

# Mel Wong, 1939 - July 17, 2003

Professor of Theater Arts (Dance)



*Mel Wong*



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## **In Memoriam**

Mel Wong

By Scott Rappaport

Renowned choreographer, dancer, and visual artist Mel Wong died of a heart attack on Thursday, July 17, in Santa Cruz. He was 64. Wong established an international reputation, first as a performer with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and then as a choreographer, teacher, and performer with the Mel Wong Dance Company. He had been a professor of dance in the Theater Arts Department at UC Santa Cruz since 1989.

Wong's paintings and sculpture have been exhibited in galleries and museums throughout the country. His dance background included professional training in ballet and modern dance in California and New York. He received a Ford Foundation Scholarship to Balanchine's School of American Ballet in 1964 and 1965, and toured internationally with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (1968-72). He choreographed and performed his own work since 1970, and formed the Mel Wong Dance Company in 1975.

Wong's company performed throughout the United States and in most of the major dance festivals in New York City, as well as at the Asian Arts Festival in Hong Kong (1983) and in Japan. He choreographed more than 180 dances, and his works can be seen in the repertoires of companies in Canada, the United States, Hong Kong, Japan, and Europe.

In 1983-84, Wong became the first Chinese-American to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship in choreography. He also received grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Foundation for Contemporary Performing Arts, the Cultural Council of Santa Cruz County, and the Ford Foundation.

Wong's educational background includes a B.A. from San Francisco State University and graduate work at

the University of California, Los Angeles, and at Mills College, where he received an M.F.A. in visual arts, as well as the Catherine Morgan Trefethen Fellowship in Art.

Wong is survived by his wife, UCSC lecturer in dance Constance Kreemer, and daughters Anika, Kira, and Suzanna Kreemer Wong, all of Santa Cruz; his mother, Louise Wong of Alameda; his brother, Maurice Wong of Oakland, and two nieces and two nephews.

A public celebration of Mel Wong's life in Santa Cruz-including music and dance-will be held in September on a date to be determined. In lieu of flowers, tax-deductible contributions toward a college fund for his children can be made to the Mel Wong Dance Foundation, Inc., 201 Dickens Way, Santa Cruz, CA 95064.

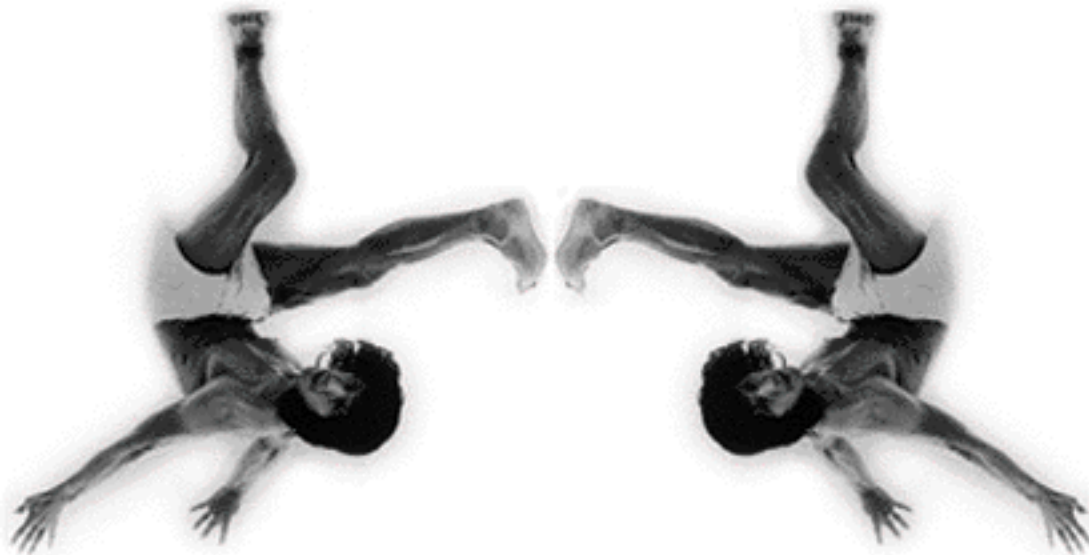
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**Mel Wong** was a choreographer/visual artist who was uniquely involved in exploring the relationship between visual arts and dance in the environment. Concerned with the interaction between the two, he combined elements of both in his mixed-media choreographic works.

His educational background included undergraduate work at San Francisco State University and graduate work at the University of California, Los Angeles and at Mills College, where he received an MFA in the Visual Arts and the Catherine Morgan Trefethen Fellowship in Art.

