

Overlooked No More, Walasse Ting, Who Bridged Cultures With Paint and Prose

His style as a poet and artist was informed by his upbringing in Shanghai and his years in Paris. He then joined the Pop-fueled studios of New York.



By Will Heinrich

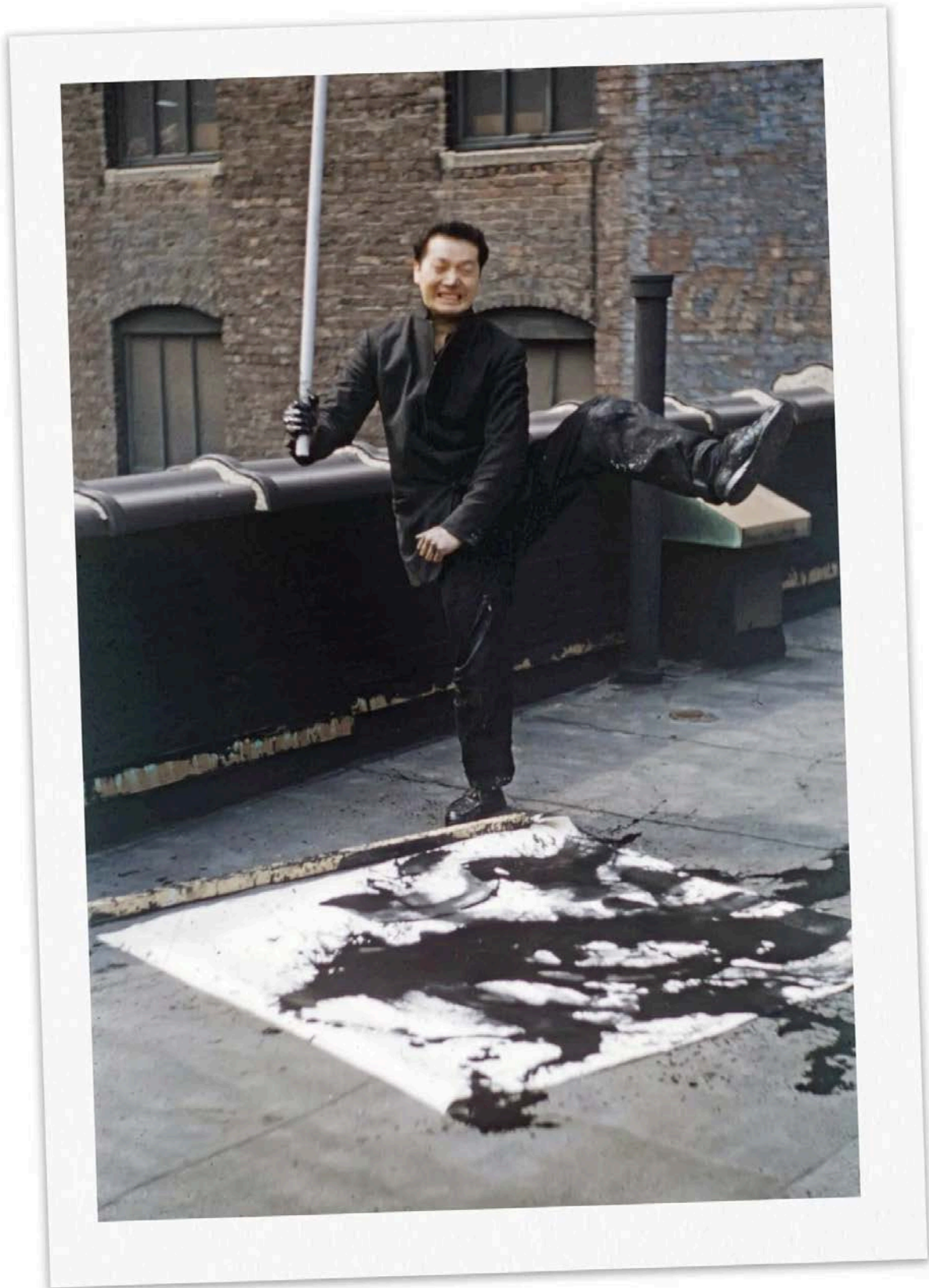
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This article is part of Overlooked, a series of obituaries about remarkable people whose deaths, beginning in 1851, went unreported in The Times.

