exhibition at the Rotunda in Central. "In the meantime, I shall continue with my painting as I have always done. I will not be rushed by death."

And that is what he did. Until he became too weak about two years ago, he would pick up his brushes daily in the Kowloon flat he shared with his wife, the artist Choi Yan-chi, as determined as he was in the aftermath of a debilitating stroke in 2000.

"I was coming out of a thick fog with a fire burning in my heart. I was not afraid of death any more," he said, recalling his state of mind when he painted *Out of the Valley* (2000), an abstract composition with a bright red spot emerging from a grey mist.

He could not remember a moment when he didn't have a brush in his hand. Born in British colonial Hong Kong in 1922, the eldest son of a taxi driver went first to a traditional Chinese private school, a so-called *Bok Bok Jai* where old, bearded Confucian masters focused on getting young children to memorise classic Chinese texts and demanded unquestioning obedience.

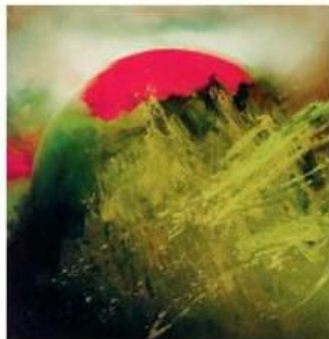
Hon's mischievous nature would land him on the receiving end of the master's whip often. But he did get something out of his early schooling – a superb command of Chinese language and calligraphy.

A few years later, he was plunged into the more practical and respectable Wah Yan College in Kowloon, a leading Catholic boys' school where lessons were taught mainly in English. Through the school years and later, when he started making a living as a postal inspector after the Japanese occupation from 1941 to 1945, he taught himself how to paint whenever he had a free moment.

The post-war years were lean times, but a fertile period for



Tai Mei Tuk, 1959 (above) and Rising Light, 2000 (below).



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HON CHI-FUN, SPEAKING IN 2013

Hong Kong's blossoming art scene.

Prominent southern Chinese ink artists such as Lui Shou-kwan and Chao Shao-an moved to the city and taught here. In the 1960s, the Cultural Revolution on the mainland and the riots in Hong Kong prompted reflections on the city's identity. At the same time, young Hongkongers were overlapping up Western cultural influences such as the Beatles and pop art.

Hon spent every Sunday sketching with fellow artists who were all trying to bridge Chinese ink traditions with Western modernism. Soon after American abstract expressionists such as Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell began to reference Asian calligraphy and brushwork in their art, Hon and fellow Hong Kong artists switched to abstract representation of their inner feelings while experimenting with different materials.

As a self-described hippy with a motorbike, Hon co-founded the Circle Art Group and started using airbrushes on acrylic.

Through the decades, he would move from acrylic paintings to Taoism-inspired screen prints, multimedia works and writing poetry. His was the first generation in Hong Kong to seek a new visual language to represent the melting pot of identities and cultures they lived in, and to break away from traditional Chinese forms so radically it would have left his old *Bok Bok Jai* teachers foaming at the mouth.

He was widely collected in the 1970s and 1980s, by the Museum of Art in Hong Kong and mostly collectors. The older Hon expressed disappointment Hong Kong modernist artists were often overlooked, but was not surprised. Having become part of China in 1997, the city was destined to stay on the margin as the world's big powers determined the course of art history, he said.

He and Choi moved to Canada after the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown in Beijing, but moved back to Hong Kong in 2000, when he had a stroke.

He was taken to hospital a few weeks before he died on February 24 and was shown the catalogue of his upcoming retrospective at the Asia Society, which will open on March 12. He died in hospital surrounded by his family.

A Story of Light: Hon Chi-fun, Asia Society, 9 Justice Drive, Admiralty, 11am-6pm, Tue-Sun, Mar 12-June 9.



The late artist Hon Chi-fun at his home in Ho Man Tin in 2013. Photos: Jonathan Wong, Edmond So, Handout