



Tibetan Highlands 60" x 68" Oil

## HONGNIAN ZHANG, AN AMERICAN ARTIST

There is a dragon hiding in every painting by Hongnian Zhang.

Yes, even in his paintings of Pilgrim settlers in the raw environment of early New England. Gazing at these masterfully painted scenes, one would not expect to encounter the coils of a hidden dragon.

The "hidden dragon" is a flow of light, motion and, frequently, color to be discerned for capture by the eye of an artist. It almost invisibly invites and commands the gaze, compelling the focus and rhythms of attention as the scene is regarded and it beams a triumphant smile as its intended effects are achieved, usually without its own presence being consciously detected.

The hand which traces the mythical reptile's posture in the pilgrim settlement visited here is, fittingly, one which has benefitted from insights ancient and modern, artistic and cultural philosophies worlds apart as well as seasons tumultuous and serene.

Hongnian Zhang was born in Nanjing, China, in the turbid wake of the Second World War as the conflict changed gears in the battle

for control of the country from the repulsion of invading armies to a bloody contest between Chinese Nationalist and Communist forces.

"New government, new revolution, new philosophy—everything changed for our family. You can see what happened here," Zhang gestures in his Woodstock, New York, living room, indicating an old photograph he has conjured up to the screen of a laptop computer perched on a coffee table. He points to a babe in arms, saying "That's me with my mother, my father and two sisters. We are in Shanghai, trying to leave (China). My father was educated in the United States. Also, he was a banker and belonged to an older time. He was ready to take us to America but we missed the boat, so our lives are totally changed."

Zhang recalls that his family typically never spoke about their plight as, block by block, the struggle pushed Chiang Kai-shek's forces off of the mainland, or their hardships in the upheaval as the People's Republic of China took root. He expresses a dispassionate lack of regret for the resulting impoverished circumstances of his early childhood because "I only have one life and I grew up in China under Communism, so I couldn't think of another kind of life."





Water Bearer 30" x 40" Oil



Fu Hao's Battle 48" x 96" Oil





Before the Long March 70" x 84" Oil

Despite the insecurity of their own situation, Zhang now recognizes his parents' extraordinary efforts to shelter him from the most ominous shadows of the time, giving him the secure feeling of a beloved child.

"So, I was kind of a 'sunshine boy,' always happy, and I think that was a good beginning because I *liked* everything and I found everything interesting," he remembers. "My parents were not artists themselves but they were both very educated. Another thing that was helpful in my path to becoming an artist is that we were very poor. When you're very poor, you have nothing but imagination. We could not travel. We didn't have tv. So, every day I needed to think—to use my brain and that, I believe, helped me to become an artist."

Remarkably, Zhang can remember his first drawings at two or three years old, making his first marks and saying to himself with a childish exuberance of wonder, "Oh, I can draw!" Because the experience registered so lastingly, he looks at it today as almost a forecasted destiny. "By no means did I draw well but I drew; I showed my dream, my imagination..."

As an evolved master painter, Zhang credits the new communist government with paying vigorous attention to education, an affirmative legacy from his upbringing in the 1950s and '60s which

involved him with professional art teachers at children's centers.

"It didn't matter if you had money or not," he recalls, "if you had talent, you got an education. So I was trained very well from early on by a collegiate artist who loved his job and gave me lots of help when I was nine or ten years old until I was fourteen and ready to go on to a more difficult level of instruction."

"Most of the time American people don't seem to understand the kind of system it was under communism," Zhang continued. "In China, and I think maybe in Russia, everything is under the plan. They will decide how many artists are needed. They felt they didn't need too many artists, so they had a very limited number of schools for that. In order to get in, they want to be very sure that you are really talented. That's why my school, at that time, was almost the only art school at the high school level. Out of the whole population, all over China, only thirty students were selected to start in this school, so that is why I say my teacher gave me excellent training because I was able to get into this very select school."

