



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Fong Chow, 2002
February 6**

Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America. Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Fong Chow on February 6, 2002. The interview took place in New York, New York, and was conducted by Margaret Carney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Fong Chow and Margaret Carney have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

DR. CARNEY: This is Margaret Carney interviewing Fong Chow at the artist's home in New York City on February 6, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Good morning, Fong Chow.

MR. CHOW: Good morning, Margaret.

DR. CARNEY: It's nice to see you again.

MR. CHOW: Thank you. My pleasure to see you.

DR. CARNEY: I think we'll start at a logical beginning place, if you could talk about when and where you were born.

MR. CHOW: I was born in Tianjin, North China.

DR. CARNEY: And what year was that, and what date?

MR. CHOW: That was December 2, 1923.

DR. CARNEY: And can you tell me about your childhood and how that might have influenced you as an artist, an art historian, and scholar and maker? Were you in China for a long period of time? When did you go to Hong Kong? Could you talk about your background in that way, and who your family was?

MR. CHOW: My family was quite Westernized. My father was educated in England, and he worked for a coal mining company in North China. My mother was born in Sydney, Australia-let me see now, I've forgotten-[pause]-but was educated in Hong Kong.

DR. CARNEY: That was your mother?

MR. CHOW: Yes, and spoke fluent English.

My grandfather was among the first Chinese to study in the United States. At age 13, in 1874, he was sent to Hartford, Connecticut. He attended school there, then went to Andover and Columbia University. After he returned to China, he worked in the customs office and was general manager of

one of the earliest railroads in North China. He retired in Hong Kong, which was then a British crown colony. There he worked to improve the life of the Chinese population. He was active in civic and cultural forces, including hospitals for the Chinese. For his work, the British awarded him a knighthood.

DR. CARNEY: When was that?

MR. CHOW: I have to look it up.

DR. CARNEY: Do you remember your grandfather very well?

MR. CHOW: Very well. In 1932, my parents and I, with my three brothers, moved back to Hong Kong. We lived in a big Chinese house with a Western-style garden, together with grandfather, grandmother, uncles, aunts, and cousins. As the oldest grandchild in the family, I enjoyed a happy, carefree, spoiled childhood.

DR. CARNEY: You were the oldest grandchild?

MR. CHOW: Yes. Yes.

DR. CARNEY: Oh. And can you tell me how that kind of background might have impacted your career choices and that kind of thing?

MR. CHOW: I attended Chinese schools in Hong Kong. The Japanese occupation in 1942 interrupted my studies. It was then that I started to paint in Western styles, as I found a wonderful teacher, Yu Been, Y-U B-E-E-N, who had trained in Canada. After the war, I was able to travel to Mainland China, to Canton and Shiwan, S-H-I-W-A-N, a ceramic center since about the 12th century. There I was excited to see the old, wood-fired dragon kilns and the colorfully glazed vases and roof ornaments they produced.

There was also a museum in a converted family shrine showing the examples from some of the best periods, because many of the pieces were signed. I was very moved by the works and wondered if someday I could learn to do this kind of work.

Yes, I have worked in other media. As I said, I studied painting in Hong Kong. I continued to paint when I was a student in Boston [School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston]. I was commissioned to paint a number of portraits in oil, notably Judge Pierre Northrop of Concord, Massachusetts, and the wife of the then-editor of the Christian Science Sentinel.

I have also dabbled in photography. For the last 10 years or so, I have tinted black-and-white photographic prints with oil paint, in the 19th century tradition. I've also done photograms and collages.

DR. CARNEY: I remember when we were working on the "Alfred Asia Connection/Reflection" exhibit that was at Taipei Gallery [New York City], and I was writing about you and researching in depth how varied your work has been. You have worked in so many different areas. My first connection with you was ceramics, obviously, and I think I referred to you as a renaissance man, because you really-

MR. CHOW: Oh!

DR. CARNEY: -well, you really have a genius-

MR. CHOW: Oh, high praise!

DR. CARNEY: -with so many different media. And I'm wondering, I know you've enjoyed all of those, has there been a highlight? I mean, if you look back now, can you say that because you started with painting-even though you'd seen the ceramics, the Shivan-can you say that one impacted your life to a greater extent? I mean, the fact that you did-in the cases over there-the beautiful Junware glazes and celadon glazes that you were so interested in, was that more important than your work later, more recently with photography, or is it the balance?

MR. CHOW: That certainly was. Ceramics became my major study, and I was minoring in painting and printmaking.

DR. CARNEY: This was at Boston?

MR. CHOW: That was in Boston. And I am also glad to report that in doing portraits for people, I also earned some of my pocket money.

DR. CARNEY: Oh. [Laughs.] That's important.

MR. CHOW: [Laughs] Yeah. Anyway, it was time for me to study abroad. My father asked whether, as the oldest son, whether I would prefer to have education in Europe or in America, and without hesitation, I said that I would really like to follow my grandfather's footsteps and come to the new country.

DR. CARNEY: Well, that's wonderful.

MR. CHOW: Yes. So on my first trip from Hong Kong to the United States, I stopped in Japan, Honolulu, San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Boston.

DR. CARNEY: When was your first trip?

MR. CHOW: That was in 1947, two years after the Second World War.

The fine ceramics I saw in the museums made a lifelong impression on me. They motivated me to make hand-thrown pieces and develop my own glazes. This I did at the Boston Museum School, at Alfred, and throughout my career.

DR. CARNEY: I remember you telling me that when you were at the Museum School in Boston, that you would try-when you were working in your studio, you would try making some glaze, and then you had the great luxury of going upstairs into the museum and actually looking at the early, the Sung dynasty Chinese work in the museum and sometimes handling those pieces. Is that a true story?

MR. CHOW: That was true, because the ceramic department was in the basement of the Boston Museum, near the Huntington entrance. Eventually we outgrew the space, and a new ceramic department was built next to the museum school. So eventually, we moved.

DR. CARNEY: That's a great story.

