



Wong, Martin (1946-1999)

by Richard G. Mann

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American artist Martin Wong created innovative, transgressive paintings that celebrated his queer sexuality and explored multiple ethnic and racial identities.

Although largely self-taught as a painter, Wong succeeded in gaining significant recognition in the highly competitive New York art world of the 1980s. Defying easy classification, his intellectually and psychologically complex paintings have most often been described either as social realist or as visionary.

Challenging Eurocentric notions of the limited range of subjects appropriate for an Asian-American artist, Wong focused primarily upon Latino and African-American subjects throughout the 1980s. In the following decade, he turned his attention to his Chinese-American heritage, creating bold paintings that combined childhood memories with spectacular Hollywood versions of Asian culture.

Within his deceptively naive style, Wong incorporated references to the art of many different cultures in his images. His wide-ranging interests also were manifested in his extensive collections of many types of objects, ranging from children's lunch boxes to medieval Persian miniatures.

An avid participant in the street culture of the Lower East Side in New York City, Wong became the most important individual patron of American graffiti art. In 1986, he co-founded with Peter Broda the Graffiti Museum, now incorporated into the Museum of the City of New York.

Background and Formal Education

Martin Victor Wong was born on July 11, 1946, in Portland, Oregon, where his grandfather owned a jewelry business. An only child, he was raised by his parents in San Francisco, where they worked for Standard Oil and Bechtel Corporation.

In a 1993 interview with Elisa Lee, Wong remarked that his grandparents and other members of his extended family had a profound influence on his personal development, combining as they did the spirit of "the Wild West" with involvement in Chinese civil rights politics.

Wong demonstrated a very early attraction to men in uniform. As a young child, he was a familiar figure to many firemen and policemen in San Francisco, and he frequently ran down streets after their vehicles.

Revealing precocious artistic talent, Wong began painting when he was 13 years old. His mother strongly encouraged his interest in art, and she began systematically preserving all indications of his talent. Now an invaluable resource for scholars of the art of Wong and his associates, the substantial archive of materials that she collected and organized over the course of several decades is housed at Fales Library, New York University.

After graduating from George Washington High School in San Francisco in 1964, Wong studied ceramics at

Humboldt State University, where he received his bachelor's degree in 1968.

Wong's study of ceramics had a significant impact on his later career as a painter. For instance, the emphasis placed in ceramics training upon the properties of pigments helped him to develop a strong appreciation of subtle shifts of tone. More specifically, the hues that he utilized most frequently during the 1980s (burnt sienna, ochre, and umber) can be related to his experience in ceramics.

Most importantly, Wong's commitment to technical refinement and his systematic investigation of the properties and possibilities of the painting medium can be related to his education as a ceramicist. During the period that Wong studied ceramics, most American university programs in painting downplayed and even denigrated technical skill and emphasized instead a largely conceptual approach to art making. As a result, many painters of Wong's generation sought emphatically crude methods of execution. However, because of the complex, difficult, and potentially dangerous processes involved in ceramics, technical matters continued to be emphasized in the training of artists in that medium.

Wong in Eureka and San Francisco, 1964-1978

While attending Humboldt State, Wong began living in nearby Eureka. He remained based in this small town on the northern coast of California until 1978. Surrounded by awe-inspiring redwood forests and boasting many outstanding examples of ornate late nineteenth-century architecture, Eureka by the mid-twentieth century had attracted a vibrant and idiosyncratic community of artists, who were treated with tolerance by the largely working-class population.

Art historians generally have overlooked work done by Wong in Eureka. However, in paintings that he created there during the mid-1970s, he already revealed his fascination with run-down urban environments.

A typical painting of the period, *Weatherby's* (about 1974), depicts a road with diner, motel, and stores--a commercial strip that could be located almost anywhere in the United States. Ignoring the natural and architectural splendors glorified by other regional artists, Wong represented Eureka as it probably was experienced by many of its working-class residents. Also dating from the mid-1970s, a portrait of a fellow artist, *Bill McWhorter in a Convertible with a Boy and Dog*, is infused with the erotically-charged, rugged masculine energy apparent in his later paintings of acquaintances in New York City.

