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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

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Portraits of Pilgrims

*Artist says
he relates
to colonists*

By CINDY NICKERSON
STAFF WRITER

PLYMOUTH — Zhang Hong Nian feels a kinship to the settlers of Plymouth Colony as surely as if his ancestors had arrived on the Mayflower.

The 45-year-old Chinese artist, who came to the United States in 1985 to attend graduate school, knows what it's like to be a stranger in a strange land. As a student who was sent away to be a farm laborer during the Cultural Revolution, he knows what it's like to toil in the fields. And he knows what it's like to find freedom from oppression.

So last Thanksgiving, when he first visited Plimoth Plantation, a re-creation of the early settlement, complete with "interpreters" who dress in period costumes and work the land with reproductions of 17th-century tools, he immediately identified with the Pilgrims.

"When I see Plimoth Plantation, I think, 'This is something I've been through,'" Zhang says during a phone interview from his home in Woodstock, N.Y.

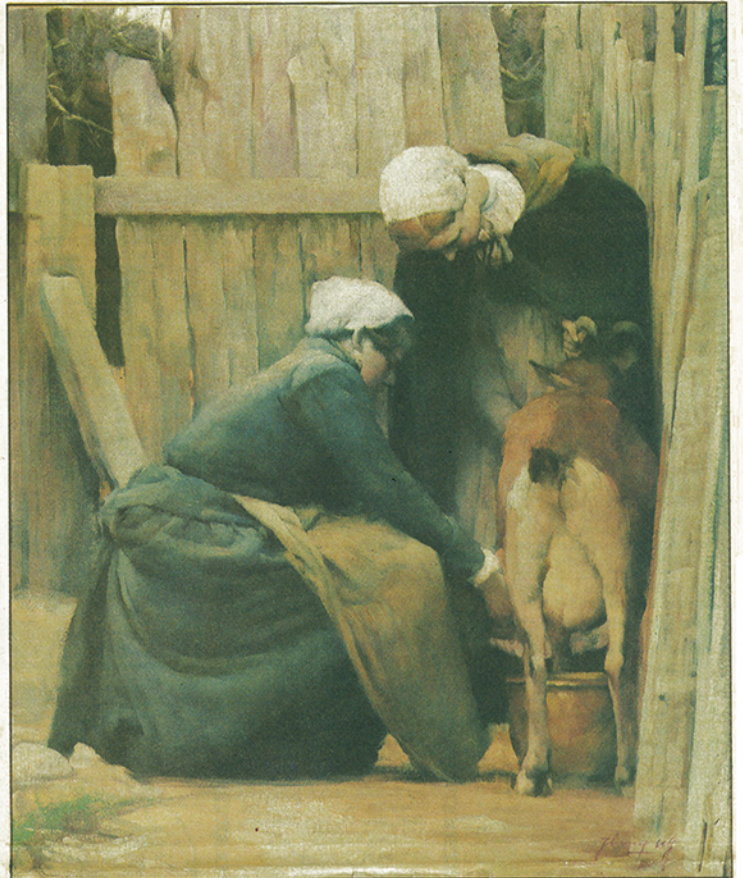
His response was to do a series of oil paintings of Pilgrim life. Plimoth Plantation is presenting 22 of the works in the exhibit "Portraits of a Colony: Views of Plimoth Plantation," running through Nov. 29 in its Accomack Gallery.

In painting the series, Zhang sought to express something of the harshness of the Pilgrims' life by capturing the rough wood of the homes and fences and the coarseness of the woolen clothes. "I want to combine the beauty and the rough. Most of the time, people talk about beauty, they're talking about something soft. . . . I want to show the beauty of the hard time."

Beauty is definitely present — and so is serenity — especially in the earnestness, strength and grace of the Pilgrims, who are mostly depicted going about such everyday tasks as hoeing, splitting a log into planks, milking a goat and baking bread. They have about them a simplicity touched with nobility — not unlike the peasants the French artist Jean Francois Millet painted in the mid-19th century.