Zhang emits a few of his reserved chuckles as he attempts to compare an art education in Communist China to one in the United States.

"It is not like here, where you can take it part time and pay for it,





Tavern Rest 36" x 46" Oil



From the Roof of the World 24" x 48" Oil





Execution of the Scholars 48" x 60" Oil

if you have money, or get a scholarship and quit, if you want to quit," he laughs. "This is very serious training and you don't have the choice— if you're in then you're in and there's no opting out. It is free but very hard training that brings you almost to professional levels at a young age. Maybe you've heard how the Russians train their ballerinas? It is like that— a long, full devotion from a very young age— concentration on geometric form for hours a day, every day, that kind of drawing for a year— nothing but geometric form and still life. Then, the next year, you follow another detail and your education is formed very gradually. It gives a solid foundation for those skills."

Creativity was not encouraged in this system, Zhang points out. The focus is technique and even thinking about impressionism, about Picasso, or any other such "distraction" is straying dangerously from the beaten track. This rigidity, Zhang feels, was not beneficial for every student because, as he could see, many had developed none of their more creative instincts after years of study. Only ten or fifteen in his class of thirty are still artists today.

"Before the Cultural Revolution, we had good training although the life in China was poor," he observed. "But people weren't feeling the pain so much as yet because it was still a peaceful life and the people felt a sense of equality and purpose. It was as in Cuba today, with free education, free medical care and people feeling equal but equally poor. It was that kind of life."

China's *transitional period* under Mao Zedong's leadership instituted socialist rule, collectivized agriculture and formalized elections that solidified Mao's elevated position. Meanwhile, Hongnian Zhang grew up with a determined focus to learn the

myriad secrets of visual artistry. Despite the great social and economic upheavals of his homeland, he continued to be prepared for a career in art until the disastrous decade of the *Cultural Revolution* seized China in 1966.

#### National Turmoil and "Re-education"

"It was a big mistake for Chairman Mao and a great shock for the Chinese people," Zhang recalls, venturing that personal motives of countering political enemies within the party may have blended with Mao's stated desire to purify the communistic core of the Chinese revolution by rigorously indoctrinating and "re-educating" the masses. "Probably that was all in his mind. It didn't work at all and the whole country was falling apart. It was almost like a civil war for ten years. For us, it was painful because we were not allowed to continue to study."

In fact, education in its traditional sense was replaced with the "Socialist Education Movement"— a work-study program with an emphasis on the work schedule of factories and communes meant to reorder "bourgeois" priorities that favored intellectual activity over labor.

"The government decided that all students had to go into the countryside for 're-education'— which meant hard labor, to wash your brain, to take capitalist ideas out of your mind," Zhang said of the *xiafang* (or "back to the countryside") program he felt was basically "stupid" in its conception but from which he concedes he was able to recognize some benefits.