The free handling of paint, electric colors, and swirling forms of the earlier work contrast with the meticulous execution, earth tones, and carefully-balanced compositions characteristic of his paintings of the following decade.

The bright neon colors and the exuberant, curved shapes of *Weatherby's* correspond with much of the psychedelic art produced in the San Francisco Bay Area during the late 1960s and the 1970s. However, Wong has indicated that he was most strongly influenced by Regionalist American artists of the 1930s; for instance, Thomas Hart Benton similarly infused town and landscape views with a great sense of energy by arranging forms in wave-like patterns.

Advertising himself as the "Human Instamatic," Wong supported himself in part by drawing portraits of other residents of Eureka. Despite his slogan, he consistently treated subjects in a highly imaginative way. For example, he drew Peggy Dickinson with three heads to convey her energy. Although later commentators often have characterized these portraits as grotesque, his clients were pleased by the accuracy with which he captured their distinctive characteristics, physical and otherwise. A very vigorous use of line enlivens all these portrait drawings. Influenced by Persian miniatures and Chinese landscape scrolls, Wong fused images, lettering, and decorative motifs into dense patterns.

By 1967, Wong had an apartment in the heart of the Haight Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco, and he began to divide his time between San Francisco and Eureka. Wong eagerly participated in the emerging hippie movement, joyfully taking advantage of the era's sexual freedom and experimenting heavily with psychedelic drugs. Some critics have attributed the visionary aspects of his work to his use of hallucinogenic substances, but it seems unlikely that his artistic genius has such a simple explanation.

By the mid-1970s in San Francisco, Wong was actively involved in the Angels of Light, a communal theatrical group that sought to fuse mysticism and sexuality in presentations that incorporated dance, music, lavish costumes, and performance styles from diverse cultural traditions. Wong helped to paint the scenery for their shows, which were usually presented outdoors. Although the commune had a significant number of women members, performances by the Angels tended to emphasize specifically gay male sexuality, and audience members were encouraged to join performers in realizing sexual fantasies as a means of achieving spiritual enlightenment.

In 1978, Wong abandoned the relatively laid-back environments of Eureka and Haight Ashbury and resolved to establish himself as a major player in the highly competitive New York art world. The boldness of his decision can hardly be overemphasized; thus far, his art had received only a very minimal level of attention on the regional level.

Despite this radical change in his career path, Wong's experiences as a hippie continued to manifest themselves throughout his later years. Until the end of his life, he continued to sport the long hair and large Fu Manchu moustache characteristic of hippies. Moreover, he maintained a sexually promiscuous lifestyle, and he continued to utilize hallucinogenic substances, once ending up in Bellevue Hospital as a result. Inspired by the communal ideals of the hippie movement at its best, he often freely distributed proceeds of his artistic endeavors to help friends and other struggling artists.

Wong in the Lower East Side

Moving to New York in 1978, Wong immediately established himself in the Lower East Side, a working-class neighborhood, which, by the 1970s, had become a predominantly Puerto Rican community with numerous other minority residents, especially Dominicans and other Latinos and African Americans. Attracted by the low rents, many young aspiring artists helped to make the Lower East Side a major center of advanced art production between approximately 1974 and 1984. Although the neighborhood has now been largely gentrified, it was still run-down in the 1970s and 1980s.

Shortly after arriving in the city, Wong moved into Meyer's Hotel on Stanton Street. The manager offered to let him stay free for three months if he would clean up three rooms with collapsed ceilings. However, he ended up staying for three years, serving as the night watchman throughout that time. In 1981, he moved to a nearby six-floor walkup occupied by heroin dealers and addicts.

Wong extensively explored his new neighborhood and he became deeply involved--personally and professionally--with its Latino residents. Eager to interact on an equal footing with his neighbors, Wong taught himself to speak Spanish by picking up words from them. The nickname "Chino Malo" (Bad Chinese), affectionately given to Wong, attests to his integration into the community.