MR. CHOW: Yes. So later, when I was working at the Metropolitan Museum, I had the opportunity to travel to many countries and saw more wondrous works of clay, like the magnificent Babylonian glazed-brick walls lined with animal relief in Berlin, the superlative Chinese ceramics at the British

Museum and the Victoria Museum in London, and thousands of terra-cotta soldiers and horses in Shiyang, China. I had the advantage of seeing private collections, and examined objects not shown to the public. One year in Sweden, Bo Gyllensvard, curator of the King's Collection of Chinese ceramics, said to me, "Here are the keys to the cabinet. You can look and handle anything you like."

DR. CARNEY: Wow.

MR. CHOW: That was, you know, so nice.

DR. CARNEY: I remember Lawrence Sickman talking about Mr. Gyllensvard also.

MR. CHOW: Yes. Lawrence Sickman also did the same thing with me, just said, "Help yourself," you know, and closed the door. [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: Mr. Sickman actually let me take a piece home one week, and I got to study the piece at home in my house in Lawrence and then take it back to the Nelson-Atkins Museum [Kansas City, MO].

MR. CHOW: Yes!

DR. CARNEY: He was very generous. I didn't learn anything, I don't think, other than I was scared the entire week something was going to happen to the piece he gave me. [Laughs.]

MR. CHOW: Yes. But they're all so generous and treated-

DR. CARNEY: Well, he said that about you also.

MR. CHOW: Yes. I mean, treated us like members of the private club.

DR. CARNEY: Since you brought up the Metropolitan Museum of Art and you've mentioned Alfred, could we talk a little bit about your schooling, how you got from the Boston School to Alfred to go to school? How did you hear about Alfred when you were in Boston?

MR. CHOW: After four years at the Boston Museum School, the logical place to go is Alfred, and I was very lucky to have been accepted.

DR. CARNEY: Was there a particular person that told you that Alfred was the place that you should be?

MR. CHOW: No, but Alfred is known for their ceramic training, and I was determined to get there.

DR. CARNEY: Can you tell me a little bit about your teachers at Alfred, and maybe some students that you had or students that you were associated with? Was Charles Harder at Alfred when you were a student?

MR. CHOW: Yes. Charles Harder was the head of the ceramic design department, and he was a wonderful head and tried to train us thoroughly. And in a way, he tried to steer us from doing only studio work, I mean studio potters work, and he insisted at the end that I should learn production methods, too.

So one problem he gave me was to make a porcelain tea set, which I did. And of course, instead of working in clay, I worked with plaster. I had to trim down the forms and add the spouts and the handle and the cover and develop some Chinese type of glazes, like the pale blue glaze which is

known as claire de lune and celadon.

DR. CARNEY: And what year did you go to Alfred?

MR. CHOW: I was at Alfred during 1951 and '54.

DR. CARNEY: And did you have other teachers besides Charles Harder that were influential in helping you develop your skills?

MR. CHOW: I had wonderful teachers, not always in ceramics, but for instance, Katharine Nelson in paintings, Marion Fosdick in sculptural form, Daniel Rhodes, and Ted Randall.

DR. CARNEY: And when did you meet Glidden Parker? Was he a student at Alfred when you were there, or was his factory already in production?

MR. CHOW: Glidden Parker already set up his pottery [Glidden Pottery, Alfred, New York] for quite a few years, and I only joined him during the tail end of it, I would say from 1952 to '57.

DR. CARNEY: And what did you do with Glidden Pottery? Can you describe a little bit about what Glidden Pottery was and what your role was with it?

MR. CHOW: Glidden Pottery was a very forward-looking place, because they used the RAM process, R-A-M process, to stamp out plastic clay immediately into ceramic shapes, the great advantage of the clay body being able to glaze raw after drying. It was fed through a tunnel kiln of some 60 feet long. The firing range varied from 20 to 25 hours cycle, and it was gas fired. As you know, the natural gas in New York State was very reasonable, and that's why everybody was using it.

DR. CARNEY: I didn't know that. And what exactly did you do with Glidden Pottery? What was your role?

MR. CHOW: I developed forms and new glazes, plus some decorations for the Glidden Ware in order to give it a new look.

DR. CARNEY: Are you referring to the most famous of Glidden pottery pieces, the hot collectibles, the Gulf Stream blue, and all the wonderful-I would have to say, knowing a little bit about Glidden pottery, that the pieces that you designed have made you famous. People really have enjoyed it. And right now, especially with the selling on eBay and all of that, your work, your designs for Glidden pottery, your glazes and your forms are really very popular, "New Equations" and your "Charcoal and Rice."

MR. CHOW: Actually, I started with a black-and-white ceramic line, which I referred to as a flower line, in black and white, called "Charcoal and Rice." I thought that before I go into colors, I should restrict myself to forms and very simple glaze treatment.

DR. CARNEY: I know Sergio Dello Strologo was designing also for Glidden around that time. Did you have contact with him?

MR. CHOW: Yes. I knew Sergio, who was a very good designer, who came in to the Glidden pottery towards the end. Of course, none of us knew that.

DR. CARNEY: You mean you didn't know the end of the pottery was going to happen?

MR. CHOW: No. No. Since I was responsible for developing the glazes, I made a number of new colors for him, plus the decorations of different spices.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, you mean on the canister sets?

MR. CHOW: In decal, yes. You know, all those things were put in. You can put in this time a red pepper, and the next time you can put in the mushroom or something.

DR. CARNEY: Yes. They're really beautiful.

MR. CHOW: Yes. He was a very talented designer, and his line was not really well-promoted before the pottery failed.

DR. CARNEY: It's very popular now.

MR. CHOW: Yes, it is, because it's rare, too.

DR. CARNEY: Along with your "New Equations," which is my favorite. [Laughs.]

MR. CHOW: I see. Oh, yes, that's right.

DR. CARNEY: I've always been curious how you came to work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, your transition from little Alfred, New York, to the major New York City arena. How did that happen?

MR. CHOW: It came about in a very curious way, because Marion Fosdick, Professor Marion Fosdick, was originally from Fitchburg, Massachusetts. So was Alan Priest, the curator of Far Eastern art at the Met.

DR. CARNEY: Oh. I didn't know that.

MR. CHOW: Yes. So that was only one contact.