There's also much beauty in Zhang's superb handling of light, even as it illumines the humble setting of Plimoth Plantation. He painted the works in the academic European style he learned at the China Art Institute of Beijing, using underpaintings and glazes. (The school also gave him instruction in traditional Chinese painting.) It's a realism enlivened by the freshness of his strokes and just a hint of impressionistic color.

In "Knitting," a smile plays on



■ "The Dairy Goat," above, and "The Sea Chantey," below, are on exhibit at Plimoth Plantation.



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■ Zhang Hong Nian's "Two Women at Daybreak" is included in the exhibit at Plimoth Plantation.

PILGRIMS

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the lips of a young woman as she sits watching her older companion knit. Otherwise, Zhang's Pilgrims are a fairly serious people, even when, as in "The Sea Chantey," several of the men stand singing on the deck of the Mayflower.

"Man of Plymouth" is Zhang's interpretation of John Carver, the first governor of the colony, who died in 1621. In the portrait, the brim of Carver's hat casts a deep shadow over the top half of his face. His eyes are hidden, heightening the contemplative mood. It's easy to imagine he is pondering the Pilgrims' chances for survival in the New World.

Zhang has had similar adventures and worries.

His father, who had been educated and had taught in the United States, returned to China to fight in World War II. He was set to take his family to America when the Communists took over China in 1949. "The army came too fast," Zhang says.

In 1969, three years after the Cultural Revolution began, the government split up his family and sent Zhang, then a 21-year-old art school graduate, to labor in a poor

rural village. "I work in the field for four years. ... They say we must get reeducation," he says.

In the early spring, he and others were forced to break up the ice on the rice paddy with their bare feet. Ten of them slept on earthen mounds the size of four twin beds. "We cannot do our artwork," Zhang says. "All we can do is work in the field and study Mao's work."

He doesn't, however, look down upon the work he did. He learned to feel close to the land and knew the times for planting and harvest. "Even though I was forced to do it — I still feel proud."

In 1974, Zhang was able to return to Beijing as an official artist for the government. "We had a good salary, we didn't have to worry about selling paintings," but there was little opportunity for freedom of expression, he says.

Once, in 1976, he was part of a demonstration in Tiananmen Square that ended similarly to the one in 1989, with soldiers and the police suppressing the crowd. "It's a bloody day," Zhang recalls. "I was there as one of the people, but when I come back to the place I work, they ask me to do a painting of the people as antirevolutionaries and the police as heroes. This is terrible. I feel I do the wrong job. I don't want to lie."

Zhang was accepted into graduate school at City College of the City University of New York after a friend showed faculty there slides of his paintings. "When the chance came (to come to the United States), I say, 'I want to do that — to finish my father's dream,'" he says.

Zhang's realization of the American dream didn't come true immediately. "I had a hard time at first — that's another reason I (decided to paint) the Pilgrims. I only had \$30 when I came to this country. ... I only eat bread, peanut butter and orange juice for almost a half-year."

For a while, he bemoaned his new country's apparent indifference to his plight. "Nobody take care of me." But, when his paintings began to sell, he fully appreciated the creative freedom he had as an artist. "Most important thing is — nobody bother me," he says with a ring of joy in his voice.

Since coming to America, Zhang has visited such places as the

Grand Canyon, Colorado and San Francisco, but he found them "too beautiful," too different from his native landscapes. Nor did he feel at home when he saw the big farms where the land is worked with machinery.

"I want to see something I understand," he says. "When I see the small field in the Plimoth Plantation, I understand that."

Plimoth Plantation will be open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily through Nov. 29. Admission is \$18.50 for adults, \$11 for children under 12 and free for children under 5. In addition to the Pilgrim village and the gallery, visitors can see a Wampanoag settlement, the Carriage House Crafts Center and the Mayflower II.

To reach the plantation from the Cape, take Exit 5 off Route 3; immediately get back on the highway going south and take Exit 4; and follow the signs to the entrance.

More information may be obtained by calling 746-1622.