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Parade, 26"x19"

HONGNIAN ZHANG

*Applying the yin/yang of painting
to working in pastels*

BY MAGGIE PRICE

HONGNIAN ZHANG is an American artist with a Chinese background. Born in Nanjing, he studied at the Central Art Academy in Beijing, China's most prestigious art school. He is well-known in the People's Republic of China as an award-winning oil painter, and his paintings have been exhibited and acquired by China's Central Art Museum. He emigrated to the U.S. in 1985, and was one of the first Chinese artists to exhibit Chinese oil paintings in the western world. His color theory and unique approach to oil painting is presented in his book, *The Yin/Yang of Painting*, by Zhang & Woolley, published by Watson-Guipill. He teaches and presents workshops at the Woodstock School of Art and Hudson Valley Art Workshops. He lives in Woodstock, New York, with his wife, artist Lois Woolley and their three children. He has recently begun working in pastel. He is represented by Fletcher Gallery, Woodstock, New York (www.fletchergallery.com).

HongNian Zhang dreamed of being an artist early in his life. Growing up in China, it was not easy to fulfill that dream. "There is a long history of Chinese art," he says, "but not a tradition of oil painting, as in Europe with the Old Masters." It was that traditional, more European, style of oil painting that appealed to him.

His dream was sharply interrupted by the Cultural Revolution. Schools were closed and students were abruptly removed from their studies and sent to the fields as laborers. "It was hard, hard work," he recalls. "We were not permitted to study; we had no books, no art."

After four years he was allowed to go to back to Beijing, where he at last was able to continue his formal study of art.

His education there began with a strong foundation of drawing skills. Students spent a very long time learning to draw correctly before they were allowed to move to painting. "When they let me use oils, I was so happy to use color," HongNian says now.

"I was very lucky," he says. "I got a job as artist in residence at Beijing Art Academy, so I got paid to paint. Mostly



Tibetan Boy, 18"x12"



Tibetan Children, 20 1/2"x30"

I painted what the government wanted, but sometimes my own work. I cannot complain; I got to paint." His own work helped create the avant-garde Flashback and Scar movements during the years following the Cultural Revolution. These movements, in opposition to China's politicized art climate, evoked a raw, untainted vision of Chinese life.

"I painted what happened to me, what my life was when I was sent to the fields and away from my studies. I painted the suffering of the people, so everyone would remember. Other people would see these paintings and think I had painted their lives, but I had painted my own experience."

After a while he wanted to go back to college for a degree; he was older than the other students, and was

quickly successful, so they allowed him to jump to graduate school.

He came to the United States to finish his masters' degree. "I wanted to do it," he says. "I wanted to see original oils, the masters. We had only a few hundred years' tradition of old masters in oil painting in China, though thousands of years in ink drawings."

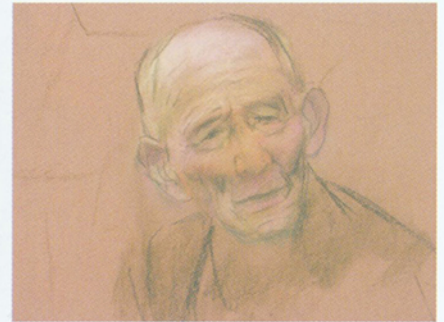
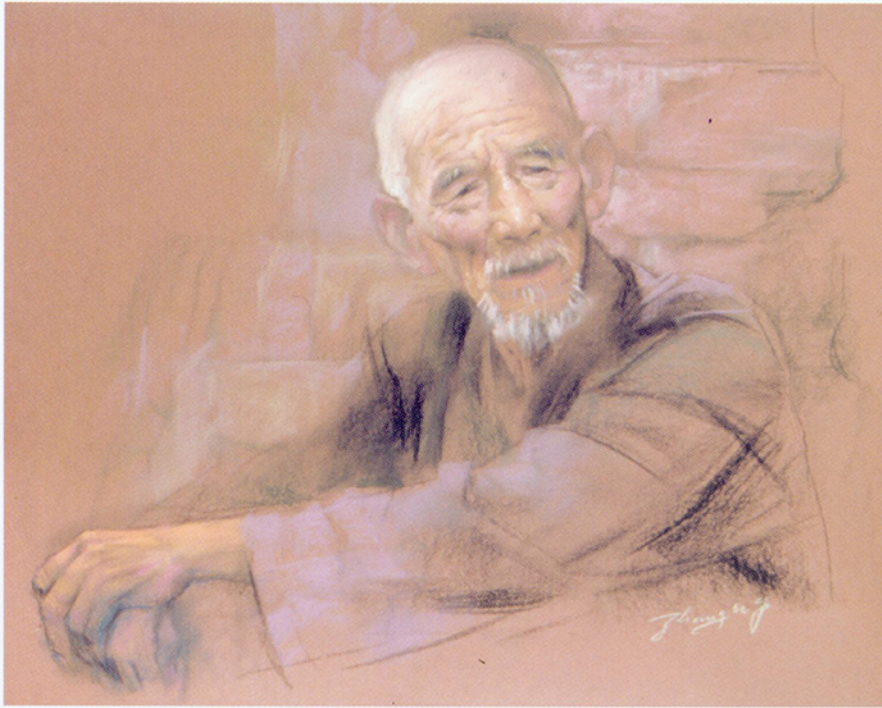
"When I first came to New York, I almost lived at the Met," he says. "I had a hard time then, no money, no language, no skills; but I could go to the Met and see my 'old friends' of paintings."