The other contact was that while Alan Priest was in Peking studying Chinese and enriching the Far Eastern objects-he was said to have gone to China every three years for a number of months, not only to collect things, but to learn the language-while Alan was in Peking, he met my maternal uncle, James Zee-Min-Z-E-E - hyphen - M-I-N Lee, who was in China.

DR. CARNEY: In a moment we're going to turn this tape over, but we'll let it play out for just a second before we return to Alan Priest and your uncle.

MR. CHOW: Sure. Of course.

[Begin Tape 1 Side B.]

DR. CARNEY: This is Margaret Carney, interviewing Fong Chow at the artist's home in New York City on February 6, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. I didn't say this on the first side of the tape, but this is actually tape one, side two.

MR. CHOW: Good.

DR. CARNEY: If we could go back to what we were talking about just a moment ago about how you came to end up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and you were talking about how Alan Priest had met your maternal uncle, James Zee-Min Lee, in Peking. And what did that have to do with you

ending up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art?

MR. CHOW: James Lee at the time was helping to do a movie called *The Good Earth* [1937]. He was technical adviser for MGM, I think. So later, he told me to look up Alan Priest in New York City, which I did. And Alan at that time was looking for a young member to take care of the Asian collection of ceramics at the Met, because the old curator was retiring.

DR. CARNEY: Who was the old curator?

MR. CHOW: Theodore Hobby, curator of the Altman Collection.

DR. CARNEY: How do you spell Harby?

MR. CHOW: H-o-b-b-y. Theodore.

DR. CARNEY: Thank you. And do I remember correctly that you were a fellow first at the Met?

MR. CHOW: That was later on. At first, Alan Priest gave me some forms to fill out to apply for this fellowship, and I did nothing for two years, because I didn't think I should change my profession in midstream. But after the closing of Glidden Pottery, I did apply and was accepted.

DR. CARNEY: So was this in 1950-?

MR. CHOW: That was around 1958, I think. Yeah, around 1958, yes.

DR. CARNEY: And what exactly did you do at the Met? You were there 25 years?

MR. CHOW: Yes. I started as assistant curator, taking care of thousands of Chinese ceramics, plus Japanese and Thai. And I was eager to learn, as well as put on display some of the neglected things. Anyway, after installing the Altman Collection of Chinese porcelain-

DR. CARNEY: Is Altman A-l-t-m-a-n?

MR. CHOW: Yeah, A-l-t-m-a-n. Altman. Let me see now.

DR. CARNEY: So you put the Altman collection on exhibit?

MR. CHOW: Yes. Then came the John D. Rockefeller bequest, and eventually redesigned the entire second ceramic balcony, the whole thing.

DR. CARNEY: You certainly saw a lot of changes at the Metropolitan Museum while you were there.

MR. CHOW: Yes, I did. After the retirement of Alan Priest, after Alan Priest retired after 35 years, I got the extra-what do you call it-responsibility to run the whole department.

DR. CARNEY: Wow. What year was that that you took over the whole department?

MR. CHOW: That was '53-no, that was '60-around 1954.

DR. CARNEY: Sixty-four?

MR. CHOW: Sixty-four, yes. Yes. Through '71. In other words, I was made in charge because there was nobody there, nobody around. Then I saw my opportunity to learn new things, and I did two

major Chinese sculpture galleries. You know, one with a wall painting, one eight-sided. That's an eight-sided Tang and Song. See, that's why I always have a fondness on sculpture, you know. And that's why, you know, from a pottery man, I've gone into these sculptures.

DR. CARNEY: Since you brought up that, the piece that we're looking here, the recumbent sheep-is it a sheep?

MR. CHOW: Ram.

DR. CARNEY: Ram. Was this piece made while you were renovating the sculpture galleries at the Met, or was this done earlier in your career?

We're sitting looking at a wonderful ceramic sculpture, a clay piece that's a very whimsical and marvelous form, on the coffee table here in Fong Chow's home.

When did you do this piece?

MR. CHOW: My sculptural pieces were mostly done between 1983 and '88.

DR. CARNEY: And I'm getting off the track here again, but-

MR. CHOW: It's okay.

DR. CARNEY: -I'm interested in where were you able to work-as you lived in New York City, where were you able to work and find studio space to continue making ceramics?

MR. CHOW: For almost 20 years, I had no studio of my own, but in '83, I found this basement ceramic studio near Cooper Union with a back garden. That's when I did all these things.

DR. CARNEY: Did you set up your own studio, or was there already one there that you were able to participate in?

MR. CHOW: I was fortunate to have found the studio, because someone was studying in Japan but came back and had to teach and raise a son, so the place was unused and she didn't want anybody there. And then when I got wind, I went and talked to her and she was very nice. She said, "Oh, yes, you can rent this place because I'm not using it."

DR. CARNEY: Were you already retired from the Met at this point, in 1983?

MR. CHOW: Yes. Yes. Why don't I say, on my retirement from the Met in 1983.

DR. CARNEY: Oh. That was the year?

MR. CHOW: Yes, that was the year. That was a key year.

DR. CARNEY: Well, because you're such a creative person, do you feel that your creativity-if you weren't making ceramics during those 20 years-was your creativity coming out in acquiring new work for the Met or reinstalling galleries, or what was the outlet for your creativity during that time period if you didn't have studio space and time to work?

MR. CHOW: That's right. My creative energy was spent on doing new galleries-adding to the collection, and no end of administrative work. [Laughs.] You know.

DR. CARNEY: Is that creative? [Laughs.]

MR. CHOW: No. No. I hated it. But I did it for seven years, you know. Did it for seven years. I thought, "Why am I doing this?!" You know? "Why I am doing this?" And an old friend said to me, "Oh, it's a shame for you to spoil your talent, and what you get at the end may be just retirement salary." You know. And different people tried to tempt me away because of seeing I wasn't really happy, creative, you know. And this one person said, "You know, now you have experience with the museum, why don't we buy a building and go into business like this place?" Years ago, 30 years ago. But I said, "No, I don't know business. I'm not good at business, so it's no use."

DR. CARNEY: You have told me that you're not very in love with doing paperwork.

MR. CHOW: Oh, no. No, no. But fortunately, I had good help. And also, thank God for those volunteers.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, volunteers.