Throughout the 1980s, Wong devoted himself to depicting the streets and buildings of the Lower East and its residents, especially the workers, firemen, boxers, and criminals, who became his friends and lovers.

During this period, Wong focused almost exclusively upon Latino and African-American subjects, thereby challenging theories of identity then prevailing in the art world, which held that artists should confine themselves to themes that were directly relevant to their own ethnic and racial heritage. However, as

Yasmin Ramírez has noted, Wong's choice of subjects during the 1980s accords with the experiences of many Chinese immigrants who settled in Latino neighborhoods in the United States.

Artistic Transformation

During his first few years in New York, Wong successfully undertook a radical transformation in his style of painting. Considering that he held a variety of jobs to support himself throughout this period, his achievement is remarkable. By the mid-1980s, he was employed as a clerk at the bookstore of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which began collecting his work in 1984.

Although he did not receive any formal instruction to assist his development, he undertook intensive independent study of works by a wide variety of artists. Largely working on his own, Wong changed his art in ways that did not correspond to predominant trends in the contemporary art world.

Among the many modern artists whose work profoundly influenced Wong, one may note the following: Grandma Moses, whose combination of obsessive detail and visionary imagination often has been compared to Wong's style; Edward Hopper, whose poetic views of New York directly anticipate Wong's cityscapes; Piet Mondrian, whose dynamic abstract compositions (such as *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, 1942-43) directly inspired Wong's paintings of urban walls (notably, *Flagstone Boogie Woogie*, 1984); and Jasper Johns, whose enigmatic depictions of ordinary objects strongly influenced Wong's approach to his subjects. In addition, Wong also found constant inspiration in popular culture and in the people and buildings of the Lower East Side.

Early Paintings of the Lower East Side

Typical of Wong's many paintings of street scenes done during the early 1980s, *Stanton Near Forsyth Street* (1983) exemplifies the transformation of his art.

Despite the illusionistic spatial recession of the massive background buildings and the meticulous textures of the brick and plaster walls, other elements emphasize that the scene is an artificial construct, endowed with mystical dimensions. A flat surface with no visible sides, the building in the foreground seems on the point of disappearing.

Most of the flat black sky is covered by large, blocky hands that spell out in American Sign Language the words of one of Wong's poems about the heavens at night. In the few remaining spaces of the sky, Wong drew out and labeled several constellation charts--thus indicating abstractly the heavenly bodies, which he chose not to depict illusionistically.

Playing with levels of reality, Wong enclosed the street scene within a painted trompe l'oeil wooden frame, which he inscribed below with his name, the title, and date, and above with poetically evocative phrases: "Morning at the edge of time. It never really mattered."

In this picture, the two men on the street seem dwarfed by the massive buildings with boarded up windows. At the far left, a figure closely resembling the artist, stands facing the viewer, while a man, shown in profile, walks toward him from the far right. These figures subtly evoke a cruising and pick-up narrative, although there are no explicit indications of interaction between them. Complicating efforts to devise a conventional narrative is the Spanish inscription, describing a scenario that does not correspond with Wong's arrangement of figures.

Representing the hotel room in which Wong lived and worked, *My Secret World, 1978-1981* (1984) has been compared to *Bedroom at Arles* (1888) by Vincent van Gogh, whom the later artist considered an inspiration for his own efforts to create a new manner of painting revealing the spiritual in the mundane.

In contrast to van Gogh, Wong makes his room visible only through two windows and thus denies the viewer the full view of the space, as provided by van Gogh.

Blurring boundaries between reality and illusion, the rows of brick create an exquisite surface pattern. The window frames bear a variety of inscriptions, including the declaration that "It was in this room that the world's first paintings for the hearing impaired came into being."