HongNian says he does not regret the struggle of his early years in China. "Now I belong to the world," he says. "I have a Chinese background, I am a United States citizen, but I belong to

the world. The world is not so big, one should not feel so much from here or there. It is a small world and a short life and there is not much time to finish."

He clearly enjoys his life now. He has brought his daughter and his nephew over from China. He paints and teaches, and every month or so he goes into New York City, a hundred miles away, and visits his "old friends" at the Metropolitan Museum, or takes a train trip to Washington, D.C. to visit the National Gallery.

HongNian feels that coming to the United States was his destiny. "My father was educated here in the 1920s," he says. "He planned to bring our family here, but the times changed, and the opportunity was gone." His childhood was difficult. "We had lots of prob-



lems," he admits. "We were poor, but I learned from my hard life. We had nothing, so I dreamed. I always wanted to come here, perhaps to fulfill my father's dream from 50 years ago."

Certainly HongNian has been fulfilling his own dream of becoming an artist. His oil paintings have been enormously successful. He was featured on the CBS Sunday Morning Show, and attracted national attention with his paintings of the people of Tibet. His interest in historical themes led to a series of oil paintings depicting early American Pilgrim life. He recently completed a series of large oil paintings for the National Geographic Society, recreating events from ancient Chinese history, and is working on several more.

His book, *The Yin-Yang of Painting*, is in its third printing. While it is written to oil painters, he says the yin-yang theories apply equally to pastels.

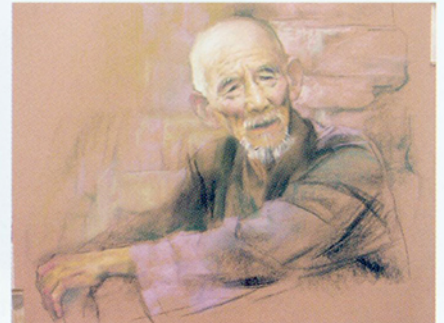
HongNian has been working in pastels more and more recently. At first he worked in a smaller format, but he has moved to larger, complex compositions.

"Pastel is like a vacation," he says with a grin. "I feel free. I have strong ideas about oils, also a market demand

Old Wall, 25"x20".

This painting uses the red/green palette shown at the immediate right.

Above, right, the first color layer with the first application of line; middle and below, far right, sequential applications of color build the image.



so I must paint. Pastel is like a break."

When he lived in China, he says they did not have good quality pastels, so he did not work in that medium. "They may have them now, but if I had stayed in China, I would not have begun to use pastels for many more years.

"But after I came to this country and began using pastels, I reconnected with my first language of drawing, my love of drawing. Painting with oils, the brush keeps me from using the language of drawing as much.

"In oil, space and light is the major language. In pastel, it's line, edges, gesture. I always drew with charcoal, so when I first picked up pastel, I had the love of drawing plus the beauty of color," he says.

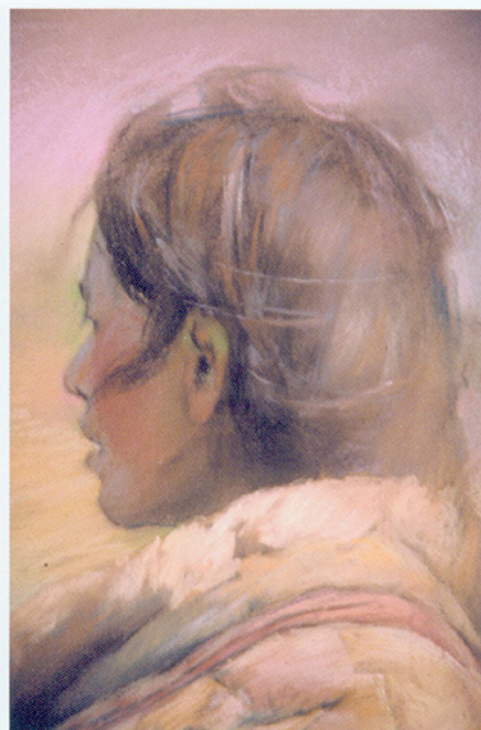
He works on Canson paper. "When I want to be loose and sketchy, I use the rough side," he explains. "Smooth side is for more layers. But I like to be more loose and sketchy, usually."

