

HONGNIAN ZHANG

Contemporary Master

By Pauline Uchmanowicz

Renowned in the People's Republic of China and throughout the United States, award-winning oil painter HongNian Zhang creates contemporary masterpieces in the Western-academic realist tradition. His enduring works, such as his 1976 colossal *Before the Long March* (70" x 80"), which portrays Mao and other Chinese leaders gathered before that yearlong event in 1934-35, encapsulate epic sweeps of history into singular frames of reference. "Contemporary American subject matter only recently entered my paintings," Zhang wrote in the preface to *The Yin/Yang of Painting* (Watson-Guption Publications, 2000), acknowledging that his co-author and wife, the portrait painter Lois Woolley, has inspired this new focus.

Born in Nanjing in 1947, Zhang started professional training in art at age nine. One of only thirty chosen to study at the prestigious Central Art Academy in Beijing, at age 14 he became the institute's top student. Then came the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, catapulting Zhang to a countryside reeducation camp in

Hebei province, where he spent four years performing forced labor. "Mao believed we should learn from the peasants," he explained. "But as educated art students we became numb doing only hard labor—no art and no reading, except for Mao's book." A cherished painting from that period the size of a folded napkin, which he furtively created and "smuggled" out, sits in a tiny gilded frame in the painter's Woodstock living room below a landscape done by his first wife, who died in China at a young age.

Returning to the capital city in 1973, he became the youngest artist employed in the official Beijing Art Academy. He repeated this precocious feat in 1979 as the youngest inductee into the All China Artist Association. Beginning in 1982, Zhang made several treks to remote Tibet to produce an artistic record of Tibetan life in a series of sensual nomadic vignettes. Subsequently selected as one of only five students for the Central Art Academy's master's degree program in 1984, Zhang pioneered the "Flashback" painting style and led the Chinese "Scar" movement, both of which broke with traditional propaganda art after the Cultural Revolution. Over the past two decades, the innovator's works of art have been exhibited and acquired by the China Central Art Museum and three paintings reside in the permanent collec-

tion of the National Art Museum in Beijing. Reproductions of his paintings have appeared in numerous periodicals around the world.

After he came to America in 1985, Zhang became involved with New York's Grand Central Art Gallery. A year later, the gallery's successful "Realism from China," the first show to introduce Chinese oil painting to the western world, landed Zhang a profile in *ARTnews* and an appearance on CBS. A 1996 cover story published in *Artist Magazine* showcases his painting technique. *The Yin/Yang of Painting*, already in its second printing, likewise reveals connections between his style and ancient Chinese philosophy. Zhang teaches painting at the New York Academy of Art in New York City and is on the faculty of the Woodstock School of Art. Since his relocation to the United States, his work has been acquired by both private and corporate collections, including Harvard University and continues to be exhibited throughout the U. S. as well as internationally.

Zhang recently completed a series of large oil paintings (10' x 4') for the National Geographic Society that recreates events from the ancient Chinese Shang Dynasty (1300 BCE). Hanging in their corporate headquarters in Washington, DC, reproductions appear in the October 2001 issue of the organization's maga-



Before the Long March, oil, 72" x 84"

zine. Meanwhile, a comprehensive, scholarly article on Zhang's work is currently underway.

When asked about his compulsion to create "grand narratives" reminiscent of nineteenth-century paintings and literary works on the scale of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Zhang answered, "Everything today is commercial, so artists want to do any easy job that doesn't [politically] bother anyone. But when we have subjects of more importance—our lives are so dramatic—we deserve a masterpiece." As one who grew up around what he calls "grand political tragedy," Zhang instinctively gravitated toward big events. "I was constantly asking questions like 'What's the argument between Russia and China?', not, 'Will I make money this week?'"

Admitting joy at landing the commission from National Geographic, Zhang elaborates: "As a little boy, I dreamed of doing big paintings—epic pictures from wars from 2000 years ago. I wanted to do a mural of the Opium War. It was like a dream; I even did a little sketch. But when I came to America, no one was interested; it bothered them with its fighting and violence. So when National Geographic said 'do it' [including warring murals], it was a dream come true." Zhang relished the research as much as the physical work of painting, traveling

