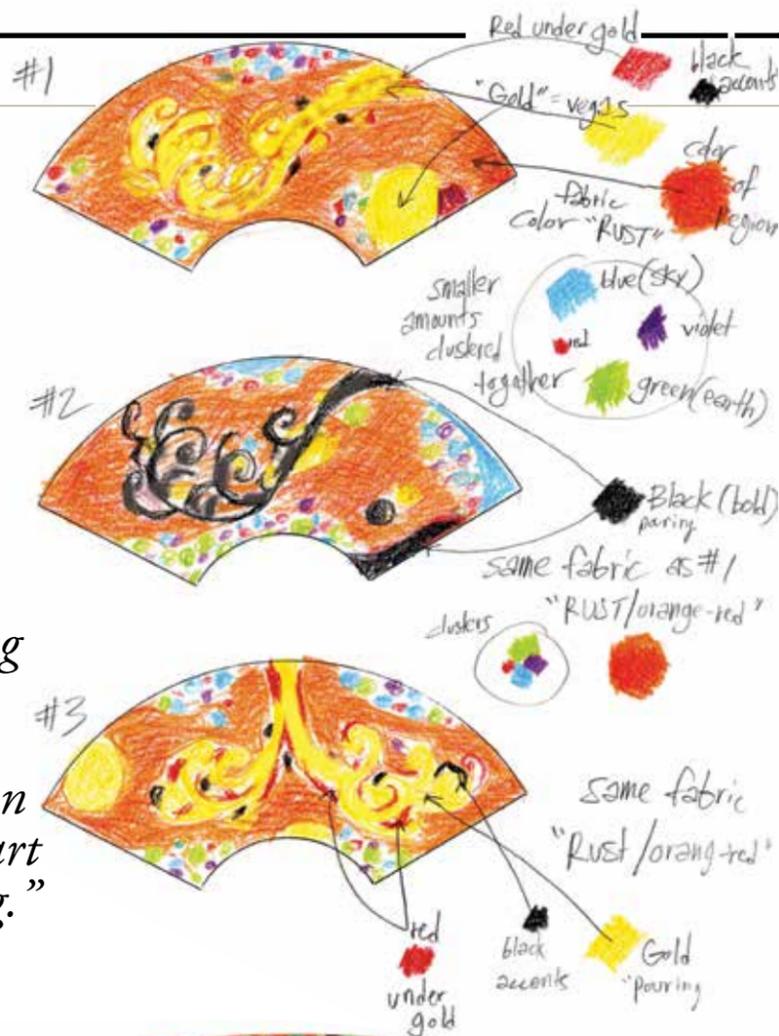


THE ART OF IDENTITY

“Eric came up with a unique identifier for us with *The Moment of Yuanfen 1*. It features the hotel’s signature colors and embodies a strong sense of place. There is a very emotional human tie between the art and the building.”

—Cliff Atkinson
General Manager



The Mandarin Oriental Hotel Group’s highly recognized logo is a fan that embodies their luxurious and elegant image with a nod to their Oriental essence. Each hotel commissions their own particular fan to reflect the individuality of that property.

Perhaps it was fate that drew American-born Chinese artist Eric Jiaju Lee to the Mandarin Oriental commission. An avid rock climber, Lee was already familiar with the Las Vegas terrain from his visits to Red Rocks. As an artist, he had spent time studying landscapes and working with silk fans. And as a professional, his path crossed happenstance with hotel executives, who noticed his work at an art show in Miami.

Lee’s interest in art started at a young age with classes when he was only 7 years old. He easily admits that the visual arts are the best way for him to express what’s in his life. Two trips during high school—one to Paris and the other to Taiwan—deeply influenced his decision to pursue art as a career. A trained violinist, he connects with surrealist Wassily Kandinsky, who was fascinated with the power of music and paralleled the two media to explain the validity of surrealism as a movement. Likewise, Lee sees harmony and discord in color combinations.

Studying his own cultural background brought him to the works of a great Chinese artist of the early part of the Qing Dynasty, Shi Tao, whose writings parallel Kandinsky’s ideology and personally reinforced to Lee the importance of that style of art. As a hiker and climber, Lee finds that nature often informs his work, much the same as Kandinsky, who was inspired by landscapes and capturing the spirit—not necessarily the visibility—of nature. This thread is also prevalent in Chinese art, where artists would travel to and soak in the essence of a place and then go home and paint nonexisting landscapes based on what they had seen. “A fundamental part of Chinese painting is the idea of positive space—solid forms, like mountains—and negative space, like a river,” explains Lee. “It is the yin-and-yang dynamic of action and nonaction. The sky, mist, and rivers were unpainted while the rocks and actual things were.” To a Chinese painter, Western art is all active, as every part of the canvas is usually covered.

For his work, Lee also looks to Jackson Pollack for inspiration, who likewise left space on his canvas. “The spaces followed a rhythm, much like calligraphy,” says Lee, who then decided to follow suit, not covering the whole canvas as well as abandoning the use of brushes. Lee started pouring paint and tilting the surfaces to make the paint “move.” He also began incorporating into the process another of his personal interests, tai chi. “I realized that if I used tai chi movements as I tilted the paint, it resulted in a more natural line. To embody nature, there has to be an uncontrollable element to that. Just like the natural line of a river, where water finds the easiest route, I wanted gravity to manipulate the line with more natural movement.”

Historically, many Chinese artists have worked with silk as a medium to expand his or her base, and Lee began doing so too. He also experimented with shapes, first traditional squares and then vertical and horizontal rectangles. He moved on to circles and another Chinese signature, the fan. “The fan is a perfect synthesis of my interest in abstract painting and traditional Chinese painting,” adds Lee, who was showing some of his fan-shaped paintings at Miami’s Art Asia, where Mandarin Oriental executives spotted his work.

To prepare for the Mandarin Oriental piece, Lee was flown out to Las Vegas. Unlike original art, Lee explains, the challenge of a commission is to find your own interests in something someone else wants. “You have to stay genuine to yourself as an artist while fulfilling the needs of your client.”

The backdrop of the resulting *The Moment of Yuanfen 1* painting is a rich rust color, inspired by the natural colors of the region: the oxidized iron in the rocks. “The orange-red Aztec sandstone is so textured. And when the sun hits it, it is really something else. The background is the geography of the landscape: the mountains, with clusters of smaller forms to represent the blue of the sky, the green of the desert flora, and the red and violet striations found in the earth and rocks in the Las Vegas area.”

To this, Lee added a “pouring” of gold in the shape of a flowing branch, with a similar form underneath in red as its shadow. “Gold represents the richness and luxurious experience of urban Las Vegas.”

The result is a telling calling card for the resort, combining its geographical position with the sparkle of the Mandarin Oriental’s location on the Las Vegas Strip. And in many ways, it is the perfect amalgamation of Lee’s interests as a person and as an artist, pulling from all aspects of his craft and dynamic as an individual.

“I do think it was fate that this project happened,” adds Lee, thoughtfully, who has used the word *yuanfen*, or fated, in the piece’s title. “And now the value of my art is being able to share it with others in such a public setting.”

Five feet wide and over two feet tall, *The Moment of Yuanfen 1* hangs in the hotel lobby on the 23rd floor and can be found on printed materials used throughout the Mandarin Oriental. A companion piece, *The Moment of Yuanfen 2*, similar in composition except for a black “pouring,” hangs in the hotel residences.