"If you're a positive person, you can always find positive





We Were Young Then 35" x 75" Oil



No 111 cm x 128 cm Oil



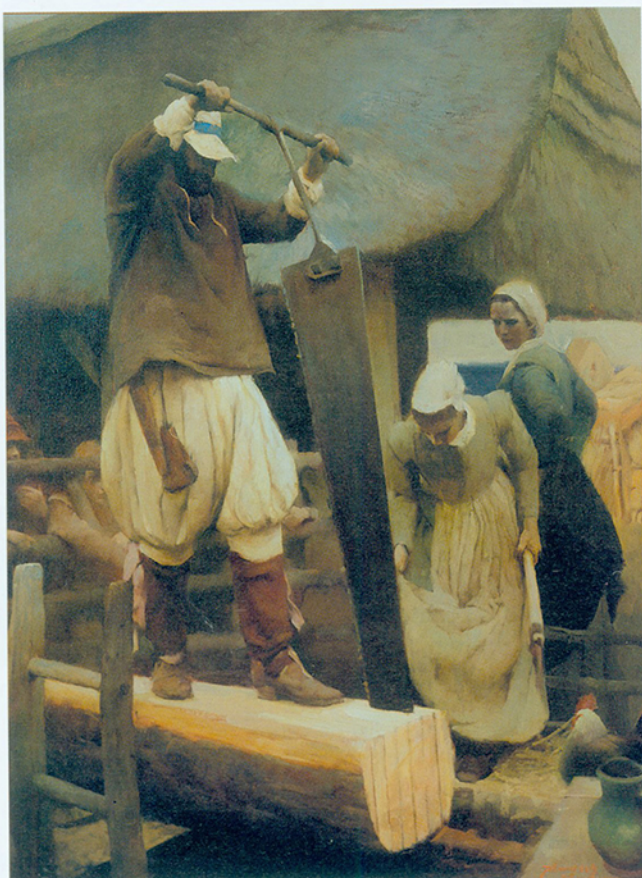


Woodstock Halloween 54" x 74" Oil



Rite of Spring 32" x 70" Oil





New Home 40" x 30" Oil

angles," Zhang reflected. "I found life is hard, labor is hard and it made me stronger. You don't stop to take a break, have a smoke, listen to some music. You work on and on. Our hands were cramped in a cupped position when we went to sleep because of working all day with shovels, and the next morning the hands would stretch out. In early springtime our bare feet broke the ice into freezing water. It's very hard but you must take it because there's no way out. You cannot run away."

Reviewing the concentration camp-like aspects of his existence during four years of forced labor in the rice fields, Zhang recited the conditions as "no freedom, not allowed to study, no painting, no reading (except, of course, Chairman Mao's own little book—which was dangerous to be without), no freedom of dating, no freedom to go home...All of China was like that."

Zhang's family, he noted, was also dispersed. His sister, who had been in medical school, was in another *xiafang* commune, as was his mother. Both now were also absorbed in *ku li*, as it was called, or "bitter labor."

"So, everybody was in a different place but a good thing happened, also," he said. "I was always a city boy, used to baths and certain comforts and I never really walked all my life but now I was walking in the countryside in my early 20s, getting to know farmers and things important to them. In some ways, you become healthier, with a stronger mind but, most important to me, is that it made me



The Companions 40" x 30" Oil

love painting so much more. We were not allowed to paint or draw anything because, if we are artists for the future, we should have a good communist mind. Then we can be artists."

For Zhang, who was poised for higher education when the Cultural Revolution struck in 1966 and dreaming of laying down his sometimes wearisome brushes to become a movie director, the prohibition of art during his confinement kindled a restoration of his earlier fervor for painting. Today, he roots around his living room for a tiny precious landscape on paper he managed to paint on the sly during his *xiafang* years. It is a humble effort, palm-sized and inconsequential next to even the paint sketches he does before starting a full-sized painting today (which actually are quite remarkable) but he holds it like a treasure.

It was a legacy of his extraordinary talents which limited Zhang's years of farm labor during this strenuous decade to four. His student work left behind at his old school was noticed during an effort to add younger artists to the staff of old masters at the Beijing Art Institute. Although initially delighted at having been "drafted" to join the working artists who created paintings at the academy, Zhang describes the following years as "very weird." The Cultural Revolution was continuing and the frenzy to destroy the "old ways" led to an historically unparalleled spree of destruction as the Red Guards rampaged through the land. The victims of the roiling repressions which clutched at each province went largely uncounted



and the violent power struggles of clashing factions were played out against a cultural atmosphere that found the most useful values of art in the glorification of communist party triumphs and the exaltation of beatified politicians in a stratified cult of personalities.

As an illustration of why his prized employment as a professional painter, rather than as an art editor or teacher or designer, was less than enjoyable, Zhang cites the Tiananmen Square incident of April, 1976, when thousands gathered to mourn the death of Zhou Enlai with poems and statements that celebrated the fallen leader's modifying influence on hard line communist rule. Authorities, perceiving the tone of the demonstrations to be critical of the less liberal remaining leadership, sent in troops to disperse the "counter-revolutionary" protest with a brutal, club-swinging display of force.