Flickering among the major figures of postwar art — the Minimalist sculptor Dan Flavin, the avant-garde artist Pierre Alechinsky, the abstract painter Sam Francis and others — is the radiant shadow of Walasse Ting.

Ting, a painter and poet from China, introduced Flavin to Japanese ink. He turned Alechinsky on to acrylic paint. Together, he and Francis explored the interplay between Western action painting and Asian brush techniques.

In an era when artists were typically siloed by geography and genre, Ting broke free, effortlessly creating fertile connections wherever he went. His own work, at its best, melded the elegance and delicacy of traditional Chinese ink painting with an eye-grabbing palette equally influenced by American Pop Art and the lurid colors of the Florida aviary he frequented, Parrot Jungle (now Jungle Island) in Miami.



Ting in the late 1950s on the roof of the Manhattan building where he had his studio, on West 25th Street near Sixth Avenue. The Estate of Walasse Ting

Learning to paint in Shanghai, traveling to the avant-garde circles of Paris and settling among the Pop-fueled studios of New York gave him a rare firsthand fluency in multiple visual languages. In each city, he absorbed and reshaped the dominant styles around him before adeptly collapsing the distances among them all.

Walasse (pronounced Wallace) Ting was born Ting Hiong Tchuan on Oct. 13, 1928, in Wuxi, China, near Shanghai, the youngest of four sons of Ting Ho Ching and Ying Ping Si, who owned and managed factories that made boxes and other things.

Though he was enrolled for a couple of years at the Shanghai College of Fine Arts, he was never much of a student — he later called himself “self-taught” — and, in any case, China was still reeling from the civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists. At the urging of his father, who foresaw the eventual triumph of the Communist Party in 1949, Ting left mainland China and traveled around Asia for two years before arriving in Hong Kong in 1951. There, he stayed with a wealthy uncle and, in 1952, had his first art exhibit, “Modern Paintings of Eastern and Western Styles.”

The next year, he took a boat to France, arriving in Marseilles, and from there he made his way to Paris, where he adopted the name Walasse, with a spelling that evoked Henri Matisse and a sound reminiscent of a childhood nickname meaning “spoiled.”

Ting started out washing cars at a garage, laughing when French customers, using a condescending term for Chinese men, addressed him as Charlie. But soon he befriended Asger Jorn, Karel Appel and Alechinsky, painters of the Cobra group, an

expressionistic movement that focused on color and vitality. (The group's name refers to Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, the cities from which its founders came.) Later, he and Alechinsky collaborated on hundreds of explosively energetic paintings that they called "Alechings."



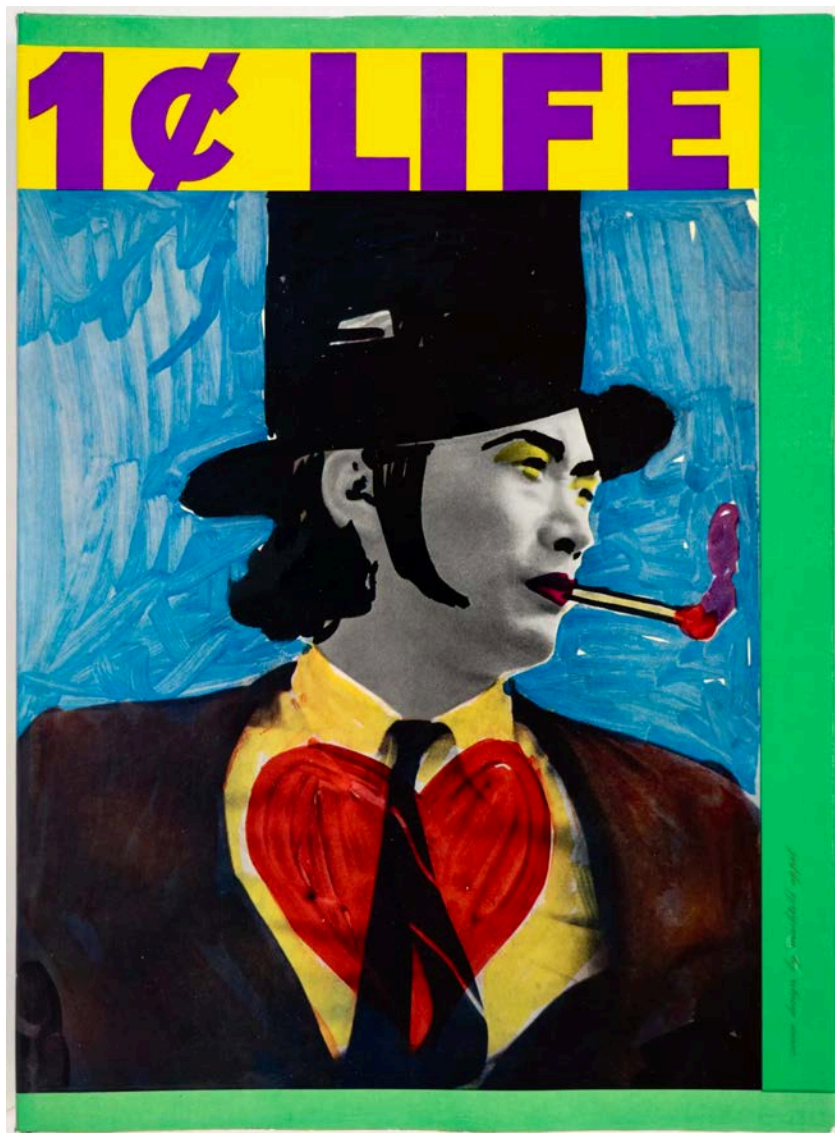
"Aleching (Stage Two)," 1963, a lithograph by Ting and Pierre Alechinsky. The two of them collaborated on hundreds of explosively energetic paintings. Pierre Alechinsky and Walasse Ting/The Museum of Modern Art — Licensed by SCALA, via Art Resource, NY

