

Behind the SCENES

AT THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY



NGS PHOTOGRAPHER MARK THIESSEN

Big Is Beautiful

Paintings of China fill a broad canvas

Almost all the artists who paint for NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC work on canvases larger than these pages, but they've seldom created paintings as large as Chinese-born artist Hongnian Zhang's extraordinary work for the story on the Shang and other Bronze Age cultures. Each of his three paintings measures eight feet wide and four feet high, making them perhaps the biggest created for the magazine since the 1920s. Each took a month to paint; Hongnian was still putting the finishing touches

on them in the Society's photographic studio (above), just before transparencies were shot for reproduction in the magazine.

Why work big? Hongnian says it gives his work more power. Chris Sloan, the magazine's art director, says it's difficult for artists to capture detail on a small canvas, and that reducing a large painting for publication eliminates brushstrokes and can make scenes look more realistic. Chris liked the big versions too: He bought the canvases to add to the Society's permanent collection.

NO SEX, PLEASE

When illustrations editor Kathy Moran began to assemble photos for this month's article on sexual selection, she e-mailed some 250 photographers and photographic agencies around the world, asking for their help. But a quarter of the e-mails bounced back unread to Kathy and her assistant, Leah Boonthanom. Eventually they learned why: Many automatic e-mail filtering systems read the subject line, "Sexual Selection Article," to mean that NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC was sending them pornography. "We'd probably have been better off calling it 'The Birds and the Bees,'" Kathy says.

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC • JULY 2003