

Painting the First Thanksgiving

BY HONGNIAN ZHANG



Hongnian Zhang (b. 1947)

Thanksgiving, 1621

2009-2011, Oil on linen, 72 x 120 in.

Private collection

That dinner had been on my mind for almost 20 years.

In 1992, I had a show at the Plimoth Plantation Museum in Plymouth, Massachusetts, titled *Portraits of a Colony*. Its 20 paintings focused on the Pilgrims' peaceful yet difficult work, and also on their relationships with the Indians they encountered. There was just one picture I did not create for that exhibition: a scene of the first Thanksgiving dinner, shared in 1621 by the Pilgrims and Native Americans.

In 2009, one of my patrons wanted me to make a painting for her beautiful, and very large, dining room. She pointed to the bare wall and asked, "What do you think the subject should be?" I answered without hesitation, "the first Thanksgiving." Fortunately, she agreed.

I was delighted, especially as I could finally paint this long-imagined scene on a big canvas for a big wall. The modern holiday of Thanksgiving celebrates the fruits of hard work in an atmosphere of peace, gratitude, and generosity. The members of my patron's family are not only warm and kind to their friends, but they are also down-to-

earth and open-minded about all cultures. I knew *Thanksgiving, 1621* would suit their dining room perfectly.

I was hardly the first artist to paint this famous historical episode, so I wanted to present it from a completely new angle. Others have focused on the religious aspect of giving thanks by showing the figures at prayer. I preferred to focus on their enjoyment of the food and company, especially since the two cultures involved held different spiritual beliefs. I designed my composition so that the table appears to emerge from the canvas into the patron's dining room. The people in my painting and the guests at her actual table are together in spirit, taking part in one big meal.

The tone I established is busy and active, and the expressions and poses of the settlers and Indians convey aspects of joy, friendship, trust, and even wonder. In the distance is the ocean, from which the Pilgrims came; this suggests that they remember their homeland, even as they look forward to their next chapter in the New World.



Thong 1911



Fig. 1: Simple compositional sketch (pencil on a 9 x 12 in. pad)

A TIME-CONSUMING PROCESS

I began planning the composition with a simple sketch on paper (Fig. 1), in which the major line thrusts the table forward. Several groups appear in the middle ground around the table, while the village and ocean are in the background. Next, I reviewed the color reference photographs (Fig. 2) I had never gotten around to using for that Plimoth show long ago. I also took new photos of my models and friends. Then I made a small color study of the composition (Fig. 3).

When I finally began to sketch on the large canvas, I used vine charcoal (Fig. 4), which is easy to alter and endows a rich tone. (This was then sealed with a fixative spray so that I could paint on top of it.) Next, I chose a violet blue color with which to tone the canvas and give the picture its appropriate temperature. Relying on the charcoal drawing underneath and on the color study at my side, I began “blocking in” the simple forms, knowing that I could delve into their details later (Fig. 5). It was very important to keep the finished idea in my head while blocking in, so that I would not lose sight of the color and space relationships.

A major challenge in composing this scene was the arrangement of multiple groups. I decided to treat this as a symphony, with a strong melody recurring in different movements. (See Fig. 6.) Section (a) is the overture. The girl with the corn and the Indian lead viewers into the painting toward the bountiful table. Section (b) is the major, lively movement with interesting characters, gestures, rich color, and attractive food. Sections (c) and (d) continue the theme, but in two different tones, female and male respectively. The feminine tone of section (c) is about cooking and caring for children. The masculine activities of hunting and trading define section (d). Behind the steam, section (e) echoes in quieter tones the major theme of disparate people joyfully eating together. In counterpoint, section (f) presents a multitude of Native Americans arriving for the festivities. Section (g) is the finale, offering a distant view of the New World’s village and the vast ocean.

So now I had the story, the characters, and the different groupings. Still, one single motion was needed to unify the whole picture from right to left, and from front to back. (See Fig. 7.) I call it the “hidden dragon” or the “chi,” since it curves and flows like the body of a dragon as it gives energy to the composition. The light value accents and gestures sustain this motion from the right side of the table to the sky’s open light in the background. This device guides the viewer’s eye intuitively through the painting, creating a sense of order in an otherwise bustling mass of forms.

Measuring 72 x 120 inches, the finished painting contains some foreground figures that are life-size, ones that gave me a chance to present individualized portraits conveying the positive energy of being together (Figs. 8 and 9). Though the exchange of knowledge and ideas clearly generates joy, certain poses and expressions also suggest some of the wariness that lingers.

It took me about a year to research this scene, and another to paint it. I was grateful to receive support from many quarters, especially the costumed people who re-created the scene on location at Plimoth Plantation. Back at my studio in Woodstock, New York, my students, friends, and even my own family members modeled for me.

Now that it’s done, I hope that *Thanksgiving, 1621* captures the beauty and truth of that historic moment. Dedicated to the American spirit, this painting completes the vision I have harbored since 1992. ■

HONGNIAN ZHANG (b. 1947) was classically trained in Beijing’s Central Art Academy, and now teaches at both the Woodstock School of Art and the Shanghai Institute of Visual Art. He is represented by Fletcher Gallery in Woodstock, where he resides with his wife, the distinguished portraitist Lois Woolley.



Fig. 2: Typical color reference photograph taken at Plimoth Plantation



Fig. 3: Color compositional study (oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in.)



Fig. 4: Full-scale sketch on canvas (vine charcoal, 72 x 120 in.)



Fig. 5: Toned canvas with one area blocked in



Fig. 6: The painting’s color sections (a-g)



Fig. 7: The painting’s line of movement



Fig. 8: Gradual development of a single figure at the table



Fig. 9: Left foreground of the completed painting

Hongnian Zhang

I moved from Beijing to New York City in 1985. Soon, I began exhibiting at Grand Central Art Galleries, where most of my paintings depicted Tibetans, whose pastoral existence projected a romantic timelessness. Tibetan people had also been my primary subject back in China, and they remain close to my heart now.

In 1991, I moved to Woodstock, New York, where I still reside with my family. Having become part of a small town with New England traditions, and having joined new art circles, my interests began shifting toward American subjects. What came closest to my heart was not the lives of people today, but of New England's early settlers.

A visit to the living history site of Plimoth Plantation helped me identify personally with the Pilgrims: they and I immigrated to America with dreams of starting a new life. Figuratively speaking, we shared the same boat, only 370 years apart. I particularly identified with the difficulties the Pilgrims encountered early on, having experienced my own hardships and loss of loved ones.

I have lived in America almost 30 years now. I have worked very hard to put my roots in its soil, and I deeply appreciate the warm welcome I have received from its people.

Hongnian Zhang with *Thanksgiving, 1621* in his studio

