

## Artist escapes political canvas

Free from communist rule, Zhang's  
paintings now depict real-life struggles  
during Cultural Revolution.

BY DAN R. GODDARD  
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**A**s a young art student in China, Hongnian Zhang studied Western-style 19th-century academic realism because the communist government thought it was the best way to teach artists how to create social realist paintings that could be used for propaganda.

"We were supposed to paint positive scenes of everyday life," Zhang said. "I started studying art when I was 9 years old. The training was incredibly serious, like the way Russians train ballerinas. We worked on our art all day. I learned a lot of classical ways of making things look realistic.

"But technique is technique. I was young and innocent, so what did I know? However, the training has proved very valuable for me, something I can use anywhere I go."

In the early 1980s, Zhang made trips to Tibet that served as the basis for a series of large-scale historical paintings such as "Tibetan Highlands," which will be featured in the "International Masters of Fine Art — 2003" exhibit opening Friday at the Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art.

"I was looking for something that would really move me," Zhang said. "I wanted to feel something more timeless. I was very impressed by the people of Tibet because they are so humble and they live so

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# Artist broadens his horizons in the U.S.

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close to nature. They are part of the sky, part of the land."

"Tibetan Highlands" shows a group of Tibetan women on their way to market, carrying yak milk and other bundles on their backs. A rainstorm and richly detailed, towering thunderclouds loom over them as they walk along a trail in a desolate landscape.

The painting has an epic scope, similar to history paintings that from the Renaissance to the 19th century were considered the highest form of art.

"When you see these women, you think they must have a very harsh life," Zhang said. "But after spending time with them, I realized that, although they are poor, they have everything they need. Market day is a good time for them because they live miles apart and it's their day to get together and visit."

"They are very resilient, and I wanted to show that. At the same time, if you know the history of Tibet, you know this is a very political painting, too."

At 14, Zhang became a top student at the Central Art Academy Affiliated High School in Beijing, an exclusive government-sponsored art school that accepted only about 40 students.

"I remember that I did a painting based on Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, which showed a figure struggling with the burdens of the world," Zhang said. "I told my teachers that I had read a biography of Beethoven and this is what it said the symphony was about. But they were appalled, and it got me in a lot of trouble."

During the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, he and his fellow art students were forced to spend four years working in the rice fields in a rural re-education camp in Hebei province. They were forbidden to have art supplies or make art.

"We managed to put together an oil paint box so we could sneak out and paint landscapes," Zhang said. "I think the experience in the rice fields made me stronger, tougher."

He added that one of those clandestinely painted miniature landscapes remains among his most prized possessions.

Eventually, he was allowed to return to the city and teach at the Beijing Art Academy. In 1979, he became the youngest member of the All China Artists Association.

After years of political turmoil, he became a leader of the Scar art movement, which rebelled against the rosy propaganda paintings by showing what life was really like during the Cultural Revolution.

"I did one painting, 'When We Were Young,' that showed our time in the countryside," Zhang said. "After all those years of propaganda paintings showing happy workers, here was one



COURTESY PHOTO

Hongnian Zhang's 'Tibetan Highlands' is part of the 'International Masters of Fine Art — 2003' exhibit opening Friday at the Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art.

that showed us as young, in a dark room with no freedom and no fun. It created quite a sensation in China."

The National Art Museum in Beijing acquired the painting and two others he did showing the reality of the Cultural Revolution. At age 37, Zhang was one of five art students chosen in 1984 by China's Central Art Academy for its master's degree program.

But he decided he was bored.

"I could see what my life was going to be like," Zhang said. "I knew they were grooming me to become a faculty member at the school. I just didn't want to be a teacher. To me, teaching meant a lot of meetings and administrative work. I just wanted to paint."

So in 1985, he managed to come to this country with a student visa.

"It was a big shock," Zhang said. "My English was not good, I didn't have many friends and I didn't have any money — I came to this country with \$30. I was used to the government telling me what to do and, suddenly, there was no one to tell me what to do. I lived very humbly for the first six months. I was in New York's Chinatown. The only place I went was the Metropolitan Museum of Art."

Then he became involved in New York's Grand Central Gallery.

"It was founded by John Singer Sargent (the famed American society portraitist)," Zhang said. "I didn't know who John Singer Sargent was until 1985."

The next year, the gallery staged

"Realism in China," the first show to introduce Chinese oil painting to the West. The exhibit attracted national media attention. Zhang appeared on the CBS "Sunday Morning" show, and ARTnews did a profile on him. He was on his way to becoming a successful American artist.

"The gallery helped me get a green card, so I was able to stay," Zhang said. "It changed my life. Later, I moved to Woodstock (in upstate New York), which is a great place for an artist to live."