Zhang was among the demonstrators against the excesses of the Cultural Revolution in that crowd and he was further horrified by the orders he received upon his return to the academy.

"We hated the government by then because of their hard, bloody tactics and I was a 'troublemaker' at that event," Zhang recalled. "But when I came back to the academy, my job was to show how the government had successfully pushed down the 'anti-revolutionaries.' I don't want to do it but I cannot say 'no' and I have started to hate being an artist. You feel art has turned into a lie. It has become something which is not from the heart and you ask 'so, why do we have art?' and, by that time, my heart almost died. I was saying to myself that I have chosen the wrong profession. I should have been an engineer or a doctor so I wouldn't have to lie. I would not have to do this kind of thing."

The Tiananmen Square Incident of 1976, however, *did* have a rippling effect on the leadership and through the country and the eastern skies began to lighten on the long night of the Cultural Revolution. As an artist, Zhang was one of the early rebels to speak out in his own unique fashion.

"Later, I would tell people that I was not such a brave man, shouting when the night was still dark," Zhang said. "I was already against this government but an artist could not express that. Here, you may say that you hate the President without getting thrown into jail but, in China, if you say 'I hate Chairman Mao!', you will be killed—immediately."

"What I did was, when the time came, when the sun was rising, I felt I must speak out. Most people were not writing. The young people were in the same situation as me, of the same heart, and they have the courage but they are not educated."

The closing of the schools in 1966 had disarmed the intellectual instincts of many and the older, educated people who may have felt the same way, Zhang notes, even the great artists who taught him and worked with him were "numbed" by events.

"They were hardened," he said. "The Cultural Revolution hurt them so deeply that people were still in a stunned state. They could not speak out. When you're silenced for so long, you don't know how to speak. They want to but they don't know how."

Zhang had only his education in art to serve as a platform for his voice and with it he created a painting that recalled an interior of one of the shacks that workers were crowded into to sleep during the *xiaofang* captivity. Titled "We Were Young Then," it became a founding piece in what became known as the "Scar Movement" in Chinese art, an ingenious dropping of the cultural blindfold that would view candidly the circumstances and suffering of the preceding years.

"This painting made a big splash in China and the reason was that, for a long time, people in China were used to seeing paintings that always showed a passive happy face, smiling in the sunshine as Chairman Mao led our summer revolution to victory. I wanted to finally show something of the truth of what happened to us because I went back to the countryside where I spent four years to see what it looked like. Our camp was totally gone—the very small mud brick room, a quarter or a third of this living room, with ten people sleeping. The clay was all melted and grass had grown over it. There was nothing."

"I sat crying, remembering all the troubles, all the love, all the dreams—every pure heart buried there and I decided that I needed to do a painting to show China and the world that the people remember what happened to us. We were very young and we were supposed to have an education and love and art but we were locked there to hard labor for four years and not only us, all over China—my brother-in-law spent eight years in the same situation. So, when the painting was shown in a museum, it was shocking to see the truth and people were weeping in front of it."

"Many people of my generation said 'finally, someone is speaking the truth about what happened to us' and the name 'the scarred' was used because we had been wounded, hurt in our family and we cannot forget that," Zhang continued. "We want to remember what happened to us. We want to show people what happened to us, to display our scars. It encouraged the young artist to speak out, to talk about the truth of what happened. It became a nationwide movement as a lot of artists started doing that and a lot of good art came out of it."

A few finger strokes on the laptop resting on the coffee table before us bring another striking scene to the screen. Edged toward surrealism, the dark and chilling images conspire together to conjure a deeply effective story. Although Zhang expresses some reservation about the technical proficiency of the style in this painting, simply titled "No", it's obviously an early personal favorite if only because of the stark message it so powerfully conveys.