In 1983-84, he became the first Chinese-American to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship in choreography. He also received grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (Choreography, Dance Company, and Inter-Arts), the New York State Council on the Arts (Visual and Dance), Foundation for Contemporary Performing Arts, Inc., the [Cultural Council of Santa Cruz](#), and the Ford Foundation.

Mel established an international reputation, first as a performer with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and secondly as a choreographer, teacher,

and performer with the Mel Wong Dance Company. For the past several years, Mel toured his [solo work](#), *Growing Up Asian-American in the '50's*, in Hong Kong, Boston, Hawaii, Colorado, San Francisco, Oklahoma, Wisconsin and Connecticut. His paintings and sculpture have been exhibited in galleries and museums throughout the nation. His dance background included professional training in ballet and modern dance in California and New York. He received a Ford Foundation Scholarship to Balanchine's School of American Ballet in 1964 and 1965, and toured internationally with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company (1968-72). He had been choreographing and performing his own work since 1970, and formed the Mel Wong Dance Company in 1975. Since then he choreographed over one hundred dances.



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UCSC - Division of the Arts



## IN MEMORIAM

Melvin Wong

1938 — 2003

Dance Professor, Department of Theater Arts  
Santa Cruz

Mel Wong was professor of dance in theater arts at UCSC from 1989 to 2003. He was a choreographer, visual artist, dancer, teacher, spiritualist, and father. Throughout his life he touched thousands of people with his art, wisdom, humor, and desire to make the world a better place. His creativity was tapped through intuition, which flowed through him with unbridled abandon. The result was art, which was meaningful, political, spiritual, lyrical, satirical, and always poignant.

A stunning dancer who performed first with Merce Cunningham, (1968-72), Mel Wong began his dance career with the Oakland Civic Ballet, Oakland Civic Light Opera Association, and the Pacific Ballet Company (1962-65) in San Francisco. He went on to become a Ford Foundation scholarship student at George Balanchine's School of American Ballet. Mel received an M.F.A. in the visual arts from Mills College and was also in a masters program in dance at UCLA. He was nine credits short of a second master's degree when the Cunningham Foundation invited him into the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. Next, Mel was known in the dance world as choreographer and director of his own company, the Mel Wong Dance Company (1975-2003). His company performed in the major New York City venues including Dance Theater Workshop, The Umbrella Series, Avery Fisher Hall at Lincoln Center, La Mama E.T.C., the 92nd St. YMHA, the Asia Society, and The Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris. He was commissioned worldwide to create dances for companies in Hong Kong, Japan, Canada, the Netherlands, and for companies throughout the United States. During his life, he choreographed over 180 dances.

Mel Wong was also a visual artist. His paintings, drawings, lithographs, sculpture, and pottery have been exhibited in galleries across the nation. During October 2003 a retrospective of his art entitled "other Realm" was on display at the Bridge and J.B. Hall Galleries at UCSC's Porter College. This marked the first time his work was displayed together in one place.

Revered as a master teacher, Mel taught his own modern dance technique entitled "The Wong Way," and influenced dancers from across the globe. A former faculty member at the State University of New York at Purchase, Mel Wong taught previously at University of Colorado as co- director of dance, as Guest Artist at Hong Kong Academy for the Performing Arts, at Arizona State University, Sarah Lawrence College, the New Performance Gallery in San Francisco, New York University, Cornell University, Colorado Dance Festival, the Oklahoma Summer Art Institute, Glenwood Spring Dance Festival, the Harvard Summer School Dance Center, for three summers at Quebec Ete Danse in Canada, and for three summers at the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College. In addition, he conducted workshops and master classes throughout the world. Mel Wong was an inspiration to his students commenting, "Our theater arts graduates get great placements when they leave here, doing substantial work in drama, dance, and design. I believe it's because we encourage them to think for themselves. We give our students a strong foundation of practice and theory to work from and, inevitably, they gain confidence in their own ideas. And that's our goal. We want them to become fearless and discover their own voice, to find new ways to express themselves."

In 1990 and 2000 Mel Wong was a nominee for Outstanding Achievement in Choreography & Reconstruction, Dance Bay Area Isadora Duncan Awards. He also received grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (six in Choreography, Dance Company, and Inter- Arts), the New York

State Council on the Arts (Visual and Dance), Foundation for Contemporary Performing Arts, Inc., the Ford Foundation, and the Cultural Council of Santa Cruz, among others. In 1983-84 Mel Wong became the first Chinese American to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship in Choreography. Since 1989 he toured his solo work, Growing Up Asian American in the 50s, where he danced, talked and performed yo- yo tricks as he related his Asian American experiences. Before his death, he was performing with Silvia Martins in a tour of his solo choreography entitled SOLOS BY MEL WONG.

Connie Kreemer