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THE ART OF HISTORY: epic painter

HONGNIAN ZHANG

By Ross Rice

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATT PETRICONE

So you think it's hard to be an artist nowadays? Actually, it's always been a tough gig; there's never been much money in it at the entry level—it's hard to get those important early shows and press, and sometimes you actually have to die just to get a break. But really, it's not all that bad; rarely does a modern artist have to fight for the right to express him or herself in this day and age. Certainly not in America.

But in China during the 60s, under Mao Tse-Tung? Now that was a tough time and place to be a young artist. Just ask Hongnian Zhang, a Woodstock resident, who is presently considered to be one of the world's leading historical epic painters, and is an educator at both the Woodstock School of Art and the University of Shanghai. Four years of hard labor and "re-education" during China's Cultural Revolution were supposed to break his will, stop this artist from developing. But they failed, and now, with major works hanging in national galleries in both Beijing and New York, he is highly revered in China, and highly respected in the U.S. In the skillfully rendered realism of his paintings, East meets West, and they seem to get along just fine.

Born in Nanjing in 1947, Hongnian Zhang has warm memories of growing up with his parents—Zhang's father was a U.S.-educated banker—and two older sisters, during what was a very turbulent time in recent Chinese history, with Mao's Communist Party defeating Chiang Kai-Shek's Kuomintang in 1949. Exhibiting early natural skill, Zhang, at the age of 15 was one of 30 students from around the country selected to attend what was considered the top art school in the nation, the

Central Art Academy Affiliated High School in Beijing. One painting, an abstract titled *Symphony No. 5*, earned him a reprimand: apparently Beethoven was deemed too "capitalist" for Chinese tastes.

Upon graduating in 1966, Zhang considered going into filmmaking because he wanted to see his pictures move. But the Cultural Revolution was in high gear, with the Gang of Four and Red Guards ascendant and Mao in eclipse. "Decadent artist" types like Zhang got sent to the countryside for "re-education." He describes, "I was assigned to the countryside for hard labor, four years. It was farm work...not necessary. Our job was not to produce rice. They needed us to do hard work to change our minds."

Ten young men were packed into a small cabin with just barely enough room to sleep. They had to break the ice in the early spring with their bare feet, forbidden to use their boots. Small things became important triumphs. "Every night when you went to sleep," Zhang says, "your hands would not open (from holding the tools of the work). When you'd wake the next morning and see your hand straightened out, you're so happy!" Zhang went from being a "sentimental young boy" to a man with "heart."

One of the worst parts was not being allowed to paint. But he did anyway; by managing to get oil paint smuggled in, using chalk and glue to make an improvised gesso to stabilize the little squares of pocket-portable cardboard, he was able to paint on site, on the sly. In a life with few choices, this was the most important choice of all. "I made my mind so strong, nobody can stop me from painting anymore...I don't care what kind of life (I live), I will paint when I have a chance."

WE WERE YOUNG THEN, 1980



BEFORE THE LONG MARCH, 1977

UNION SQUARE



When he was finally sent home to Beijing in 1973, he soon caught a lucky break, securing a position as artist-in-residence at the Beijing Art Academy, with a salary and the ability to travel around the country. "I was lucky because of the timing... I was ready to be more and more angry at the government, because it was ruled by—Mao was still alive, but a very old man, didn't know what was going on—the Gang of Four; those people were very powerful. I (didn't) respect them, they (were) very mean, angry people, big trouble, critics of artists." The more moderate Premier Zhou En-Lai seemed to keep the Gang's excesses in check, and Zhang recognized this in two paintings that foreshadowed his later epic style: *Farewell* (1976) and *Before the Long March* (1977). With the death of Zhou in 1976, the Chinese public displayed a massive spontaneous outpouring of grief in Tiananmen Square. The Gang of Four overplayed their heavy hand, resulting in their eventual demise, and the stage was set for the ascension of Deng Xiaoping, and a national sigh of relief. Zhang found himself on the right side of the political situation for a change.

Zhang decided to push the limits. "The art of Chinese life was always sunshine, smiling, happy, nothing wrong. But I said wait a minute, there's a lot wrong, including...why are we there in the countryside? So I did this painting. 'Big splash'." The painting he refers to was *No!*, in which a series of portraits of a lovely young Chinese woman—in various poses of action: cooking, dancing, smiling—frame the dead body of the young woman, lying in a pool of blood. "She was a person who dared to say 'no,' who said 'I don't agree with Mao and the Cultural Revolution'." Though the woman was from a revolutionary family, she was still sentenced to die, but first they cut her larynx so she would be unable to speak.