"This woman was one of the few people who spoke out honestly against the Cultural Revolution," Zhang explains. "She is a very serious lady, a violinist and a member of the Communist Party and she said that the Cultural Revolution was wrong, we shouldn't be doing this; Chairman Mao has made a mistake."

"So, they arrested her but, because her background was so perfect for them—she joined the army when she was young, she's loyal to Chairman Mao and she's a very popular person—they hope that they don't have to kill her. They say 'You change your mind and we'll send you home, so you can reunite with your children and with your old mother. We don't want to kill you.' But she's so honest, she just says 'No, I'm right and you're wrong. There's no need to send me home. Just do what you want to do.' So, they killed her... They not only shot her dead but, afraid that she would speak out on the way to the execution, they cut her throat to take her voice."

Zhang said that he chose the simple word "No" for a title because it is so shocking, when people speak out against their government, that you can pay with your life for just a simple "no." He portrays her as a "lonely voice in the endless darkness" and as he gestures to the features of the canvas, he notes that only the wide part of the ocean bed is visible while "the night is dark and the sky is crying..."

Collected by the Chinese National Museum, along with "We Were Young Then," as important historical moments in the art movement, some credited Zhang with the invention of a new style. In





Return of Zhang Qian 36" x 72" Oil



Last Rites (San Xing Dui) 48" x 96" Oil



an American book on new Chinese painting issued many years later, the style is identified as "flashback", suggesting techniques better known in the motion picture field.

"Traditionally, in China, the painting is in the same moment, from the same angle, with the same lighting but I couldn't use that kind of language here," Zhang explains. "I was working from such a shocked and confused stance that the images came almost by accident. It was just everything I was feeling. I feel she's lonely. I feel her daughter is missing her. For me, she is a saint, and so the suggestion of a halo. And people feel the same. I just did what came upon me, breaking all the rules— of the perspective, the lighting, everything— I wasn't afraid to go there and they spoke of having created a new 'stream of consciousness' style..."

What they were calling it or who was following in the art world was of little consequence to Zhang at the time, entangled as he was with following his heart in the new activism of the late 1970s. But there came a point which he equates with a recent documentary movie about Bob Dylan.

"He was leading a movement and suddenly he was tired. He didn't want to do that anymore," a chuckling Zhang said of the young songwriter. "I had the same feeling. I thought of what I had done and wondered how long one should go on crying. I was facing a new life and felt that artists should not always be political. Life is not all politics. I was feeling that every year I should do a new thing. So, I sort of got into a different style..."

Returning from another room with a canvas containing a circus of somewhat brasher images and colors in a vaguely Picasso-

Gauguin combination of forms, Zhang spoke of his "almost destiny" excursions which recalled the earthy blends of color he absorbed while living close to the land, infusing a traditional Chinese sense of colors into a more modern sensibility. Many found this sudden turn odd but writers in magazines that published the work found cause for praise. An influence from Zhang's work in this period may be observed in a later generation's directions but soon the still young master would be off into other flavors of expression.

A more lasting change came with a visit to Tibet.

### Renewed Perspective

"When I created those styles, at first it was from the heart but the more I did it, the more I began to wonder if I was just trying to be a leader; to be *avant garde*," he reflected. "Did I just want to create something so that people would say I'm *so creative*? It didn't feel very natural in my personality. Striving for fame is distant from following an artist's heart. So, when I went to Tibet, I found myself feeling very different because the Tibetan people— for hundreds, maybe thousands of years— have been living the same life. They have no thoughts to be famous or how to be rich. They just keep on so natural and so spiritual..."

"I say 'spiritual' because they don't think about material things in the false sense that 'fame' is material. They live, give birth to their children, they age and die in their natural cycle. I instantly felt that I loved the kind of peace that they carried with them because my heart had been so busy with the stresses of the Cultural Revolution— fight, fight and fight back. Then, be famous and be a success and all of that. What was the meaning of it?"