Psychiatrists Testify: Demon Dogs Drive Man to Murder (1980)--one of the best known of Wong's early Paintings for the Hearing Impaired--is displayed within a wide brick frame on the long wall, visible through the left window of *My Secret World*. In *Psychiatrists Testify*, voluptuous hands with large fleshy fingers spell out in American Sign Language the title and other statements, all derived from a tabloid newspaper account of a murder trial. Within the context of *Secret World*, this Painting for the Hearing Impaired evokes the seedy hotel rooms of detective novels and films.

Paintings for the Hearing Impaired

The name Wong devised for his American Sign Language series is bluntly humorous since all paintings obviously are comprehensible to the hearing impaired. Wong here may be revealing his impatience with pseudo-liberal identity categories that define and thus limit human potential. Nevertheless, virtually all commentators maintain that the Paintings for the Hearing Impaired simply indicate Wong's deeply felt commitment to reaching out to the socially dispossessed through his art.

Attesting to Wong's profound knowledge of art history, this project also is related to an important theme in Renaissance art theory, concerning the supposed superiority of painting to music. Thus, Leonardo da Vinci and other Renaissance artists maintained that paintings could so completely engage viewers that they could hear sounds emerging from the scenes depicted.

Originally exhibited in Lower East Side and Soho restaurants and antique shops in 1980, the Paintings for the Hearing Impaired were the first works by Wong to attract significant critical attention. Although Wong rarely produced paintings with Sign Language as the sole subject after the early 1980s, he continued to incorporate hands spelling out words in many cityscapes and figurative paintings.

During a Public Art Fund-sponsored residency at New York City's Department of Transportation (1990), Wong created *Traffic Signs for the Hearing Impaired*, executed by city workshops in aluminum steel and made the same size and colors as conventional traffic signs. Located in all five boroughs, these are used to identify public schools and to provide important directions ("One Way Street," "Watch Out for Pedestrians," etc.). In 1992, Mayor David Dinkins gave Wong a Special Arts Award to acknowledge his efforts to include all New Yorkers through his creation of these works of art.

Storefronts

During the 1980s, Wong created an extensive series of paintings, which he referred to as Storefronts, depicting the facades of various businesses, places of worship, and social organizations located in the Lower East Side. For example, *African Temple at 9th Street* (1985) shows two occupants of the storefront temple against its outer walls, which are densely covered with inscriptions. Like many other paintings in the series, *African Temple* attests to Wong's fascination with graffiti and found inscriptions of all sorts.

Blurring boundaries between reality and illusion, Wong makes several of the Storefront paintings, such as *Iglesia Pentecostal* (1986), approximately as large as the facades that they are supposed to depict. Moreover, as Jasper Johns did in *White Flag* (1955), Wong emphasizes the equivalence of painting and subject by omitting any indication of spatial depth. However, in both *White Flag* and *Iglesia Pentecostal*, subtly textured paint indicates that the images are reproductions of other things.

Although strongly influenced by Johns' intellectually complex approach to the depiction of supposedly ordinary objects, Wong differed from him by focusing upon subjects that resonated with the experiences of those excluded from the mainstream because of race, economic status, or sexual orientation. Nevertheless, despite Wong's flamboyant personality, references to homosexuality in his paintings of the early 1980s are almost as discreet as in paintings by Johns.

Pedro's Lament

Pedro's Lament (1984) was inspired by his passionate and stormy relationship with Pedro Rodriguez, an amateur boxer whom he met in 1980 and with whom he lived for several months, as explained by Barry Binderman in *Sweet Oblivion*.

Wong's relationship with Rodriguez is deeply encoded in this work, and one needs to be familiar with the details of Wong's biography to appreciate how it visualizes his personal experiences. However, even a casual viewer can recognize this as a complex and powerful work, functioning simultaneously on multiple levels--visually, emotionally, and intellectually.

Recalling a relic in a Catholic altarpiece, a sketchbook, opened to a pen drawing of Rodriguez, is displayed behind glass in a large gilded frame on the lower level of the painting. Rodriguez also is invoked by the tirade transcribed on the blackboard-like surface that occupies virtually all of the center area of the painting. A wild combination of endearments, pleas, and threats, this tirade so disturbed Wong that he ended his relationship with Rodriguez shortly after it occurred.

