

NEW FEATURE! SIMPLE SOLUTIONS TO PAINTING PROBLEMS

CAPTURE REALISM WITH COLORED PENCIL

The Artist's MAGAZINE

AMERICA'S FAVORITE ART MAGAZINE

JULY 1996

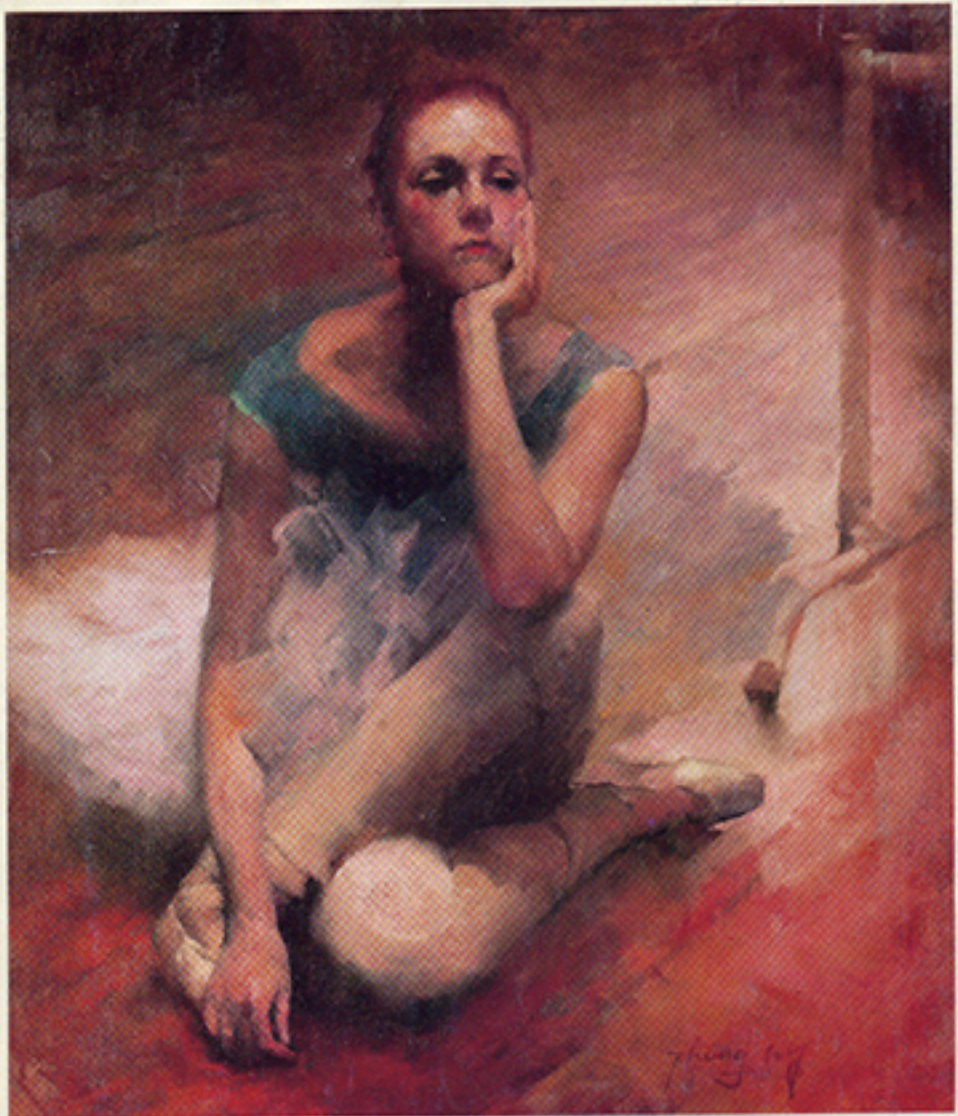


TWO KEYS TO GLOWING OILS

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SUCCESS**

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TIPS
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Ballerina, by Zhang Hong Nian, oil, 24 x 20.



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Glazing a Mood

From subtle grays to glowing colors, how Zhang Hong Nian brings controlled radiance to any subject.

BY ELIZABETH EXLER

The most crucial step in a painting comes "just before I start to work," Zhang Hong Nian says. "That's when I determine the image plus the mood or emotion I want to express." Combining complementary color schemes with the glazing techniques of the Old Masters, Zhang has developed an amazingly simple approach to capturing just the right mood for a vast repertoire of subjects and environments. Use this approach to give your work the same gem-like color, subtle atmospheric effects and drama that Zhang brings to his oils.