Ting arrived in New York in 1957 and had his debut show of black-on-white action paintings in 1959. He befriended Claes Oldenburg, Joan Mitchell and Sam Francis, and he introduced many other artists to one another at raucous dinner parties he hosted. He ate hot and sour soup with Oldenburg and the painter Tom Wesselmann and served as a kind of mentor to a group of Taiwanese artists who respectfully

called him “Lao Ting,” or “Old Ting.” He helped Ming Fay and other Chinese artists in America find exhibition opportunities and continued visiting Paris, ferrying ideas and techniques between the two art capitals.

But though his own work was collected by major museums and exhibited regularly, Ting’s career was hampered because “he wasn’t Chinese enough for the Chinese or American enough for the Americans,” in the words of Ariella Wolens, who curated his first institutional solo show in the United States, in 2023 at the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale (part of Nova Southeastern University).

“Even when things weren’t going great for him,” his daughter Mia Ting said in a phone interview, “he was very self-assured, so I think he gave confidence to a lot of people.”



In 1964, Ting published "1¢ Life," a collection of 61 color lithographs by a cross section of 1960s artists. Walasse Ting, Estate of Walasse Ting/ARS NY

The most tangible monument to Ting is his 1964 book, "1¢ Life," a collection of 61 color lithographs by a cross section of 1960s artists, most of the works set above original poems, which he wrote in a style that transposed the distinctive compression of classical Chinese into English.

From Andy Warhol came four glistening grimacing mouths floating over Mr. Ting's poem "Jade White Butterfly." Roy Lichtenstein's two-page spread presented a smiling blond woman in his signature Ben-Day dots and a close-up of a spray can. Kiki Kogelnik designed a collaged red rocket to carry Ting's poem "Orange Naked Woman" into space. Joan Mitchell contributed an energetic black cloud, and Ting himself made a sensual yellow and red odalisque.



Kiki Kogelnik designed a collaged red rocket to carry Ting's poem "Orange Naked Woman" into space in "1¢ Life." Walasse Ting and Kiki Kogelnik, via The Estate of Walasse Ting/ARS NY

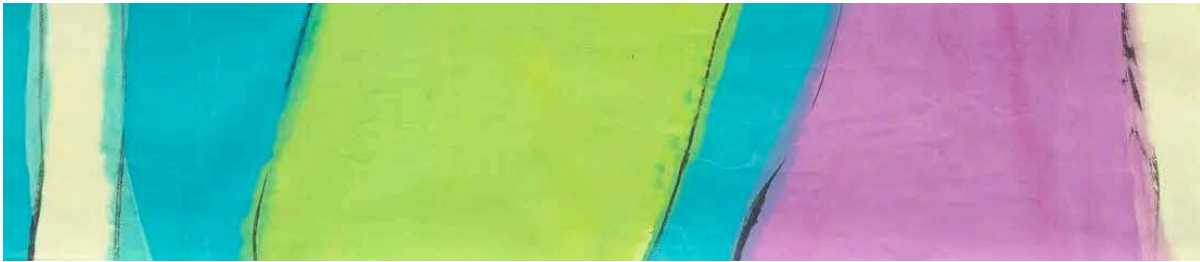
Wesselmann's Pop Art riff on the American flag appeared above a particularly telegraphic text:

“STOMACH SUNK IN WHISKY / PEE INSIDE PANTS / I SAW A LITTLE STAR / WHERE IS MY BABY TONIGHT.”