MR. CHOW: Some of them well-educated Park Avenue, Fifth Avenue ladies, you know, that went through art courses and, you know, after they raised their children, they wanted to do something. So they came in and really just helped me a great deal.

DR. CARNEY: Well, they probably loved working with you, too.

MR. CHOW: Well, you know, I'm not too good, but I said, "Look, look, there's a whole pile of letters I have to write." And on this one I penciled, "Give her this-and-that reference book" and then so on and so forth. But those are the wonderful times that I had.

And then I was asked to help out with the volunteers. You have no idea. So at first, people were very excited and 40, 50 of them came, and talked to them on ceramics, talked to them on sculptures. At that time, we could show them, you know, what things to point out.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, so this was really a decent program, to be a tour leader.

MR. CHOW: Yes, a decent program. I was training, and 50, my God. My God.

DR. CARNEY: Weren't they lucky?

MR. CHOW: No, no. Then I got a few really top-rated ones. And one day I got this letter saying that, "I went to the Met and I joined the group," and I knew exactly who was conducting that, a very nice Fifth Avenue lady. And she said, "In that one hour, I learned more than the courses I took at Harvard."

DR. CARNEY: Whoa.

MR. CHOW: You know, things like that. And naturally, I was very pleased. But then I also realized that all of a sudden I became an educator, you know, which I am not.

You see, the thing is, people are so difficult sometimes. At that moment Hoving came in, and Hoving hired a chief curator, new, and a new title, called Theodore-[pause]-well, I'll think of it. But anyway, so these two people, as they say, a clean broom sweeps clean, or whatever. But, you know, their motive is not very nice, and I was at that time with the title of "associate curator in charge." So, like you, Margaret, when things are not going the way it should, you look somewhere, you look

elsewhere.

DR. CARNEY: Right. So, while things weren't great with the politics at the Met at that time, you had something really good happen working with the volunteers and finding some new role, new contribution-

MR. CHOW: That's right.

DR. CARNEY: -and personal interactions, professional interactions with other human beings that was rewarding?

MR. CHOW: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DR. CARNEY: That's powerful.

MR. CHOW: Well, you see, so I tried to ignore that. And at that time, somebody else was still in the department, yet I was made in charge, because the former director, James Rormer, knew that I was dedicated. And then when Alan Priest retired, Alan Priest said, "Look, I wish that you be my successor. You still have quite a bit to learn, but don't sulk over unpleasant things from time to time." And he said, "I wouldn't mind telling you that I survived five administrations, five."

DR. CARNEY: [Laughs] He must have been a superior person.

MR. CHOW: Oh, I learned so much, you know. And so I felt that since I said yes, I will try, I thought. So then after he was gone, Rormer died and they got Hoving.

DR. CARNEY: How do you spell the director's name, Rormer?

MR. CHOW: R-o-r-m-e-r. James Rormer. James Rormer was-

DR. CARNEY: I didn't know about him.

MR. CHOW: Yes. Well, he was fine. He was very sympathetic. He worked his way up. He was Medieval and Cloisters. When they were building Cloisters, he did a good job. And Rockefeller, you know, trusted him and so on and so forth, so he became the director of the Metropolitan.

And I hate to sidetrack like this, but then in one of those occasions, a lady invited me to have lunch. And I didn't know what it was. So the lady happened to be connected with China Institute, and she was a Luce, L-U-C-E. So, I mean, you know, Time and Life started with Henry Luce and all that, which is fine. So she was on the board.

So after lunch she said, "You know, China Institute needs somebody to be the head. Would you be interested?" So I said, "Thank you very much; I don't think this is my field." China Institute is mostly educational. So, "Thank you very much." And so before I leave, I said to her, "You know, both you and Henry was born in Shantung Province." The family was connected with, what is it, the Chinese religious thing, you know. But anyway, so that's the connection.

So I said, "I'm sorry to say that"-the Florence Waterbury left her estate to the museum for me to buy things, not terribly, terribly rich but enough money to buy a few things, so I said, "The Waterbury fund is almost used up," and I said, "I wonder if you and Mr. Henry Luce," who was on the board, "would consider giving some money towards purchases." I said, "I can't buy anything now. Every time there's another van Gogh painting, you know, European painting, that costs billions." Well,

anyway, she said, "Yes, I'll speak to the Luce Foundation director."

And within one week, I got this angry, angry telephone call from Thomas Hoving. He said, "How dare you try to undercut my fund-raising program!" I said, "How do I know?" I said, "You know, we are supposed to fend for ourselves in the department." But already he was so jealous that I knew these people and that I mentioned, you know, the possibility of funds. And I said, "I haven't undercut you. I knew nothing about this." And already he got a big chunk of money for his big show, called "Harlem on My Mind." It was a photographic show, everything blown up as big as that wall. Nothing wrong with that, using the money like that, but, you know, he for some reason noticed a little paragraph written by a 16-year-old high school student about a certain race and certain things. She was black.

Well, anyway, to make a long story short, the show was a terrible flop.

DR. CARNEY: The "Harlem on My Mind"?

MR. CHOW: Yes. The catalogue with this girl's foreword so enraged certain people in the city, the catalogue had to be withdrawn.

DR. CARNEY: Oh my God. That doesn't happen too often.

MR. CHOW: No, no. See, I'm just trying to-

DR. CARNEY: Was that show funded by the Luce Foundation?

MR. CHOW: Oh, yes! He already got that. But when he heard that I was trying to get some money-

DR. CARNEY: But did you get money from the Luce Foundation?

MR. CHOW: No, never.

DR. CARNEY: You didn't because he-

MR. CHOW: Well, you see, I never did-

DR. CARNEY: Oh, you never got to follow up on it?

MR. CHOW: No, no, never follow up, never follow up. And then after he said to me that "you dare to undercut my fund-raising program" and so on and so forth, I said, "You know, we are asked all the time to fend for our department if possible." Well, anyway, he said, "As far as I'm director, you'll never make full curator."

DR. CARNEY: Wow.

MR. CHOW: I wasn't. I wasn't.

DR. CARNEY: You were just doing your job.