Collaboration with Miguel Piñero

Both personally and professionally, Wong's complex relationship with Miguel Piñero generally is considered to be one of the most significant events of his life. A reformed drug dealer and burglar, Piñero (1946-1988) began writing with serious intent during his third imprisonment for armed robbery (1971-73 at Ossining Correctional Facility), and he had become an award-winning playwright and poet by the time he met Wong. Describing himself as a poet of the streets, Piñero wrote eloquently and powerfully about the experiences of Puerto Rican immigrants in New York.

Wong met Piñero in 1982 at the opening of *Crime Show*, a group exhibition at ABC No Rio, which included two paintings for the hearing impaired. Within a few weeks, Piñero had moved into Wong's apartment, and they lived together for the next year and a half.

Wong also credited Piñero with introducing him to aspects of the East Side that he did not know and with enabling him to become more fully integrated into its Latino community.

During the time that he lived with Piñero, Wong was able to develop a very significant body of work, which was presented in his first solo exhibition, *Urban Landscapes*, held in 1984 at Semaphore Gallery East.

Wong made several images of Piñero, including the tall, narrow *Portrait of Piñero* (1982), which depicts the poet writing in a notebook, opened on a ledge that also serves as picture frame. Above and behind Piñero are several of the brick tenement buildings that were beloved by both artist and writer. In the dark sky at

the top of the picture, fleshy hands recalling the hearing impaired paintings record some lines from Piñero poems.

Wong incorporated similar hands in the foreground of *Attorney Street: Handball Court with Autobiographical Poem by Piñero* (1982-84), where they spell out one of his frequent declarations: "It's the real deal Neal I'm going to rock your world."

In *Attorney Street*, graffiti, sign language, letters, architectural motifs, and trompe l'oeil elements (including brick and wooden frames) are densely compacted together in what Wong described as a "landscape without a view." On the wall of the handball court, Wong reproduced graffiti painted by one of Piñero's young followers in a Lower East playground. In addition, Wong transcribed in the grey sky above the brick tenements an extended selection from one of Piñero's poems.

Attorney Street undoubtedly is the most famous of the numerous paintings that Wong created in collaboration with Piñero. The Metropolitan Museum of Art purchased *Attorney Street* shortly after its completion, and this event transformed Wong's career, establishing him as a major player in the New York art world.

Homoerotic Paintings

The dramatic change in Wong's status may have given him the confidence to depict homoerotic themes more explicitly than he had up to this point. One of the first of these is *The Annunciation According to Mikey Piñero* (1984), a free visualization of an incident in Piñero's critically acclaimed play *Short Eyes* (1974), set in an unnamed prison in New York City.

Wong specifically references the attempted rape of the beautiful young Cupcake by the drug addict Paco, but he makes a number of changes from Piñero's play. For instance, Wong moves the scene from the showers to the more neutral setting of a corridor outside a prison cell, where Cupcake is less vulnerable. Although excerpts from Piñero's text on the background wall emphasize the brutality of this incident, Wong transforms this violent scene into a transcendent spiritual encounter through his handling of the figures.

Following the imagery traditionally used in Catholic altarpieces of the Annunciation, Wong shows Paco bending down with one knee on the ground, as he raises an arm in salutation to Cupcake. In the play, Cupcake emphatically rejects Paco, but Wong shows Cupcake with an ambiguous, rather puzzled expression on his face as he turns toward Paco. Thus, Wong leaves open the possibility that Cupcake may accept Paco's offer of love.

The reference to the Annunciation is emphasized by the large bouquet of roses, drawn on the walls at the upper right. These traditional symbols of the Virgin Mary also may have been intended in part as an allusion to *Our Lady of the Flowers* (1942), one of most famous books by Jean Genet, who fused Catholicism and homoeroticism in his fictionalized accounts of prison life.