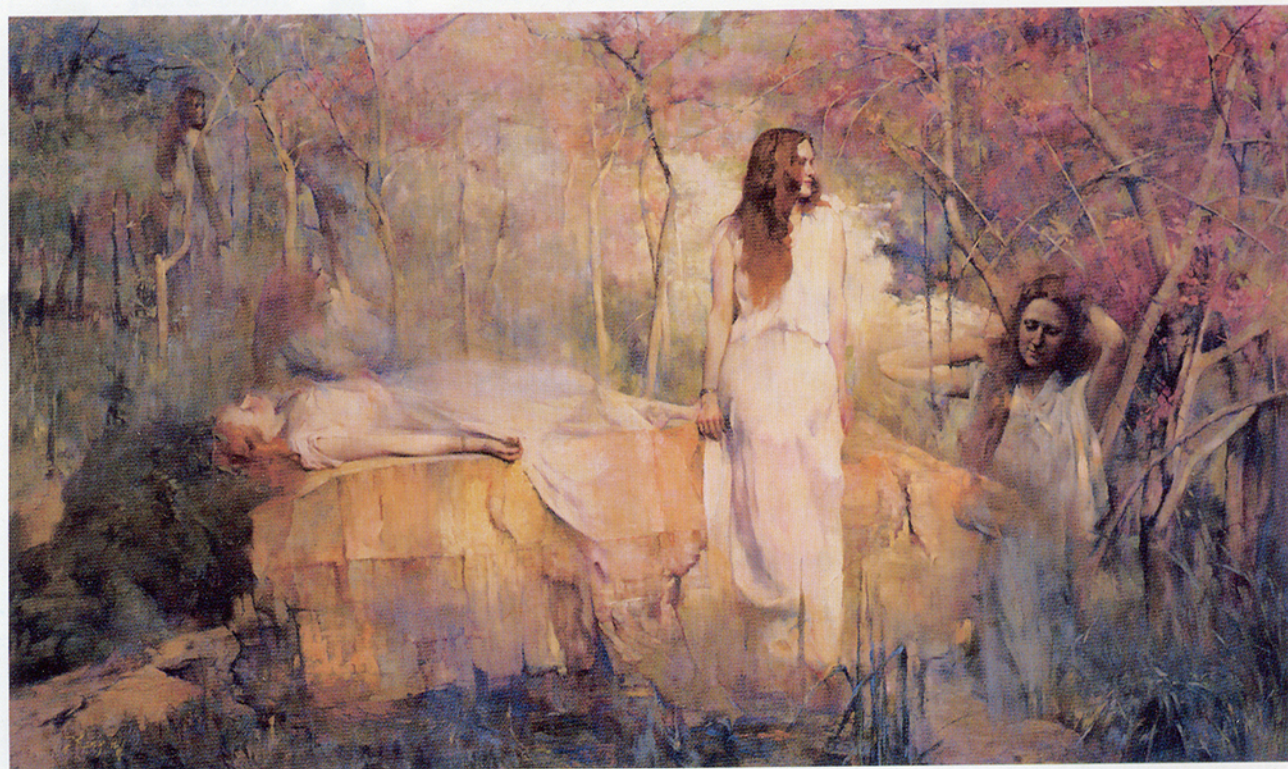
to China twice and to the London Museum to seek out settings, buildings and artifacts. "I'm mostly a loose kind of guy who doesn't do that kind of detailed study," he explains.

Now an American citizen, Zhang's paintings in recent years have expressed an individual vision of his adopted land. For example, the 30" x 40" *Greeting in the Village*, inspired by a trip to Plimoth Plantation, depicting smiling settlers in colonial garb, reflects the ancestry of "cheerful, down-to-earth, hard-working people" the painter has encountered in this country. Though typical historical narratives of the colonial period in American history emphasize hardship, Zhang, who feels "very proud" of having produced a painting on the subject, wants people to look back at what has been peaceful and simple in our history. Characterizing New York as "a grand city," he has used its people and environs as material for large, multi-figure compositions, such as *Union Square* (40" x 70"), which depicts picnickers, strollers and clusters of families.

Zhang's celebration of contemporary American people and landscapes is further showcased in his current solo exhibition "Life and Light," at Fletcher Gallery in Woodstock, NY. A couple sprawled on its bank in *The*

Breeze from the Hudson as well as a gaggle of longhaired mothers and daughters in flowing dresses playing ring-around-the-rosy in *Waltz Along the Hudson* suggest the master's embrace of new-found regionalism. Several woodland settings in praise of lovely, nymph-like female beauties illustrate the dramatic range of seasonal hues native to the Hudson Valley, particularly in spring and fall. Among the most compelling paintings in the show, *Déjà Vu* (36" x 60"), a mystical, autumnal dreamscape featuring a woman projecting several "versions" of her being, was inspired by French impressionist Jules Bastien-Lepage's *Jeanne d'Arc*, a famed 1880 rendering of Joan of Arc as visionary which is on permanent display at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City.

Zhang does not completely abandon overtly political themes in "Life and Light," as *Ground Zero*, a requiem for those who lost their lives, family members or friends in the September 11 attacks illustrates. Its central figure, an elegant, dark-haired angel, holds a sprig of red, white and blue flowers, her eyes cast downward and her free hand partially obscured in a fold of her garment. Ruins suggesting the collapsed twin towers haunt the bottom right of the frame, while a coil of metal lies at the feet of



Déjà Vu, oil, 36" x 60"



Ground Zero, oil, 48" x 36"

the angel. The image, already seen around the world and which attracted interest from Mayor Giuliani's office, sold quickly to a private collector and is slated to serve as cover art to a forthcoming poetry anthology.

Particularly touched by the 1,500 children who lost parents on September 11, Zhang, who raised his own daughter as a single parent, recalls how difficult it was to paint in the period following the disaster, his "heart filled with the darkness of despair." As in the past, he turned to painting angels as a way of comforting himself. "The nation was sad and uncertain, so I wanted to paint a strong, powerful and serious protector

but also someone gentle and tender," he said. Conveying the majesty and import of the Statue of Liberty, at once a symbol of courage, justice and truth, according to Zhang, the image does not intend to resolve or answer our reactions to the events, but rather to offer possibilities—the way a lyric (versus a narrative) poem operates. He conjectures, "The rolling piece of metal at her feet—is it a sword perhaps? The pocket in her hand—could she be reaching for the scabbard and contemplating retribution?"

Working day and night for three consecutive days to complete *Ground Zero*, the painting comforted Zhang's soul. "I hope its image

brings similar solace to all those who, like me, despair over this tragedy," he lamented, despite his general outlook of optimism. "To me, the world is forever young," said HongNian Zhang in *The Yin/Yang of Painting*. "When selecting subject matter, I strive to keep my heart and eyes wide open, to see the world with the innocence of a child."

"Life and Light" continues at Fletcher Gallery, 40 Mill Hill Road, Woodstock, through January 15. Visiting hours are Thursday through Sunday, noon to 5 PM. You may call the gallery at 845 679 4411 or visit their Web site at www.fletchergallery.com.