A MOODY OUTLOOK

One of the secrets to Zhang's success is his use of a limited palette. Each painting is built around mixtures of complementary colors. For example, if an object is red, the shadow it casts will include some of its complement—the color opposite it on the color wheel—in this case, green. Along with red/green groupings he also uses the complementary combinations purple/yellow and blue/orange.

The dynamic relationship between these complementary colors is what gives punch to his light-and-dark schemes. "Light and dark colors push and pull," Zhang says. "Cool and warm contrasts act in the same way. Such color relationships activate a painting. For example, I may base a painting on the complements yellow and purple, as in *Woman Shucking Corn*. If I want a light painting, I'd use yellow mixtures in greater amounts; for a darker painting, purple mixtures would dominate. The

light/dark contrasts depend on the dominant color of the piece."

Choosing the dominant color is key to determining the mood of a painting, Zhang says. To return to his previous example, a yellow-light painting creates a bright, cheerful mood, while a purple-dark painting reflects an air of mystery. It's the manipulations of the dominant color's temperature and value that direct the finer nuances of mood in a piece.

KEEPING IT SIMPLE

Zhang is a proponent of spontaneity, but within limits: He relies on a well-tested approach to his compositions

and color schemes. This helps ensure a painting's success. "My approach allows me to work with complete freedom," he says. "I sometimes rely on photographs for the sake of convenience, but I never copy. I'll take several shots of the same setup or similar setups, then combine the most interesting elements into a strong composition."

He maps these out with a rough sketch on paper. This sketch is usually very simple; its purpose is to determine how the canvas will be divided to create a balanced composition. He also includes at least one curved line to indicate motion. "For me, movement is essential," Zhang says. "It's

what brings a painting to life, creates a feeling of excitement, and moves the viewer's eye through the painting."