Two thousand copies of “1¢ Life” were published by the Swiss gallerist and art historian Eberhard Kornfeld, with expenses underwritten by the Detroit collector Florence Barron. The book was a hit. It has been exhibited regularly and is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Ting's prolific artistic practice passed through many phases. His NSU Art Museum show, “Walasse Ting: Parrot Jungle,” included a series of narrow green acrylic and ink paintings on paper nearly six feet tall. On one, a parrot with a round, light-green head seems to float on a single twiglike foot, its powder-blue wing wrapped around its shoulder like a cloak. In another, a parrot with an orange head and yellow breast trails a broad rainbow tail.





An untitled early-1980s work by Ting, acrylic and Chinese ink on rice paper. His work, at its best, melded the elegance and delicacy of traditional Chinese ink painting with an eye-grabbing palette equally influenced by American Pop Art and the lurid colors of the Florida aviary he frequented. Walasse Ting, via NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale and The Estate of Walasse Ting/ARS NY. Photographed by Jeffrey Sturges

There are heavy, wet-looking carp, explosively colorful flowers, exuberant crayon grasshoppers, hulking cats, a flat, eye-searing watermelon — in short, a whole natural world that sparkles as if reflected in a brook. In “Green Peacock,” a lone bird’s tail, rendered in a rich green and marked in ink with a herringbone pattern and dotted, like a plum tree, with royal blue spots, fills a sheet of paper eight feet long. Ting made drip paintings à la Jackson Pollock, but with brighter, more accessible colors; portraits, deconstructed à la Willem de Kooning; and many explicit nudes.



The exhibition “Walasse Ting: Parrot Jungle” ran from November 2023 to March 2024 at the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale. NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale

What united them all was Ting’s prescient insight that an artist could draw from every culture he came across. Bright acrylic colors don’t exist in traditional ink painting, but they can be applied with an ink painter’s sensibility, and the same

fluid line, thoughtfully applied, can evoke both cursive Chinese characters and Matisse.

Ting married Natalie Lipton, a painter and commercial artist, in 1962. He began showing with Lefebvre Gallery in Manhattan in 1963. Along with Lipton and their children, Mia and Jesse, he was one of the original tenants of Westbeth, a subsidized housing community for artists in the West Village.



Ting with Natalie Lipton, a painter and commercial artist, on the roof of their Manhattan studio building in the late 1950s. They married in 1962. The Estate of Walasse Ting

Later in life, Ting made visits to China and showed more frequently around Asia. He died on May 17, 2010, at a long-term care facility in Manhattan. He was 81. The death, which was not widely reported at the time, was caused by complications of a cerebral hemorrhage. His wife had died in 1983.

Ting self-published several volumes of poetry, one of which was translated from classical Chinese. All were written in the same stripped-down, billboard-like English.



Ting in the 1950s. He was 81 when he died in 2010. The Estate of Walasse Ting

“All Kinds of Love,” which appeared in “1¢ Life” under a two-page spread by Oldenburg of a female profile glaring at a giant slice of cake, begins:

*parent love children as summer garden hold tree
husband love wife as long distance call
husband love mistress as rainbow in pocket
girl love man as open dream*

“Black Stone,” written for Sam Francis and appearing under a thrilling two-page spread of primary-colored splashes and dots, ends with the lines:

“WHO SAY NO BEAUTY IN THIS WORLD / WHO SAY NO TRUTH ON EARTH”

A correction was made on May 17, 2025: An earlier version of this obituary misstated the number of siblings Ting had and the number of color lithographs in his book “1¢ Life.” He was the youngest of four sons, not three; and his book has 61 lithographs, not 60. In addition, the earlier version misstated the location in Florida of the aviary Jungle Island. It is in Miami, not West Palm Beach. And it referred incorrectly to a group of Taiwanese people Ting mentored. They were artists, not poets.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

Will Heinrich writes about new developments in contemporary art, and has previously been a critic for The New Yorker and The New York Observer.