He and his wife, Lois Wolley, co-wrote a book, "The Yin Yang of Painting," that landed him on the cover of Artist Magazine in 1996.

Zhang paints a wide variety of subjects, including still-lives and landscapes. Last year, he was commissioned by the National Geographic Society to do three large paintings re-creating scenes from the ancient Chinese Shang dynasty (1600-1027 B.C.). However, he also has been working on a series based on historical narratives of the American colonial period.

"I have to have full knowledge or feeling for a subject, or I can't touch it," Zhang said. "In China, I studied classical ways of making things look real, but in America, I have studied abstract art. Underneath, all of my paintings start off abstract. Mainly, though, I want the viewer to feel something. I want my paintings to live forever."

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## Exhibit features top painters

Nearly 100 paintings by 45 of the top traditional realistic and impressionistic painters in the world will be featured in the third annual "International Masters of Fine Art — 2003" exhibit.

About a dozen of the artists are expected to attend the gala opening reception from 5:30 to 9 p.m. Friday at the Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art in Alamo Heights.

Sponsored by the newly formed International Museum of Contemporary Masters of Fine Art, the exhibit will run through Dec. 13. The entire exhibit can be seen online at [www.internationalmastersoffineart.com](http://www.internationalmastersoffineart.com).

"A master artist is one who consistently and over time demonstrates artistic excellence in composition, design skills and mastery of subjects," said Jim Janes, Greenhouse Gallery executive director. "The IMFA artwork was selected by each master artist or the exhibit selection committee as the artists' strongest works."

Each artist will be showing two to three works, including paintings — mostly portraits, still-lives and landscapes — and sculpture, especially wildlife bronzes.

In addition to the exhibit, the gal-

lery is sponsoring a seminar on Saturday at the Silo Restaurant followed by a private tour of the McNay Art Museum and a black tie optional cocktail reception and fixed price draw Saturday evening.

Former Southwest Art editor Susan Hallsten McGarry and portrait artist Steve Childs will conduct the seminar on "Art as a Language of Communication."

Tickets for the Friday evening reception cost \$50 per person; tickets cost \$125 for the Friday evening and Saturday day events. Tickets for the Saturday night reception are \$75 per person; tickets for the Saturday day and night events cost \$150 per person.

The package price for all events and the collector catalog is \$250. For a couple that shares a catalog and attends all events, the price is \$450.

For reservations, contact the gallery at (800) 453-8991 or (210) 828-6491.

Following the opening weekend, admission is free for the exhibit, which will be open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays at the Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art, 2218 Breezewood Drive.

— Dan R. Goddard

## Artists named among best

David Leffel, Joseph Zbukvic, Pino Dangelico and Michael Albrechtsen may not be household names, but within the world of traditional representational art, they are recognized as among the best.

Most of the artists in the "International Masters of Fine Art — 2003" exhibit are from the United States, but others hail from Spain, Australia, Canada, Russia, South Africa and France.

Here's a list of five artists and their paintings to look for in the exhibit at the Greenhouse Gallery of Fine Art:

**Dan Gerhartz** A graduate of the American Academy of Art in Chicago, Gerhartz has won awards at the National Academy of Western Art Show and has been featured in the Prix de West and the Artists of America exhibits. "Midsummer" is an oil painting combining an abstract background with a classically draped female figure.

**Andy Thomas** A self-taught artist who labored for 16 years in advertising, Thomas is becoming known for his historical paintings of Civil War battles that have been used to illustrate several books. "And the Band Played On" features a host of deceased pop music stars playing pi-

rates, including Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Elvis Presley, Patsy Cline, Billie Holiday, Jim Croce, Roy Orbison, Jerry Garcia and Beethoven as the pirate king.

**Kevin Macpherson** For 10 years, the Greenhouse Gallery has represented this former president of Plein Air Painters of America known for his lushly painted landscapes. "Romance of the Sea" is a rocky cliff towering over sun-dappled waves rendered in expressionistic brushstrokes.

**Laura Robb** Profiled in the April 2001 issue of Southwest Art, Robb is a native of Oklahoma who went to New York City to study art with Michael Aviano and has settled in Taos, N.M. "Mostly Peonies" is a still life that blooms with richly textured, thick layers of paint and lustrous colors.

**Bob Boomer** A master woodcarver who studied at Fresno State University, Boomer lives in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, where he finds the exotic manzanita and weathered cedar he prefers. "Pueblo Portrait" is a detailed Native American woman carrying a pot on her head, with the flowing lines of her robe formed by the grain in the manzanita wood.

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