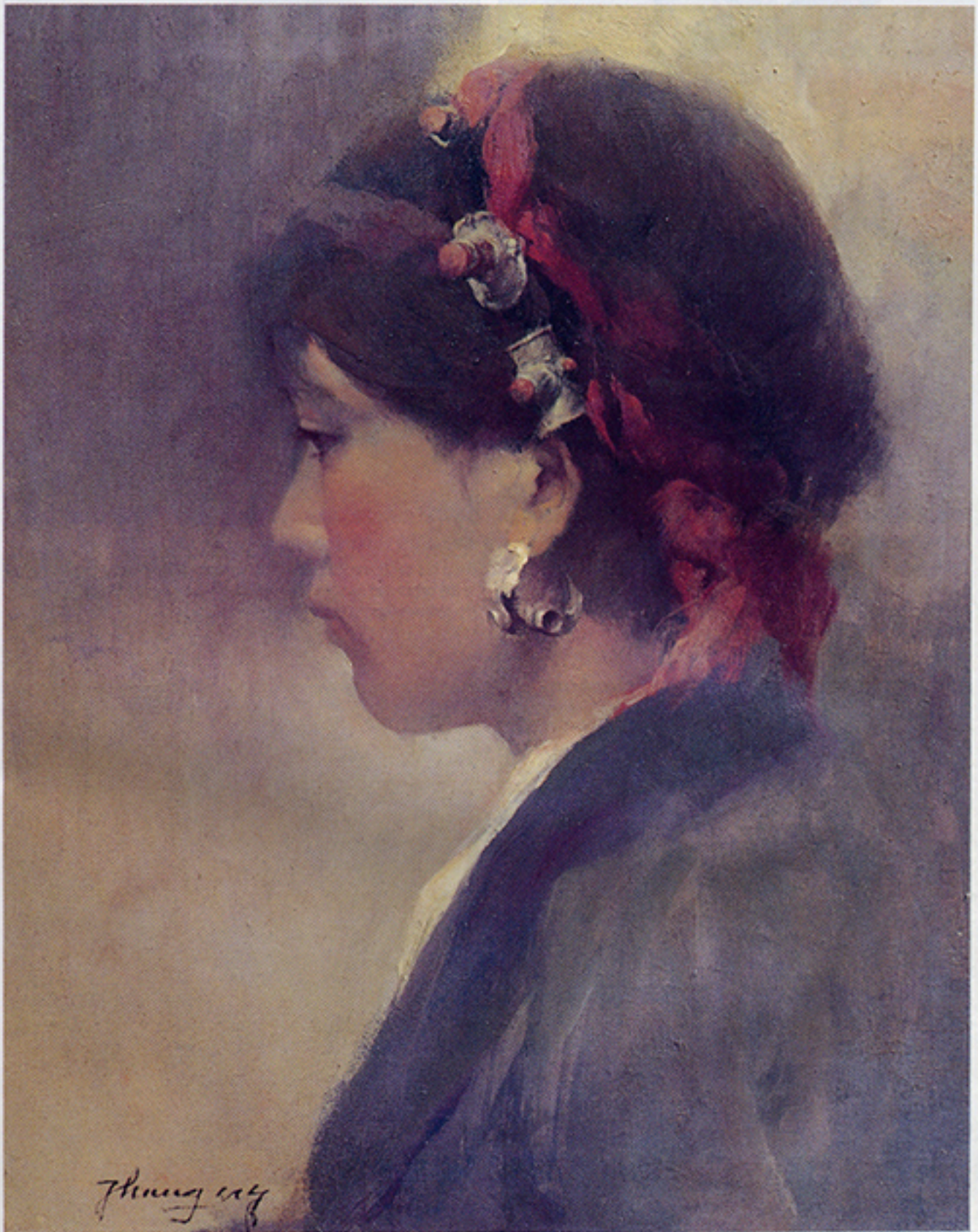
DIVING IN

Zhang eschews detailed preliminary drawings on his canvas; his initial sketch is only for placement and proportion. Instead, his first goal is to cover the white surface as quickly as possible, using only tinted oil washes diluted with turpentine. He favors oil-primed linen for an "oil-on-oil" feeling, and he paints fat-over-lean. He usually follows the traditional dark-to-light approach, especially when a painting contains lots of darker colors.



Creating with Complements

Zhang builds his moody oil paintings on multiple glazes of complementary colors. Before the Storm (30x40) uses a red/green scheme, with a pattern of dark reds dominating the painting. Notice how these reds work with their light-green complements to give the scene its "punch."



Building Form and Color

Glazing is central to Zhang's oil-painting technique. In *Kong Ding Girl* (24x20) he used a textured yellow underpainting to give form to the decoration in the girl's hair. Over this, he applied cool, blue-purple glazes, which he then wiped from the highest textured areas, leaving highlights that accentuate the textured brushwork. Finally, he built the lifelike color of her cheek by glazing a cool red over soft fleshtones.

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Step One: Creating Movement

Zhang began this painting by making a purple sketch of all the major compositional elements. Then, he began laying in his darks with four values of purple. In a high-key painting, such as Zhang planned here, the darks provide the movement that carries the eye through the piece. His goal was to establish this movement at the outset.



Step Two: Adding Midtones

Once the darks were in place, Zhang began to lay in the middle values in the dress and background. He mixed these neutral midtones from the yellow/purple complements.



Step Three: Turning On the Lights

He applied his lights using four yellows softened with purples. Zhang wanted to maintain strong light/dark contrasts, so while these yellows almost totally overlapped the midtones, they didn't touch the darks.



Step Four: Shifting the Shadows

Zhang developed the subtle color changes in the shadow, modeling the form by changing the value, temperature and intensity of the purples. He kept the paint thin and wet as he worked.



Detail: Softening Edges

Using a fully loaded brush, Zhang painted the lightest areas with mixtures of yellow. Once again, he avoided touching the dark pattern. Then, he used a clean, dry, soft bristle brush to gently soften the transitional areas where planes meet.



Step Five: Reaching a Finale

After letting the painting dry about two weeks, Zhang used glazes to further develop form. He unified the piece with a blue-green glaze applied over the entire surface. Then, he completed *Woman Shucking Corn* (24x20) by using glazes to strengthen some local colors, such as the red in the corn and the woman's face.

"I start by blocking in the dark areas, which help define the lighter forms in the paintings," he says. "I don't overly concern myself with the subject matter at the beginning. I'm still thinking about the subject in simple, abstract terms. The painting is still developing. Everything can be adjusted later on."

Once the darks are in, Zhang moves to the midtones. "Remember that the middle tones account for most of a painting, so pay particular attention to them," he says. His are mixed from the complementary colors on his palette, "producing a beautiful assortment of neutral gray tones that are basic to the painting."

Finally, Zhang builds up the light areas by mixing his colors "with lots of white." He uses an impasto technique when applying his lights. The thick paint helps him sculpt his forms for a greater sense of volume and mass. The goal here is to give dimensional objects a textured feel that will hold up under the transparent glazes to follow.

A NEUTRAL VIEW

With his basic composition in place, Zhang turns to transparent glazes to intensify his paintings. When oil colors are glazed, transparent layers optically fuse with the underlying paint layers. The thin application of transparent oil acts like a liquid film over dry colors, enriching and unifying a painting. Light reflecting through the transparent layers creates a range of glowing color, from delicate to radiant.

