

## “Lost” Cultural Treasure Brings Record Prices at Moran’s February 16th Art Auction

When it opened in 1953, on Grant Street in San Francisco’s Chinatown, Johnny Kan’s Restaurant was groundbreaking. Until that time, though Chinese immigrants had been in the United States for over a hundred years, most Americans knew only a purely American version of Chinese food, bearing little resemblance to the real thing, served in the many modest chop suey places found across the country. Kan’s was one of the first Chinese restaurants in the US to serve authentic Cantonese dishes in an elegant atmosphere. From the sumptuous dining rooms patrons watched the master chefs cooking in an innovative, glass-enclosed kitchen, and received service that was immaculate and refined. The restaurant soon became famous nationwide, boasting a steady clientele of international celebrities.

Happily, Mr. Kan’s entrepreneurial brilliance was united with a strong sense of pride in his heritage and love of his city. At one point in his career he campaigned to restore Chinatown to the way it had appeared before the 1906 earthquake and fire, and bring back the manufacturing shops that had once produced traditional products like lanterns and slippers. Though that effort failed, Mr. Kan did leave at least two enduring legacies behind when he died in 1972: a new American appreciation for fine Chinese food, and a unique series of twelve watercolors commissioned from the Chinese-American artist Jake Lee that chronicled the history of the Chinese people in the United States.

The watercolors were completed in the late 1950s or early 1960s and hung in one of Kan’s private banquet rooms, the Gum Shan (Golden Hills) Room, named after the term Chinese gold miners gave the United States when they first worked the Mother Lode. The large (41 X 31 inches) paintings were striking, boldly composed and brightly colored, packed with elaborate detail and figures in expressive poses engaged in the various cultural and commercial activities of Chinese immigrants of the previous century. In one spectacular scene, diners could see New Year’s Day dragon dancers roaring down a Chinatown street festooned with giant strands of popping firecrackers, while in another, vineyard workers stomped grapes on top of enormous barrels and turn a press by hand in Sonoma County. Another intriguing vignette showed railroad workers perilously suspended in woven baskets as they hack at a cliff in the Sierra Nevada, overhanging a section of track on the transcontinental railroad.

Johnny Kan’s prospered under the management of family members for many years after Mr. Kan’s death in 1972, then was sold to new owners and redecorated sometime in the 1980’s, at which point the paintings disappeared from view and their whereabouts became unknown. But thanks to descriptions of them in books and articles, reproductions like the postcards printed for Kan’s tenth anniversary in 1963, and the strong visual impression they left on those who had seen them in situ, they were not forgotten and were in fact eagerly sought after.

After decades in obscurity, eleven of them resurfaced out of the blue late last winter, when they were brought into one of the walk-in appraisal clinics held at John Moran Auctioneers in Southern California. Though not aware of the details of their background until later, John Moran’s art specialist Katie Halligan realized immediately they were a wonderful artistic achievement and exceptional examples of Jake Lee’s work, and also historical narrative of an impressive scale and depth. And judging by the number of onlookers who stopped to look at them that morning, they have an irresistible appeal. />

Each painting shows a “significant milestone for the Chinese people in the United States, and together they form a rich story”, says Sue Lee, Executive Director of the Chinese Historical Society of America (CHSA). A bustling dockside scene portrays the first Chinese immigrants arriving on a wooden vessel in 1849, leading to the scenes portrayed in each subsequent painting. Other scenes depict a complicated gold mining operation in the California hills, the China Camp shrimp fishery, slaughtering pigs on a farm, the Chinese Opera House in 1862, and the types of old shops that Mr. Kan had hoped to revive: a cigar factory and a lantern shop in San Francisco, and a shoe factory in Massachusetts in the 1870’s. According to a San Francisco restaurant guide published by Scribner’s in 1963, A Cook’s Tour of San Francisco by Doris Muscatine, a twelfth painting, still lost, depicted a champion Chinese fire hose team in Deadwood, South Dakota in 1888.

Accurate down to the last detail, the paintings reflect the year’s worth of research that the artist invested in them, and the many archival photographs and documents mined to create a single scene. Ms. Lee, who had been seeking out leads on the lost works for years, has traced many of these sources, such as a lithograph that appeared in an 1870’s issue of Harper’s Magazine that may have provided the model for the barrels in the Sonoma wine

making scene.

The paintings, unsurprisingly, attracted competitive bidding when they went up for sale at John Moran's February 16th California Art Auction, each carrying pre-sale estimates of \$3000 – 5000. Though calm at first, bidding quickly gathered momentum and became heated as they were offered one by one, and by the end of the evening all but one of the paintings had sold over the high estimate, and six of them had broken, and one tied, the artist's previous record high price of \$7475, established by Moran's in 2005. Two of them, the railroad scene and the gold mining scene, realized a hefty \$16,100 each, while the shoe shop and shrimp camp scenes realized \$12,650 and \$11,000 respectively. All together the eleven paintings realized \$105,800, including a 15% buyer's premium, a remarkable result.

Seven of the paintings are now back in their city of origin, at a permanent home at the CHSA. Spotting the objects of her search in Moran's catalogue just three days before they were scheduled to go on the block, Ms. Lee managed in that short time to raise donations to back the CHSA's bid for them. Describing her first experience of buying at auction as "exhilarating," Ms. Lee says the acquisitions are "a community treasure," and plans to display them at the museum in Chinatown are underway, and it is possible that the other paintings, which sold to private collectors, may appear beside them on a loan arrangement.

More information about the CHSA can be found at their website, [www.chsa.org](http://www.chsa.org)

By Annemarie Nollar

John Moran Auctioneers