[Begin Tape 2 Side A.]

[TRANSCRIBING NOTE: There is background noise on this tape, making it occasionally difficult to hear Fong Chow's words, indicated with "inaudible" notation.]

DR. CARNEY: This is Margaret Carney interviewing Fong Chow at the artist's home in New York

City on February 6, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is tape two.

MR. CHOW: Good. Good.

DR. CARNEY: Fong Chow, nice to talk to you.

MR. CHOW: Delighted.

DR. CARNEY: Let's go back to some of the questions here and try to stick to the script a little bit.

Could you tell me a little bit about how you think your work, whether it's ceramic or photography, how this fits into an American tradition or a Chinese tradition? How did you straddle those several worlds?

MR. CHOW: I feel I am under an international influence; however, through my simplicity of form and glaze treatment, somehow my Chinese background shows through.

DR. CARNEY: Can you give an example of that, more specific example? I'm very interested in all of your Junware glazes. How long did you work on those, and was that in Boston or Alfred or later?

MR. CHOW: I seem to be fascinated by Jun, repeating the various effects of Jun. Sometimes it gives Thai blue, other times red and purple. I had tried to pursue that through the four years in Boston and also at Alfred University. And when I came to Greenwich House to teach, I also tried to revive, to see whether I still can do it. Fortunately, it seemed to be under control, and I'm very happy about that.

DR. CARNEY: When did you teach at Greenwich House?

MR. CHOW: I gave a course at Greenwich House in, perhaps, 1980 on pottery making and celadon glazes. Years later, I had a workshop at 92nd Street YMHA [Young Men's Hebrew Association, New York, NY] on porcelain.

DR. CARNEY: I didn't know about that. I mean, I've heard of the 92nd Street Y.

MR. CHOW: Yeah, this is the same thing. They are very active in the arts and crafts and also in music.

DR. CARNEY: And what was that class at the 92nd Street Y?

MR. CHOW: They do have pottery as well as silver smithing. They make jewelry. And writing courses.

DR. CARNEY: So you were teaching a general pottery class?

MR. CHOW: Yeah, general pottery.

DR. CARNEY: Ah. And you were still at the Met then, weren't you?

MR. CHOW: Yes, I was. Once in a while I'd tear myself-

DR. CARNEY: You were busy. [Laughs.]

MR. CHOW: -tear myself away to do something, you know. First I did a potting session, and then went into porcelain. At that time, lots of people were not doing porcelain because, you know, it's a very involved work. And then you have to clean everything spotlessly before you use the clay; otherwise, it picks up other stuff. I don't enjoy teaching very much, but once in a while, in order to get back to clay, I did it, just had to force myself, push myself a little bit.

DR. CARNEY: You enjoyed the part as an educator at the Met at that certain time, but you think of yourself less as a teacher when it comes to showing others how to make ceramics.

MR. CHOW: But Margaret, once in a while I like to do it; I enjoy doing it. For instance, in 1960 when the big China show from Taiwan was at the Met, two of the curators demonstrated painting- [inaudible]. And a few months later-obviously, people liked it, then the show moved to Boston. The three of us did a repeat program, this time on TV. The other time was live.

DR. CARNEY: Do you have a tape of that?

MR. CHOW: No, no. No tape at all. But I mean, the New York Times or somebody snapped the pictures-[inaudible]-Boston. But for me, I was an old-timer.

DR. CARNEY: In 1960 you were an old-timer?

MR. CHOW: Oh, yes. I started with Museum School in 1947, you know, '47 to '51, and then to Alfred, '51 to '58, something like that.

DR. CARNEY: I guess you were an old-timer as in you had many degrees?

MR. CHOW: No.

DR. CARNEY: I mean, you had your B.F.A. and your M.F.A.

MR. CHOW: Yeah. Well, that's all. That's all.

DR. CARNEY: I guess I should say what year did you get your B.F.A. at Alfred, and what year did you get your M.F.A. at Alfred?

MR. CHOW: Maybe '52, and then '53 I got the M.F.A.

And Margaret, it was so nice of you to pick out that photo of the Harders. You know, even now I look at it and I'm very touched, because they were such wonderful, wonderful people.

DR. CARNEY: I wish I could have been at Alfred when Charles and Gay Harder were there.

MR. CHOW: They are just wonderful. And once in a while, Gay and Charles Harder came to my apartment on 16 West University Street. I notice that building has not been torn down. Somebody said the building was torn down. It wasn't torn down. I rented half a house, downstairs and upstairs.

DR. CARNEY: They rebuilt that house. It burned down and they replaced it.

MR. CHOW: Oh, right. All right. You're right.

DR. CARNEY: But it looks, apparently, quite a bit like the other. Kind of a box structure.

MR. CHOW: Yes, yes, a box. You know, I didn't see too much change. Yeah, somebody said it

burned down. Anyway, it was in that apartment Hui [Hui Ka-Kwong, classmate of Fong Chow's at Alfred] and I did the cooking for the Harders. So that was very interesting. They were just very sweet.

And I was surprised to see Harder's son.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, yeah.

MR. CHOW: He's so small.

DR. CARNEY: Was Charles Harder a big man?

MR. CHOW: No. He was bigger. He was bigger. He was, you know, pretty-

DR. CARNEY: He looked like a very impressive figure in the photograph.

MR. CHOW: Oh, yeah. Look at the-[inaudible]-[medal, book?] that he gave me. You know, I mean, beautiful, really fantastic. But anyway, I had a wonderful association at Alfred. My best training, of course, was still Boston. I'll tell you why. At Alfred, quite a few of us were a little disappointed because Daniel Rhodes was teaching, and he was not a good teacher.

DR. CARNEY: Oh?

MR. CHOW: He was not a good teacher. I mean, we didn't really respect him because he was so lazy. And once in a while we went to his house-[inaudible]-and so on and so forth. And the daughter came out in the middle of the room, in the rug, and she was peeing all over the rug. And then Lillian Rhodes said, "You know, we don't scold her; it's not good." So, quickly they mopped it up. Imagine! A pretty big girl, just about five years old. You know. But this is the kind of thing that you can associate. I still-

DR. CARNEY: Well, that was a pretty dramatic moment.