"When applying a glaze, I handle it freely, just barely touching or dabbing certain

Variations on a Limited Color Scheme

Zhang's limited-palette approach places a premium on variations in value and temperature. In Working Together (30x24), for example, he used a variety of complementary blues and oranges to create rich color while retaining a gentle mood.



spots to create color highlights," Zhang says. "I also sometimes cover the entire painting with a monochromatic glaze, but I make sure not to use an even coat. I want to create some diversity—some sections are softer, some darker and some brighter."

Glazing isn't merely a tool to create pretty colors; it's a means to control the relative lightness and darkness of colors (see "Glazing Basics" on next page), which in turn can control mood. I can completely change the mood by glazing one color over the entire painting," he says.

Maintaining his reliance on complementary colors even as he glazes, Zhang uses them to create modulations in color.

For example, he may apply warm glazes of orange/brown, orange/red and orange over a transparent blue to help neutralize it. The neutral shades these combinations produce will be notably different, yet similar enough to be used to describe subtle value shifts in even the deepest shadows. Dark tones created in this way take on a depth and luster unrivaled by the brightest colors straight from the tube.

Zhang uses this glazing approach to break up an overpowering color, enliven a dull color, or change the character of an underpainting. Jewel-like glazed areas offset by large areas of neutral tones guarantee that the painting will have a brilliant, lustrous look.

As he brings a painting to completion, Zhang thinks in terms of accents, rather than details. Depending on what he wants to convey, he may use light or dark colors in conjunction with sharp or blurred brushstrokes. Because of the drying time involved, the total number of glazes varies with painting size. Larger pieces get four or five glazes, while smaller works get six to eight. It takes from three days to two weeks for each glaze to dry. "If the surface isn't sticky to the touch, the paint is dry enough to accept another glaze," he says.

OLD BECOMES NEW

Zhang has melded conventional complementary color

theory and the traditional oil painting technique of glazing into a springboard for a more personal avenue of expression. Try this approach, and open a new door to vibrant, shimmering color in oils. ●

Elizabeth Exler is a New York City-based painter and printmaker who has written widely on art and artists as well as art techniques and materials.

GLAZING BASICS

Glazing is the process of applying thinned, transparent layers of oil over more opaque layers of color. These transparent layers allow you to adjust the look of the underlying layers. For example, if a color is too cool, you can glaze over it with a warmer tone. Or, if a color's too dark, add a lighter glaze. One secret to glazing is using enough color in the mixture—don't merely tint the underpainting.

Glazes are applied in a direct manner, but to ensure uniformity, they usually have to be manipulated once they're on the canvas. To achieve the proper results, you'll need to use transparent colors and dilute them with a glazing medium, which makes the paint more workable. Zhang's medium is equal parts turpentine, stand oil, refined linseed oil and damar varnish, plus several drops of cobalt drier.

The resulting mixture has a soupy consistency, and should be applied with a soft brush or rag. To prevent the thin paint from dripping, many artists prefer to lay their canvas flat when glazing.

Finally, it's critical to wait until your underpainting is dry enough that the glazes cover the previous layers without altering them. After applying the glaze, let it dry for a few minutes, then smooth it with clean, dry brushes.

—E.E.

Step Two: Strengthening Color

Zhang created a strong area of local color in the face with rose madder (right). He also used warm and cool greens to heighten the local color of the bird, which in turn brought out the neutral greens throughout the painting.



Step One: Beginning to Glaze

Glazing is the final step in Zhang's painting process. In the detail at left, he'd essentially finished *Girl with Bird* (22x20) and allowed the painting to dry for about two weeks. Then, he chose transparent colors—a warm and a cool purple—that related to the basic red/green complementary palette (red and blue make purple; blue is a component of green). He applied these purples over the entire surface, using the cool purple for shadow areas and the warmer one for areas in light. This unified the painting and added a sense of atmosphere.



About the Artist

Born in China, Zhang Hong Nian's painting life was overtaken by forced rural labor during the country's cultural revolution. He eventually succeeded in becoming a government artist and was even elected Chinese Artist of the Year by the All-China Art Association in 1979. It wasn't until he came in contact with Tibetan nomads that Zhang felt he'd found his creative voice. "I admired the Tibetans' primitive love of nature," he says. He was also inspired by the natural light and pure colors of the Tibetan plains, and created several series of paintings depicting nomadic life.

Zhang's work has been exhibited around the world in such venues as the Museum of Modern Art in San Diego (California), The Harvard University Museum (Cambridge, Massachusetts), and the National Museum of China (Beijing). He currently lives in Woodstock, New York, where he teaches at the Woodstock School of Art.