Zhang was moved, outraged by the story, and fortunately under the political changes with Deng Xiaoping, was able to present the potentially dangerous work publically without repercussions. It's now in China's National Museum collection. The work shocked other Chinese artists into similar expressions, and could be considered the first of the "Scar Art" period of the late 70s, where artists could explore a more critical view of those years, in hopes of bringing about healing.

Another memorable painting from that time is *We Were Young Then*, where Zhang visually describes his living conditions during his "re-education." Ten young men in cramped conditions, each involved with one of the few activities available: reading, sleeping, cleaning up, smoking. The painting lacks sentimentality yet retains a real warmth; Zhang clearly has a strong feeling for his fellow barrack-mates, who have all stayed in touch since and are still very close. Zhang returned to the camp's location ten years after his stay, only to find that the entire camp had been reclaimed by the mud. Nothing was left of it. He broke down. "In the four years here, I never cried. Now I want to cry for the time that we missed."

Zhang cast about for a new direction, dabbling in Chinese "folk art" and stream-of-consciousness color play, finally finding it in the mountains of Tibet. "When I did the political paintings, or when I tried my new style, my mind was still...noisy. Because of the Cultural Revolution. I want to fight, I want to be famous, be a leading artist. I come to Tibet and say, OK, these people living here, never had political types do this, do that. I said 'I like that type of life. Earthy, simple...I can get into that much better.'" Starting in 1982, paintings of Tibetans became Zhang's primary



WE WERE YOUNG THEN, 1980

mode of expression for the next ten years, the early works almost a bit Impressionistic, the later becoming more sharply detailed.

But then he started feeling the need to get some higher education. The Cultural Revolution had been brutal on Chinese academia. The fledgling oil painting department at the Central Art Academy had only five students. Zhang was accepted and joined the group; most of them have gone on to become giants in the Chinese art world.

Suddenly there was an academic offer from America. Though it meant being separated from his wife and daughter, Zhang considered it; it was difficult to get out of China for any reason. "The only way to get out was to go to study. (The Deng regime) had the idea that we needed to learn from the outside world. Because it's a new era." City College in New York City had the opening, Zhang had been at Central just long enough to get the needed credit; the timing was perfect. 1985 had Zhang standing on 42nd Street with all of thirty American dollars in his pocket, the maximum amount of currency China allowed him to convert before leaving.

Once again, fortune smiled on Zhang. The then-director of the Grand Central Gallery—Woodstock's own James Cox—happened to see one of Zhang's pieces, loved it, and decided to include his work in a special group show of new Chinese artists. The show was an overnight success, Zhang sold paintings, and afterward he

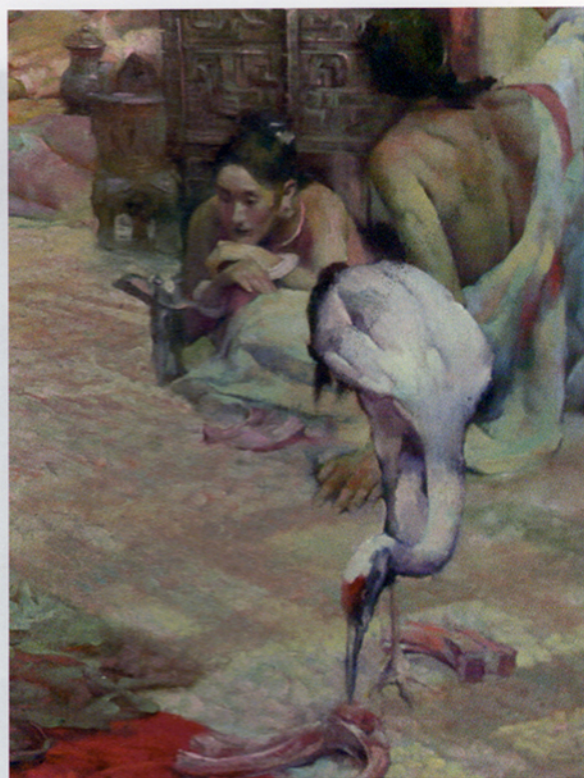


UNION SQUARE, 1999

celebrated with some good food for a change; he'd been subsisting on little more than peanut butter, bread, and orange juice for some time.