MR. CHOW: [Inaudible]-don't say anything, don't scold.

DR. CARNEY: I remember that you won some awards for your ceramics? I think one was at the "17th Annual Ceramic National" in Syracuse?

MR. CHOW: Yes.

DR. CARNEY: And was that the same piece that you won the Good Design Award for at the Museum of Modern Art? Was that the same?

MR. CHOW: I think it's the same piece. It's a large "Charcoal and Rice" bowl, a conical bowl this size. Yeah, I believe it was.

DR. CARNEY: When was that?

MR. CHOW: It's got to be in the '50s. And speaking about national shows, three or four students under [Norman] Arsenault at Boston Museum School, who really taught us well, he took us to Syracuse to the National Ceramic Exhibition-[inaudible].

DR. CARNEY: Were there other students that you worked with, either at the Boston School or in Alfred, that you'd like to mention, people that were successful in the art world? You mentioned Hui

Ka-Kwong. He was a classmate of yours at Alfred.

MR. CHOW: Yes. Yes. But there is another one who sent me an announcement. If you don't mind, I'll look for it here. [Fong Chow is walking away from the tape recorder.]

DR. CARNEY: Another student from Alfred?

MR. CHOW: Yes. Yes. Yes. He is doing mostly masks, does a show every year, and this one this time-[off-mike].

DR. CARNEY: If Fong Chow's voice is fading, it's because he's rifling through stacks of wonderful brochures and things across the room here.

Did you have classmates at Boston that you kept in touch with that were successful in the art world, or had a creative interest, that you kept in touch with?

MR. CHOW: Yes. The only name that came to mind is Paul Bollardo.

DR. CARNEY: And how do you spell Bollardo?

MR. CHOW: B-O-L-L-A-R-D-O. Paul Bollardo, who is in New York. And the name I cannot remember, he does face masks and won the prize of late. So I'll try to fill in later.

DR. CARNEY: And that was an Alfred classmate?

MR. CHOW: No, no.

DR. CARNEY: The face-mask person was not Alfred?

MR. CHOW: The face-mask person, yes, Alfred. The Boston one-[pause].

DR. CARNEY: Well, we can come back to that.

MR. CHOW: Boston, Paul Bollardo, yes.

DR. CARNEY: One of the questions that the Archives of American Art is interested in, and I'm interested in too, is whether or not you've ever had any professional affiliation, either teaching or taking classes, at Penland [School of Crafts, Penland, NC] or Arrowmont [School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN] or Pilchuck [Glass School, Stanwood, WA] or the Archie Bray [Foundation, Helena, MT]. Have you ever had in your career connections with any of those kinds of institutions?

MR. CHOW: No, I've never had any connection with these organizations. Wish I did. Then I'd probably learn quite a bit from that community. I really don't know what to think about the training between whether university trained or outside trained, which is better. I suppose Hui and I had both. Hui studied at Pond Farm with Marguerite Wildenhain.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, right, with the Wildenhains

MR. CHOW: With the Wildenhains. And I had Boston Museum School. You see, Boston Museum School at that time was very old-fashioned. They didn't award any degrees, so there was no credit.

DR. CARNEY: And what was the name of the teacher that you've spoken about so admiringly at the Boston School. It starts with an A.

MR. CHOW: Norman Arsenault.

DR. CARNEY: And what did he teach, or was he in charge of the whole program?

MR. CHOW: He was the only teacher there.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, the only teacher. He taught everything?

MR. CHOW: Yeah, he taught everything, but he tried to open our horizons by having workshops and potters, Bernard Leach, or take us here, there, other things, you know. It was a very small group. Well, that's why we had a close relationship, close touch, and he followed every step of our training in pottery.

DR. CARNEY: That's a pretty dramatic statement, that you had one main teacher, and you've said today that that was the major-the most important part of your education was in Boston, and that Alfred, that had all kinds of teachers and great people, that that wasn't as influential in your creative process. That's very interesting.

MR. CHOW: No, I guess it was good to take things one at a time, different areas.

Now I understand why I was so attuned to sculpture as well as pottery, clay, because I had a young boyhood friend who started to do sculpture when I was visiting the Chinese kiln in Guangzhou. At that time, Shiwan was not in operation, but I did see the kilns.

DR. CARNEY: This was before you came to the United States in the 1940s?

MR. CHOW: Yes. That's '45 to '47. I came in '47. Those two years I felt like a bird, you know, because in Hong Kong it was so small, and one would tend to fly like a caged bird, you know, like the Japanese wouldn't let you go there and so on and so forth. And then in '45-[inaudible].

And this particular young man became one of the greatest sculptors in China. Not that I like everything he makes, but-

DR. CARNEY: Do you have a name you'd like to record?

MR. CHOW: Sure. His name is P-a-n H-e. Pan He.

DR. CARNEY: This is your childhood friend? Is he still around?

MR. CHOW: He's still around, still going strong.

DR. CARNEY: Is he still in China?

MR. CHOW: Yes. He had three sons. And he said to me, he told them, "You know, in the art route it's not so easy. You people have to think twice about this." All three went into the art, went into the arts. One was an architect, one was a designer, and one was editor of art books. And then they built-I was very impressed-they built a wonderful museum in Guangzhou, Canton, to house the excavated pieces of a southern Han emperor of China. I think, and I have to check, maybe second century A.D., I think second century A.D.

Well, you see, this place is very interesting. [Fong Chow is walking away from the tape recorder.]
[Off-mike.]

This is the head that he made.

DR. CARNEY: Oh my God. That's fabulous.

MR. CHOW: It's about [five foot ?] tall. He's a wonderful-[inaudible].

DR. CARNEY: So Pan He did that?

MR. CHOW: Pan He, yeah. This is also Pan He.

DR. CARNEY: Very powerful.

MR. CHOW: Bronze.

DR. CARNEY: Can I ask you whether or not you've done any commissions?

MR. CHOW: The only ceramic commission began after 1952, the America House. Florence Eastmead, E-A-S-T-M-E-A-D, manager of the place, requested a dinner service for use in the luncheon room of the Museum of Contemporary Craft, now American Craft Museum. I developed a pattern called "Snow Drop" and glazes. I had two glazes to go with it, one blue and the other yellow.