Like a receding tide, the impulse to innovation ebbed as Zhang recognized a deeper need to slowly and naturally express his own experiences. Watching Tibetan children brought him back to his own childhood and refreshed the path through long years of training to be able to reproduce what he saw. He found in these mountain people and their humble lifestyles, a surviving echo of the simple joy and positive attitudes that had distinguished his character as a boy. As he sketched in the villages and on the hillsides, he felt a reborn appreciation of life seeping back into his outlook.

During this process of self-examination, Zhang thought about obtaining higher education for himself. If things returned to normal in China in the future and he was asked about his education, he could say only that he had achieved a secondary art degree before everything fell apart. There hadn't been time to apply to film school and when he returned to Beijing after his years on the farm, he had missed painting so much that when he finally *could* paint he promptly forgot about film school. Even though he could count among his friends Zhang Yimou (*Raise the Red Lantern*), Chen Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine*) and other Chinese movie makers of his generation, his fantasy of becoming a film director dropped into second place in his ambitions to the achievement of a Masters degree in painting.

The "Harvard" of his homeland, in Zhang's estimation, was the Central Art Academy, which had had no students or oil painting programs for eight years before they suddenly reopened in 1984. Too old to go back to school for a



Peasants from the Earth 30" x 28" Oil



bachelor's degree, Zhang fretted that the Academy, which chose only five students from all of China, wouldn't consider him at all. Fortunately, however, his ten years of active art experience in Beijing gained him educational credit equal to a bachelors and he was accepted even though his required English proficiency didn't pass muster in the entrance exams. By virtue of his extraordinary talents, they decided they wanted him regardless of these shortcomings and Zhang became one of the five honored students.

"The funny thing is that I started to have the crazy idea that I wanted to come to America," Zhang smiled. "My friends who had gone there early and came back told me I should go because 'you'll really learn and there is great opportunity!' Oil painting has a short history in China' and I was startled when I saw the original paintings of a collection of European art that finally came to our museums. I wanted to learn from those masters because— sure, they have died, but their paintings are in Western museums and we do not have those kinds of collections here.

"I thought I should at least go to look but also I was worried about the art movement in China, which is kind of conservative, and what was going on in the whole outside world. What is modern art? I really wanted to know. The bad memories of the Cultural Revolution were also a shadow in my heart that made me want to see a free country. My family had missed the boat 38 years before but now there was an opportunity for me to go, so I applied at City College (in New York) because it would be impossible in America at a greater school without a bachelors degree. But I was in the program at the Central Art Academy, which was very respected internationally and I can use a student visa. Even my poor English is overlooked again."

Zhang's teachers at City College were all abstract painters and somewhat awed by his talents. Noting that he could teach at the school himself, they asked why he had come to study and he explained that the student visa was his best ticket to the United States and that, truly, he did come to learn something he didn't know because the kind of abstract painting they taught could not be studied in China.

Feeling that he had the respect of his instructors as a knowledgeable student and was receiving their best efforts to convey the principles of abstraction to him, he counted himself as extremely fortunate.

"In China, you learn a realistic style of representation," he said. "You look at something real— in anatomy, in perspective, in color, in shape, in form, in lighting; everything to make it look real. But those teachers in New York showed me the dynamics of movement, taught me the abstract qualities, the push and pull; all of those kinds of things, giving me an opportunity to combine them together."

It was at this juncture that Zhang's hidden dragons began to breathe upon his canvas. He brings a recent painting to the screen of the laptop to reveal the subtle beast.

"When I think about my painting, I think abstract first. Most of my compositions start there because I check my movement. Even this one. You feel this is probably realism, right?" he asks, tracing a finger around the arrangement of figures on the screen. "But, actually, this is light movement, see? This is light movement," he repeats each time he points to a different section of the painting. "It's my dragon! This is the hiding dragon, here and here and here. They actually put the painting together because they are not just individual



Homage to Vermeer 30" x 30" Oil

objects. They're actually linked together by the movement of the light!"