Pastels Girault are the pastels he uses most. He uses NuPastels some for lines, and likes that he can sharpen them. He uses Unison for highlights, or on the side for big masses. "They have good neutral colors," he says.

"I'm not afraid of black," he points out. "Not as color alone, but I use black for line which won't show as much."

Line is very important to HongNian.

"In pastel I like to use line and edges. I want to see the beauty of the line and then the form on top, but to always let some line show through.



Left, *Echo*, 25"x20". This painting utilizes a blue/orange palette, shown below. Above, detail of the finished painting.



Some lines are light, some dark, sometimes texture is built through groups of lines. In painting the figure, there is the line of the bone, but the roundness of flesh too. I like to use a Chinese calligraphy of line and then add the flesh. It is another yin/yang, the balance of bone and flesh."

HongNian refers to yin/yang and balance frequently. In his book, he moves from the yin/yang of values, light and dark, to color temperatures, warm and cool, to color intensity, vivid and quiet. Then comes the contrast of complementary colors.

While the use of complements is clearly laid out in his book for oil painters, it is not specifically explained for the pastel artist. But HongNian finds

no difficulty in applying the theory to his pastel paintings.

"With pastel, you can't mix red and green, but you already have the color choices laid out before you," he says. "So in some ways, it is easier. But you have to really look at the color of objects. In one case a blue may be more purple, in another case perhaps it is more red.

"I think it is best not to name the colors. People want to name them, the manufacturers want to name them. But a color may be different from one painting to the next, depending on the palette and the painting. What I might call green in one painting I might call yellow in another. In one, it is the green in a red/

green palette, and in the other it is the yellow in a yellow/purple palette. So, it's easier not to name them. With pastel, you just pick up the colors, the palette for the painting."

While HongNian frequently teaches classes and workshops, he does not teach his theory of yin/yang in color selection. "Not because what I know is sacred, or secret, but because it could be misunderstood. It is important for each person to learn to use the colors right, to learn for themselves."

Applying his yin/yang theory to his own paintings, HongNian begins with a loose application of color on Canson paper. Then he adds line. "You might feel that the line destroys the beauty of the first underpainting of color," he

Dawn in Tibet, 19"x26"



says. "Sometimes the first addition of line is stiff. But I add color again, and then it is better, I have line and form from the color."

He proceeds from dark to light in stages. In a red/green painting, for example, if the reds are the darkest tones of the painting, he works a layer of reds first. Then a layer of greens, then a layer of reds, and so on. Each stage goes from dark to light, from one color to its complement.

The painting, *Old Wall*, page 50, was created with a red/green palette as shown. The painting *Echo*, page 51, uses a blue/orange palette. In the painting *Parade*, page 48, the reds are middle tones and the greens are the lightest tones.

"For a painting like this, especially a large one, you must have a clear idea of the pattern from the beginning," HongNian says. When he works on a complex painting involving multiple figures, he draws a simplified sketch first, planning the pattern of the figures and how they will look together in a group.

HongNian is not concerned about always covering all the paper. "I like the freshness of a vignette," he says. "Pastels give you a lot of freedom; they don't have to be as finished."

Working on a surface like Canson, he finds that not being able to paint over areas, as he might in oils, forces him to have a clear pattern in mind. "Pastel is easier to keep clear from beginning to end," he says.

"Even though I use layers, each layer shows something from below, but it also blends into it. That is a beauty of pastel."

HongNian's choice of medium depends upon the subject. He tends to do more of his large, complex compositions in oils. "Oils are like a novel," he says, "and pastels are more of a poem."

"Each medium has its own beauty, and the artist has to ask how to release the beauty of the material. In oils, it may be the texture; in watercolor, the flow of the water. In pastel, it is the stroke. If you don't use the stroke freely, you waste the material. From the begin-

ning to the end, I like to feel the pastel," HongNian says.

"Sometimes not very much is needed to express the idea. In painting the arm of a dancer there may be just a line and then a highlight, and the color of the paper, and that's all it needs.

"Drawing with pastel uses a very personal, very natural language. Drawing is like a signature. It is a concentrated idea. Use of line and edges is also very personal. I use the side of pastels for softness, for soft edges and for background. Then I can add a line, or let a line show through from another layer. It is a clear language of drawing.