DR. CARNEY: I've seen those pieces.

MR. CHOW: Same motif.

DR. CARNEY: They're really wonderful.

MR. CHOW: Yes, you know those.

DR. CARNEY: And you did those at Glidden Pottery, right?

MR. CHOW: Yes. Yes.

DR. CARNEY: I love those.

MR. CHOW: At Glidden I thought that, you know, what can I do to do something? I simplified it, and the color is not the usual glazes, and the decoration, little-[inaudible]-white over yellow. But anyway, as I said before, since then, that was the first tableware I ever made.

DR. CARNEY: The first line that you designed?

MR. CHOW: Yes, first line. Of course, I did not make the form. It was a Glidden form, a square, the beautiful square shapes. That was my beginning.

[Begin Tape 2 Side B.]

DR. CARNEY: This is Margaret Carney, interviewing Fong Chow, at the artist's home in New York City, on February 6, 2002, for the Archives of American Art. We seem to have had a little problem with the tape recorder during the last session, so we're hoping that everything is working smoothly or that one of the tapes came out, but this is actually tape two, side two.

And we were going to discuss for a few minutes Fong Chow's rather diverse career, and if he could talk about the kind of multitude of projects that you've worked on, both as a creative person in

ceramics and photography and sculpture, and how that fit in with your career switch to being a museum professional. Could you talk about that?

MR. CHOW: Of course.

Before I forget, Pan He, my childhood friend, became one of the prominent sculptors in China. This lady who found a pearl in the Pearl River was sculpted by him and several assistants. And this is 1981, perhaps 40 meters high. And I'm so proud to have known his children, too. He has three sons. They are all in the arts. And the four of them together designed the new museum in Guangzhou to house the important Han dynasty excavated pieces, including gilt bronze, jades, et cetera. And this is-

DR. CARNEY: Wow!

MR. CHOW: -this is detail of a facade with a sort of low relief, and I think some perhaps tinted with gold.

DR. CARNEY: That's amazing. Beautiful.

MR. CHOW: Yes. Well, you see, that's what I mean, you see, when I see other people have the possibility of doing things either for his town or country, that impressed me. When we first were in contact again, Pan He invited me to go to his unveiling of double equestrian statues of the Han king and his foreign wife on horseback. Unfortunately, at that time I said to him, "I don't believe I can come because I have a little heart problem. My doctor said that I advise you not to go to Beijing or Inner Mongolia when this statute was to be unveiled. The temperature can be 104 in the summer, you know." So I couldn't.

So my friend was very disappointed and said, "Now if this is the case, why don't I meet you after the unveiling in Inner Mongolia? I will meet you at the famous place where the famous concubine bathes in the hot spring." He said, "There is a guest house there. I can meet you there. And if you like, afterwards"-we have not seen one another for, I don't know, 40 years, and he said, "if you like, we can go to Dun Huang."

DR. CARNEY: Really?

MR. CHOW: So I asked my doctor again, and doctor said, "No, no, no, not Dun Huang." So I have never seen Inner Mongolia nor Dun Huang. I mean, you know, this kind of old friendship. He was the one who took me to Shiwan and to look for the kilns and everything. And I even stayed one night at his family home, you know, near Shiwan. He comes from there. And he was doing sculptures there.

DR. CARNEY: Have you seen him?

MR. CHOW: Oh, yes!

DR. CARNEY: You have seen him?

MR. CHOW: Yes, I have seen him. So eventually I went. We were in Hong Kong. I took the train and he met me.

DR. CARNEY: Was this in the '70s or the '80s?

MR. CHOW: In '80-I think probably '87, as late as '87. And he said to me, "You know, Fong, I'd like to

spend time with you. We have not seen each other for decades. There's only one request I make." Orders by letter, you know. Chinese. He said, "Please don't stay in a hotel." So Chao-ling, when she saw that, she said, "My God, I don't think people in China is equipped to have a house guest, you know?" So I said, "I don't know, I don't care what you say, I'm going. I accept."

And when I got there, his family lived on the university, the art department. So his family lived on the third floor, whole third floor, his mother, at that time the only grandchild, and everything. And then he took me to the fourth floor, where he and his sons created a studio for him. So he said, "You know, with all these commissions, I cannot think. I have to have"-you know. So he had the fourth floor with a small bedroom, bathroom, a terrace all covered with white marble, a big sitting room, a winding staircase going up to the roof garden with plants and bird cages.

DR. CARNEY: Oh. That's lovely.

MR. CHOW: So every morning-oh, I stayed with him for one week. Every morning his wife served breakfast.

DR. CARNEY: Did Chao-ling [Fong Chow's wife] not go on this trip?

MR. CHOW: No, she had to come back. At that time she was working. We were in Hong Kong for a symposium, Chinese symposium of ceramics, mostly, from China, from the States, Canada, and so on, all Chinese, you know. So after that, she had to go. So I thought this would be the time for me to go to Guangzhou, you know, by myself. And for one week I stayed there, and we revisited Shiwan, all those kilns and people. So it was, I cannot tell you. This is, of course, a side track, but you could imagine how I felt after 40, 50 years I saw the same friend again. He was doing well.

DR. CARNEY: Where did you meet your wife Chao-ling?

MR. CHOW: I met her in New York, outside of New York, in the house of my cousin. My cousin and his wife used to give a party every year, either a Christmas or New Year's party. And one year my cousin and his wife invited Chao-ling's family and Chao-ling. So we met. There were lots of people. There was no follow-up on my part until the next year; they invited her again. [Laughs.] So that was how it came about, you know.

DR. CARNEY: What's Chao-ling's family name?

MR. CHOW: T sien. T-S-I-E-N. Her English name is Maud T sien. M-A-U-D, no E.

But anyway, it's-

DR. CARNEY: How long have you been together?

MR. CHOW: Oh, my goodness. Forty years. Forty years.

