



## About Tyrus Wong

Wong was born in the Toishan district in Guangdong, China in 1910. In 1919, he and his father immigrated to America leaving behind Wong's mother and sister, whom they never saw again. Arriving in the United States, Wong was initially detained in Angel Island for three weeks because of the Chinese Exclusion Act. After his release from Angel Island, Wong and his father settled in Sacramento, later moving to Los Angeles's Chinatown neighborhood.

### Early Years

Wong's interest in painting and drawing emerged at an early age. Though they were poor, his father encouraged his talents by having him practice calligraphy by dipping his brushes in water and "painting" on newspaper. Indifferent to school, he dropped out of Benjamin Franklin Junior High in Pasadena, CA to attend the Otis Art Institute on a full scholarship. There he received formal western art training while studying the art of the Sung Dynasty at the Los Angeles Central Library in his free time.

Despite graduating in the midst of the Depression, Wong had an active artistic career. He exhibited work at a 1932 group exhibition at the Chicago Art Institute that

featured Pablo Picasso. Wong was also hired as part of the Federal Arts Project, a branch of the New Deal-era Works Progress Administration (WPA). His work during this period was heavily influenced by his friend, the highly regarded modernist painter Stanton MacDonald-Wright, best known for his use of rich harmonious colors (a style referred to as "synchrony") and his integration of Chinese compositions.

### The Dragon's Den

Though he exhibited regularly, Wong and his fellow artists struggled to survive. Their answer was the Dragon's Den, a subterranean, trendy, Chinatown restaurant that attracted Hollywood stars such as Peter Lorre, Anna Mae Wong, and Sydney Greenstreet. It stood out among the chop suey joints of Chinatown and was the brainchild of close friend Eddy See. It boasted wall-to-wall murals and hand-painted menus by Wong and his fellow artists. It was there that he met Ruth Kim, his future wife.

## Walt Disney Studios

In 1938, following his marriage and birth of his first daughter, Wong took a job at the Walt Disney Studios as an “inbetweener”, one who goes through the tedious process of making “in-between” drawings that filled out the movement of the characters between the animators’ key drawings he began at Disney drawing hundreds of sketches of Mickey Mouse. He found the work tedious and numbing. When he heard that the studio was in pre-production on the feature film *Bambi*, he went home and painted several pictures of a deer in a forest. These small, but evocative sketches captured the attention of Walt Disney and became the basis for the film’s visual style. Tyrus’s Chinese-inspired sketches and paintings set the look and tone for *Bambi*, and were some of the most strikingly beautiful art ever produced at the Walt Disney Studios.

## Warner Brothers

From Disney, Wong headed to nearby Warner Brothers, where he switched from fantasy to realism. He was hired as a production illustrator and sketch artist where he painted and sketched concept art for hundreds of live-action films, including *Rebel Without A Cause*, *Calamity Jane*, *Harper*, *The Wild Bunch*, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, *Auntie Mame*, *April in Paris*, and *PT 109*. Wong was frequently loaned out to Republic Pictures where he worked on many John Wayne westerns, a genre that would become a favorite of his. He stayed at Warner Bros. for the next 26 years until his retirement in 1968.

Throughout his years at the studio, Wong continued to paint and exhibit his fine art. In 1954, he was featured in a short film produced by Eliot O’Hara demonstrating Chinese brushwork techniques. His commercial work included designing greeting cards for over 20 years, illustrating magazine covers and children’s books, and painting calligraphic style designs on Winfield ceramic ware that sold in high-end department stores.

## Kite Building

After retiring, he turned his attention to designing and building hand-made kites. His dozens of designs include multi-colored 100-foot centipedes, flocks of swallow, butterflies, and panda bears. In 1990, he and his kites were featured in the short film, *Flights of Fancy*. To this day, Wong flies his kites every month in Santa Monica.