Genet had cult status in the queer art circles that Wong frequented in New York. Wong's friend, David Wojnarowicz, also paid tribute to the French author in his *Untitled (Genet)*, a Xeroxed collage of 1979; a half-length haloed Genet stands in the foreground of what appears to be a bombed out cathedral, which is filled with human and angelic figures and which features a large altarpiece of Christ "shooting up."

From the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, Wong created other paintings that were inspired by Piñero's vivid oral accounts of his experiences in jail. These include *Penitentiary Fox* (1988) and *Sacred Shroud of Pepe Turcel* (1990).

In addition, during this period, Wong created many other paintings celebrating queer sexuality that do not

directly reference Piñero's accounts. For instance, the provocatively titled *Big Heat* (1988) relates to his long-held fascination with firemen. This painting depicts two ruggedly handsome, Latino firemen, passionately kissing before a burnt-out brick tenement building in the background.

As no fire-fighting equipment is visible, it seems possible that these "firemen" are simply two queer men who enjoy dressing in uniforms, as Wong did. Indicative of the intense queer sexual energy of this image is the fact that a large reproduction of it was featured in the 1994 Halloween poster of *The Saint*, a popular gay club in the Lower East Side.

Gemini (1988) shows two Latino men dressed in fire-fighting apparel standing with their arms intertwined; the title references not only the couple but also the constellation visible in the sky. Wong may have intended the circular shape to recall *tondo* pictures, used in the Italian Renaissance to celebrate marriage. The arrangement of simplified, cubic buildings resembles cityscapes in fifteenth-century Italian paintings. Moreover, the ornate frame designed by Wong closely corresponds with Renaissance examples.

Paintings of Chinatown

Part of the Storefront series, *Harry Chong Laundry* (1984) is the only one of these paintings to depict a Chinese-American business. Distinguishing *Harry Chong Laundry* from most of Wong's work of the 1980s are the bright colors and bold forms, which provide a premonition of the distinctive style of his Chinatown paintings of the 1990s.

Canal Street (1992) is exceptional among Wong's Chinatown paintings of the 1990s because it accurately reproduces a New York setting of that decade. Wong presents side-by-side, duplicate views of the Golden Empire Jewelry Center, a New York landmark located at the corner of Canal and Center Streets. Wong also shows two versions of the adjacent telephone booth, streetlight, and subway entrance.

At a quick glance, the two exteriors seem identical, but more careful scrutiny reveals significant gender differences in the figures visible through the windows. In the left building, six elaborately coiffed women in elegant, silk cocktail dresses press themselves up against the windows of the third floor. In the right building, the only figure visible is a man wearing a business suit, who stands stiffly behind one of the doors on the ground floor.

On a broad band, extending across the top of *Canal Street*, large gold-bordered letters and characters identify the building in English and Chinese. Displayed in the midst of these inscriptions is a gold-framed portrait of the artist, who smiles broadly at the viewer. Although his head is turned in the direction of the building on the left, his eyes are focused to the right. Wong has portrayed himself dressed in the quintessentially American garments that he often wore: bright cowboy shirt and tall Stetson hat. Located midway between two differently gendered versions of a stereotypically Asian structure in America's largest city, Wong is ideally situated to construct a distinctive identity, composed of diverse cultural and sexual elements.

In contrast to *Canal Street*, virtually all of Wong's Chinatown paintings are set in San Francisco. However, Wong does not depict San Francisco's Chinatown as he could have known it. Instead, he depicts the tourist Chinatown of the 1930s and 1940s.

In visualizing this version of Chinatown, Wong drew inspiration from Hollywood films, as well as from stories of family members, especially his beloved Aunt Nora, who had been an emcee at the Lion's Den nightclub in the 1930s. His use of stereotyped images of Chinese culture provoked charges of racism from some commentators. However, Wong brilliantly succeeded in celebrating his multiple identities as queer, Chinese, and American through his fusion of popular and personal motifs.