Zhang decided he liked America, and chose to try for Green Cards for himself and his family. But tragedy struck when his wife suddenly got cancer and quickly passed away, leaving Zhang to raise his ten-year old daughter Renee. When they finally got clearance to move, they opted to move to Woodstock instead of the City. James Cox had a place there, and his daughter was close in age to Renee. Zhang felt the need to connect somehow to his new home country, and a trip to the Plymouth Plantation in Massachusetts—home of one of the first white American settlements—provided that connection. As a part of immigration history himself, he found a spirit there he could relate to, and could paint. "300 years ago, and now 300 years later...but we're in the same boat. Coming here facing the New World, hard work to build your home." He would soon have some help with that.

Enter Lois Woolley, a young and gifted portrait artist, who was at that time the president of the Warwick Art League. One particular competition she was in charge of needed a substitute judge, and a mutual friend suggested Zhang. At the show, the attraction was mutual and instantaneous, and Zhang's choice of winner ended up being... Lois' work. But she refused to let him award her, as she was the show's director, and that moment of honest humility went a long way with Zhang. He was smitten.



FALL OF THE SHANG [DETAIL], 1996—1999

Moving in together, they had a blended family with Lois' daughter—also close in age to Renee—and son, plus Zhang's visiting nephew, attending SUNY New Paltz. Zhang's work during this time reflects his personal bliss, with nudes, flowers, and Woodstock scenes. Now he felt like he had a home.

Small wonder he was so affected by 9-11, a day when all Americans felt a direct threat to their homeland. For three days he watched the news in shock, the towers falling over and over. Then he got busy, working steadily for days on end. "I didn't want to keep watching it, I wanted to do a painting of it. I used this to release my sad, scared feeling." The painting of the pensive white-robed woman amongst the ruins became a popular poster, and he received a lot of grateful feedback for the powerful, yet tender statement.

Zhang was feeling the urge to enlarge his general canvas. "To use a music (analogy), everybody knows the Beatles as masters in their art. But they're not Beethoven. They don't write symphonies; they write masterpieces of song. As an artist, I like the symphony." Funny how fate intervenes; one morning he got a call from a *National Geographic* editor, who had seen his work in an art magazine, and wondered if he might like to do a large-scale historical painting based on an incident in the Shang dynasty. They had found the perfect man for the job, as not only did Zhang possess the necessary high level of painting skill, but he was also was a major history buff who just loved digging into the research.

The magazine issue was a hit, and *National Geographic* commissioned more epic works, covered travel expenses for the necessary research, even purchased the final products themselves. It's been a good situation for Zhang, as generally large-scale works like these have difficulty in finding buyers who have the actual physical capacity to exhibit them. During one such trip to China, he was offered a professorship at the



GROUND ZERO, 2001

Union Square, 1999

University of Shanghai, which he turned down, but offered his services as an instructor, according to his availability. Presently he divides his time between both countries—he'll be going to Shanghai soon for five months, with Lois joining him midway—but he seems most at home at his house and studio just outside of Woodstock, working on his epic paintings and teaching occasionally at the Woodstock School of Art.

Zhang manages to capture minute, yet hugely important details with little more than just a basic sketch and his imagination. Though he occasionally uses photographs to get specific elements accurately rendered, the power of the works come from the soul he infuses into the expressions of people, the clarity and architectural soundness of his composition, and his absolutely peerless ability with his color palette and brushwork.

First draft sketches are very simple, basic structural musings. The ensuing color-test paintings zero in on key features and requirements for compositional changes, very much like a dress rehearsal in the theatre. Then, it's the big painting itself, and seeing one of the epics at near completion (Zhang shows me the latest: commemorating the

marriage of a Tibetan king and his Nepalese wife around 500 A.D.) is awe-inspiring, as the lines get a little crisper, and certain blanks—known only to Zhang at this stage—are filled in.

Both Zhang and Lois work simultaneously, sharing the cozy studio, enjoying the same music (usually classical), and providing each other with trustworthy advice (when asked, of course). They have also collaborated on a very useful reference: *The Yin/Yang of Painting* (Watson-Guption Publications).

Having been allowed few choices in the first part of his life, Zhang revels in living his second life completely by his own choices. And he looks back without rancor. "As an artist, the life forms you, who you are, and how your art (looks), based on the kind of life you have had. I feel bad about those difficult times. But I also feel lucky, because I survived, and the hard life...actually helped me."

Visit www.zhangwoolley.com for more information and images.



HONGNIAN ZHANG & LOIS WOOLLEY WITH THEIR DOG DENVER IN FRONT OF ZHANG'S MOST RECENT PAINTING. PORTRAIT OF MICHAEL LANG BY LOIS.
PHOTOGRAPH BY MATT PETRICONE