With only slightly concealed delight, Zhang demonstrates the interrelationships of portions of the scene in another painting.

"It is very intricate, especially in these multi-figure paintings but you don't feel confused with so many figures because I started the movement here and it carries— you can see the shape— going here, this kid, this lady," he continues, pointing out the movements he speaks of as he follows the flow, "going down here to down here and going up with this line and actually down again right here— see this spot?— and down to this and up into this big white... That's my dragon!"

These are the things, these forceful projections of the gaze, that Zhang says he could not learn in China. It exists in some Chinese painting but it is not taught in Chinese comprehensions of oil painting, which he notes is all about creating a realism of objects and figures. That is one reason he later devoted a book, written with his wife and fellow artist, Lois Woolley, to these sensibilities of balance



and motion called *The Yin/Yang of Painting* (Watson-Guptill, 2000). The yin and yang of the book's contents can be found in layers deep enough to enthrall advanced painters while remaining assessable to novices. Beyond those often hard-to-find qualities, it also serves as a superb field guide for dragon hunters.

"This gets into the abstract thinking of how the yin and yang are offset to each other but, at the same time, are working to each other," Zhang said. "The movement from up going to down; from left to the right and, this way—right to left—all of it like yin and yang; warm and cold; dark and light; sharp edges and soft edges; thinner layers and thick layers; transparent layers and opaque layers— all working together, in yin and yang— it's a whole oil painting."

### A New World

Due to difficulty with the legalities of American currency in China that he finds challenging to explain, Hongnian Zhang arrived in New York to start his student life there with \$30 in his pocket. As might be expected, times were tough and Zhang had to rely upon the strength he gathered from his years in the countryside. Shocked, lonely and confused in the bustle of an alien city, Zhang found the determination to paint his way into this new landscape. He found a friend willing to lend him money and, sorely conscious that it was not his own money he was surviving with, he pinched and saved every penny, walking the miles each day between the campus on 110th Street to Chinatown to save 85 cents on a subway token. He ate only peanut butter, bread and orange juice— nothing else.

"Of course, I worried always, how can I find my life here," Zhang said. "But my landlord was a friend who asked me to stay with him because his wife was teaching in China. He said he would charge me \$200 and I exploded 'What!?' but I was naïve and this was such a good offer— \$200 to stay in Manhattan! I didn't know how hard it was to make a living here. But he helped me. He put a note in the elevator that said 'Famous Chinese artist has come here and can do a sketch for \$15 each.' I got jobs like a father holding his baby and a group of musicians rehearsing in the basement who asked me to do a sketch. Things like that."

Zhang speaks of an artist friend, a professor in a Brooklyn technical college, whose work sold less than briskly in New York even though his paintings were excellent.

"He wanted to know why I came to America when I could have stayed in China and gotten paid as an artist. 'You're famous. You can do your great art and not worry about it. Why did you come here?' he said. Like others, he doesn't think I can make it here and I don't know either. I just want to try."

Sometimes, Zhang muses, it's good luck. That is important, he believes. It was a stroke of good fortune which brought him into contact with one of New York's most respected art galleries, through his acquaintance with the noted sculptor, Wang Jida.

### An "Overnight Success" Finds Morning

A graduate of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, Wang Jida's abilities were tapped when the Mao Zedong Memorial Hall was constructed in Beijing in 1977. After his arrival in the United States in 1983, he was selected by the Century Memorial Foundation of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island Foundation to create a small scale model of the world renowned statue for its centennial celebration in

1986. The story of a sculptor who had worked on Mao's monumental structure creating a commemorative replica of the Statue of Liberty caught the fancy of the press and the notice of the highly regarded Grand Central Art Gallery in Manhattan.

Zhang's acquaintance with Wang Jida at this time brought him and several other Chinese artists into the spotlight. James Cox, director of the Grand Central Gallery at the time and now owner of his own gallery in Woodstock, recalls the excitement generated by the discovery of this unsuspected stream of work.