Anthony Lee's study of the Forbidden City Theater during the 1930s and 1940s provides insights that can be

applied to the interpretation of Wong's Chinatown paintings. As Lee explains, the fusion of American popular culture and Orientalist fantasies at nightclubs in San Francisco's Chinatown club created spaces in which queer Asian-American entertainers, such as the dancer Jack Mei-Ling, could enact transgressive sexual and gender identities, unnoticed by the largely white clientele, who focused almost entirely on issues of race.

Wong's Aunt Nora features prominently in many of Wong's paintings of Chinatown, including in *Ms. Chinatown* (1992), where she reclines in the foreground in a pose evidently derived from Édouard Manet's famous *Olympia* (1863). In *Grant Avenue, San Francisco* (1992), she stands in the left foreground--closely resembling photographs taken of her in the 1930s. Gazing out over her shoulder is a portrait of the artist as a young boy, as he appears in family snapshots of the early 1950s. Thus, Wong freely blends different decades as well as diverse cultural constructs.

In the right foreground of *Grant Avenue*, a handsome, muscular man embodies the erotic ideals of the adult artist. Turning around to gaze in the direction of the viewer, this figure is an Asian translation of the men on the streets in Wong's paintings of the Lower East Side. Underlining his homoerotic appeal, Wong shows this man eagerly sucking on a Popsicle while holding a cigarette.

The stylized, gilded buildings in the background are based upon structures still located on Grant Avenue, but Wong has rearranged them. The vivid red sky emphasizes that this is a theatrical recreation of the San Francisco street. Wong commented that he intended the bright colors and simplified forms of this and other Chinatown paintings to compensate for the lack of Chinese-American themes in the large-scale murals, commissioned during the 1930s by the WPA for major public buildings throughout the United States.

Wong exuberantly conveys queer male sexual energy in many of the other paintings associated with his Chinatown series. For example, in *Incident at Waverly Lane* (1992), he shows Kato with an emphatically erect penis, practically bursting through his pants, as he jumps above a stage-set version of a street in San Francisco's Chinatown.

Quoting from his earlier *Big Heat*, Wong again represents two firemen passionately kissing in *Sanja Cake* (1991). Here, the two men are displayed within a heart, lined with brick walls, which recall the backgrounds of many of his paintings of the Lower East Side. In turn, the brick heart is placed at the center of the wrapper for the popular Chinese-American product, labeled in English and Chinese. Thus, Wong here creates an intensely erotic image that fuses many cultural referents, all of great personal significance to him.

Like *Canal Street*, many of Wong's San Francisco Chinatown paintings visualize the artificiality of gender conventions. For instance, *In the Studio* (1992) inverts the traditional relation of male artist to female model. Poised with brushes in hand before canvases on easels, two women clad in traditional Chinese garments prepare to paint a seated male model, nude except for his shoes and socks.

Final years

In 1994, Wong was diagnosed with AIDS, and, as his health declined the following year, he decided to move back to San Francisco. Although he continued to paint, the level of his production declined.

In 1998, a comprehensive retrospective exhibition--held at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York and at Illinois State University Galleries, Normal--contributed to his growing reputation as a major American artist.

Martin Wong died on August 12, 1999 at the San Francisco home of his mother, Florence Wong Fie, who tenderly cared for him during his final years. To celebrate his life and art, the Museum of the City of New York held a memorial program in his honor on November 1, 1999.

Since 2003, the Martin Wong Foundation has recognized his encouragement of emerging artists by providing scholarships to undergraduate and graduate students in painting and ceramics at Arizona State University, Humboldt State University, New York University, and San Francisco State University.

Conclusion

Since Wong's death, his paintings have been included in many exhibitions in North America, Asia, and Europe. Wong is now recognized as a pioneer of the cross-cultural perspectives that have become increasingly valued in the art world.

Wong frequently stated that he most wanted to be remembered for contributing to the heritage of gay male figurative painting established by Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, and other American painters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Incorporating queer perspectives into poetic depictions of the Lower East Side and into exuberant images of San Francisco's (and sometimes New York's) Chinatown, Wong significantly broadened the scope of queer expression in American art and opened the way for new developments in the twenty-first century.

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