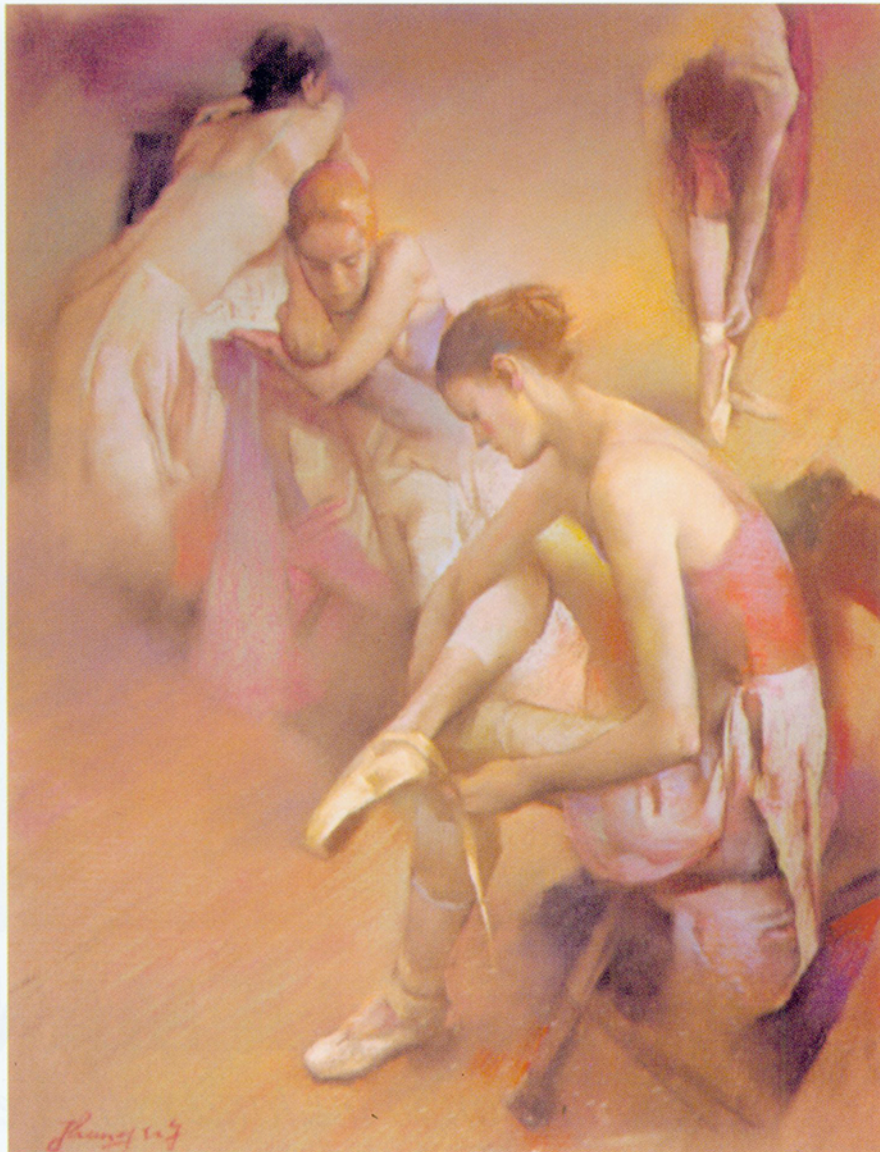
"I try to keep this feeling when I work in oils, but it is much easier with pastel."

Expressing the feeling through his painting is something HongNian always wanted to do. "In art, when you show your deepest feelings, speaking to yourself through your painting, that is when people understand and respond."

His painting *Ground Zero* [see *The*



Above, *Ballerina Study*, 10"x9";
right, *Rehearsal*, 25"x20"



Pastel Journal, January/February, page 60] touched many hearts. "I painted my emotion of the moment," he says. "I could not paint that now. It is not that it's over, or that I don't feel the tragedy, but the emotion is not so powerful as it was then. I painted what I felt then.

"Like my paintings from the Cultural Revolution, I may have dreamed of touching another person's heart, but I had to begin from my own."

Creating art requires a balance, he says. "First, the heart; second, the image. Then the drawing and color. You put them all together and 'dance' with the materials. I like to stay relaxed with the pastels. If the painting is a struggle with the image from beginning to end, people won't feel so moved. They will feel tired," he laughs. "It's just more yin/yang. You must work hard at your art, but you must enjoy it!"

HongNian does.

■ Maggie Price is a pastel artist and writer, and editor of *The Pastel Journal*.



HongNian Zhang
in his studio in
Woodstock, New
York.