"It was historically significant to find these artists together in New York at that time," Cox recalls. "Chinese realists painting with oil on canvas! We were just amazed by it and anxious to find out how this happened. I was drunk with questions— where did you come from? How did you learn this? Who were your teachers? We spent lots of time together just laying the groundwork for what we were looking at and who these people were. The strongest similarity to their work that we could find was the great Russian artists and the American painters of western New Mexico from the Taos school."

Zhang remembers spreading out his unstretched canvases on the floor, with bricks at the corners, when Cox came to view them. When an exhibition was prepared that included his paintings, it marked a dramatic turning point for him.

Literally overnight, the Grand Central Gallery exhibition brought the attention of the vastly influential New York art scene to the unique splendors of Hongnian Zhang's work. There was an article by Milton Esterow in *Art News*, an interview on CBS's popular *Sunday Morning* program and other ripples of interest spread by that initial splash. Suddenly, Zhang found his paintings in such demand that his focus shifted from his studies to making a living with his brushes. Only six months into his courses, Zhang confesses that he devoted scant time to his rapidly executed school assignments but, not surprisingly, they were still of such self-assured quality that his instructors didn't seem to notice how quickly they had been done.

Meanwhile, Zhang's Tibetan themes were flying off the walls and finance was no longer a fearsome concern. He still smiles to tell how he chose to celebrate.

"I suddenly have so much money that I decide I must buy some good food for myself," Zhang remembers. "So, I go to the food store and get a lot of stuff but when I'm on line, ready to pay, I notice that I still have the same three things— peanut butter, bread and orange juice. It was all I knew and even though I now had the money, here I was buying the same things! It was kind of funny."

Returning the loan he received from friends when he arrived, Zhang learned that it had been considered a gift by the donors which he wasn't expected to repay but "No," he explained, "I always knew that was not my money. That is why I was so careful with it."

Before he had quite completed his art studies, Zhang learned of the illness and death of his first wife in China. Realizing that he had to return immediately to bring his young daughter to live with him in the United States, he left school and redesigned his roadmap for the future.

"I didn't want my daughter to grow up in the city, so I needed to move to the country," Zhang explained. "I just basically packed up and moved to Woodstock and, living here, it became important for me to feel that I was not a Chinatown artist— that I'm an American artist. I'm living in America. I'm not speaking Chinese every day. I did not feel that it would be good for my daughter to grow up in a





Union Square 40" x 70" Oil

place where Chinese was the daily language and I think that was a good decision. She graduated from high school salutatorian, speaking perfect English, with the second highest grades in the entire school."

Zhang's daughter Renée went on to Brown University, London School of Economics and Thunderbird School of International Management. Yet maintaining her Chinese was always a priority. Throughout her American childhood Renee returned to China each summer to visit family. Today, her dual cultural background serves her career in international business well at her office in Shanghai.

Commissioned by *National Geographic* magazine for a series of paintings on the history of China, Zhang has returned to his original country a number of times to research the ancient dynasties. In his travels, he feels he retains an American identity now, wherever he goes. He sees commercial galleries in China today, selling new art

work where, not long ago, galleries and museums were only for "show." He notes the current popularity of installation art in Chinese galleries of the new century and a steady expansion of the forms of art found acceptable to a Chinese audience. But with Lois Woolley, now in his life and the Woodstock artist community offering creative companionship, Zhang recognizes his place is now rooted in a new land. Increasingly, his paintings reflect American themes...Union Square and other scenes of New York City, trick-or-treaters on a Woodstock street, the lives of the pilgrim settlers of New England which reminds him of his own pilgrimage.

"I feel my heart really understands how life is difficult to start in a strange land," Hongnian Zhang says, gazing toward the window as a painting of two pilgrim women gleams on the laptop screen. "I will just keep going where my heart takes me. Today, I like being an American artist. I feel American."

—G. Alexander Irving