DR. CARNEY: On a totally different topic, you mentioned you had heart problems so your doctor was telling you not to go to Dun Huang. When did you have heart problems? And did that-I mean, obviously, that affected everything you did, but did that affect your art-making and your career at the Met? Was it before that, or after?

MR. CHOW: My heart problem stems from mainly, I would say, these people at the museum.

DR. CARNEY: It was the stress?

MR. CHOW: I first had a heart attack, and a second, a triple bypass, and a pacemaker.

DR. CARNEY: And when did you-

MR. CHOW: This was about five or six years ago, the triple bypass. Actually, the heart attack was in '82. So '83, I made up my mind, enough is enough.

DR. CARNEY: I wondered if there was some connection.

MR. CHOW: No. If I wanted-

DR. CARNEY: And then you started doing ceramics again.

MR. CHOW: Yeah, '83. So I said, well, if I want to do ceramic again, I should make a clean cut, and found that little studio, and I was doing mostly sculptural things.

DR. CARNEY: The creative, the differently creative part-not that being a museum professional isn't creative, but the creative part as an artist, that was really something that you came back to, I'll say, later in your life again. I mean, it was something that was important to you and helped you get balanced again?

MR. CHOW: Yes. Yes. I think that's it. And at the end, we are still struggling with this last paragraph. Let me see now.

DR. CARNEY: I do want to go on record saying, assuming these tape recorders are working, that Fong Chow and his wife Chao-ling have very carefully gone through the questions that the Archives of American Art has provided and will be offering an additional audio tape that answers the questions and will more fully answer some of the questions we won't be able to get to today. In addition, Chao-ling has gone through and typed up transcripts of that tape, and that will be provided also to the Archives of American Art. So that's why we were allowing ourselves today to be able to wander a little bit, because Fong Chow had already done a lot of the work before I got here. [Laughs.]

MR. CHOW: Well, you are very welcome.

DR. CARNEY: What was it that you were talking about?

MR. CHOW: Of course, Chao-ling said, "Oh, after these questions, you should wrap it up," or something like that, and this is the result of that last.

DR. CARNEY: I would like you to read that.

MR. CHOW: Yes.

[Reading.] "I have had an interesting and satisfying life in the arts. Doing creative work was most challenging and rewarding. Working in the museum, totally surrounded by beauty every day, was a thrilling experience. I was exposed to many areas of art and had a great opportunity to learn and study and to exchange ideas with colleagues and connoisseurs. My connection with the Metropolitan Museum took me to many places in this country and abroad. I saw things and met people I would have not otherwise. I have been quite lucky."

DR. CARNEY: You had said that you haven't been able to get into a clay studio in the last few

years. When was the last time you were able to work in ceramics, just because of the difficulty of having a workspace, a studio space?

MR. CHOW: I sort of resigned to the fact that I have done ceramics for 40 years and now it's time to do something else. And I'm glad of it. You know what happened to the studio. After a few years, the century-old building where the studio is was condemned.

DR. CARNEY: Oh.

MR. CHOW: Century old, and it had to be shored up with steel supports. And I thought, since I'm interested in the different things, it is time for me to do something else. And I don't particularly miss it. You know, I don't particularly miss potting.

DR. CARNEY: The work that you've done with photography in the last few years, you've had exhibitions. And can you name names? Can you tell us the gallery or galleries that you've shown your work in? In the '90s I know you've had exhibits.

MR. CHOW: Actually, my fascination with photography went back quite a bit. And somehow Glidden arranged to have an exhibition at his Glidden gallery in Alfred, a joint show of my stonewares with Ansel Adams's black-and-white photos.

DR. CARNEY: Oh my God. Yes.

MR. CHOW: I think 1952. He's down here somewhere.

DR. CARNEY: Okay.

MR. CHOW: So since then, I had gone back to painting, often beginning with more or less monochromatic scale, monochromatic landscape that evoked China. Here is a double painting of my impression of Guilin.

DR. CARNEY: Wow. When did you do that?

MR. CHOW: Just a few years ago. One side with the Elephant Rock, and the other side with fishermen catching-fishermen with cormorants.

DR. CARNEY: Is it charcoal or pastel?

MR. CHOW: No, that is mostly ink. I sometimes combine ink on masonite wood and highlight with a little gold and silver.

DR. CARNEY: Those are wonderful.

MR. CHOW: This was very recent, you know. But my more recent things tend to be abstractions. I'll show you one or two.

DR. CARNEY: Do I remember that you did some photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe that are on your wall over there, too, speaking of your diversity?

MR. CHOW: Yes. Yes.

DR. CARNEY: And when did you take the photographs of Georgia O'Keeffe?

MR. CHOW: I took her photographs on two trips, between 1980 and '81, when she was about 84-94 years old.

DR. CARNEY: How did you know her?

MR. CHOW: Again through Alan Priest, who used to visit her on his way to Japan, Korea, on his way or returning home.

DR. CARNEY: What are you showing me here?

MR. CHOW: Oh. These are mostly abstractions of diptychs and triptychs of black and white, at times with a little oil.

DR. CARNEY: And what gallery-do I remember that you had at least one show in the last decade, I believe? I remember you sent me an announcement.

MR. CHOW: I don't have any gallery right now.

DR. CARNEY: You did have a show, I remember, where you did, maybe, some altered photographs, that one that looked like, maybe, Superman?

MR. CHOW: The what? Superman?

DR. CARNEY: Yeah.

MR. CHOW: Right there.

DR. CARNEY: Wasn't that on view at a gallery? I saw it here, but I remember you sent me an announcement. I was just trying to think of galleries that you've had attachments with in New York and-

MR. CHOW: I started to do photography as early as 1946. [Pause.] One is called "Umbrella Maker."

DR. CARNEY: That's an early one?

MR. CHOW: Yeah, "Umbrella Maker," with a departing scene of my friend Pan He. That was really quite early.

DR. CARNEY: I think we're going to run out of tape in a minute, so I want to thank you very much for allowing me to come into your home and interview you for the Archives of American Art. And it's been my great pleasure. And I thank you for your preparation ahead of time and for allowing this interview today on February 6, 2002. Thank you.

MR. CHOW: Margaret, it is my pleasure to have you.

DR. CARNEY: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...May 18, 2006