

# FROM THE HEART

By Barbara Coyner

Xiang Zhang loves to tell stories about the cowboys of the Southwest who have shared their everyday lifestyles with him. One rancher, an avid collector of Zhang's work, invited him to spend some time on the range, getting Zhang up at 4 a.m., feeding him a hearty breakfast, then escorting him to the hill country for a painting session.

"It was like I was the director of a movie," Zhang recalls of the working cowboys, their colorful clothing, and their willingness to pose for him all day. But that ranch visit had an added chapter when Zhang opened his one-man show months later at a prestigious gallery.

"The show had just opened, and these men came in all dressed in the clothes I'd painted them in," Zhang

says. "People stopped and looked, and some said it was like the real cowboys had just stepped off the canvas. It was unbelievable."

Spending the afternoon with Zhang can make anyone an optimist about life. He arrived in the United States 20 years ago from China and has since carved out the American dream for himself and his family. Not only has he made a big splash in the Western art world, he's found his own piece of paradise: a 37-acre rural Texas home site that comes complete with pond, wild pecan trees, and a tidy red brick house. Zhang and his wife Lily, who also is an artist, share a spacious custom-designed, 2,000-square-foot studio, and spend more time there now that daughter Stephanie is away at college.

"We have a wonderful studio, with lots of nature around us," Zhang says. "It's good for me. I can take my easel outside and paint. Our neighbor has horses I can see right out my window, and sometimes I take a break and go out and feed them. We have ten acres that would make a perfect pasture. I've thought about

*First Light, oil, 30" by 48"*

*"In order to catch the early morning light, my cowboy friends and I woke up at 4:30 a.m. After breakfast and saddling the horses, we came to the hilltop. The sunlight was warm and created long, horizontal shadows behind the horses and trees. It was the exact atmosphere I wanted for this painting. I was like a movie director, waving my hand for action and having the cowboys walking to me from 300 feet away. We shot many wonderful photos, until the horses sweated and tired for the day."*





*A Hard Day's Reward, oil, 25" by 32"*

*"It was wonderful to have lunch at the chuck wagon with the cowboys. The meal was like a banquet. No matter how many delicious foods there are, red beans always is a sure deal. Two years later, when I went back to the ranch, the cowboys told me sadly that the cook had past away from cancer. I miss him."*

having horses, but I don't really have the time. I do ride sometimes and go to ranches when I can. I love watching the real cowboys and how good they are."

There it is again—that deep admiration for the working cowboy. Just as cowboys and ranchers collect Zhang's paintings, he collects stories about them. But he also paints ballerinas, wandering backstage at the Dallas Ballet to watch the dancers as they practice. He paints commissions, as well, traveling throughout the country to paint portraits, often of children. "I have a people focus in my work," he says. "I like to paint cowboys, ballerinas, everyone. I paint from life."

And what a life it has been. The son of a chemistry professor, Zhang grew up in an urban setting in China, getting caught in Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution in 1965. The

upheaval in Chinese society closed many universities and libraries, shifting the country to an agrarian emphasis. Ultimately, Zhang and his family were shut out from Western culture, and his father was uprooted and moved to the country. Yet one of his father's associates, a medical professor, kept Zhang supplied with skulls and anatomy models, enabling the young man to master the construction of the human body. Hiding the models and skulls under his bed, Zhang drew when he could, perfecting his eye for figurative art. Later, he landed a scholarship to the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, where he learned set design.

"In China, everything was arranged by someone else," Zhang says. "School was free, but once you graduated, you belonged to the country and they put you where

they wanted you. You had no choice. I look at my daughter now, ready to graduate from college, and she can ask what she can do after graduation, send her resume around, and have choices."

The demise of the Cultural Revolution turned Zhang's life in a different direction, as he met Lily at one of the newly opened Western bookstores. They both were excited about the recent infusion of Western culture, but Lily also expressed an interest in Zhang's drawing, requesting some art lessons. Friendship eventually led to marriage and, when Zhang snagged a full-ride scholarship to Tulane University in New Orleans, Louisiana, the couple no longer dreamed about all things Western, they were headed West. In New Orleans, Zhang designed sets for the Opera House and Mardi Gras, and met art collectors Dorothy



*Ranch Wrestlers, oil, 60" by 40"*

*"Cowboys respect their work. They dress every morning as if they are going to a party but, after three hours of branding, their clothing is covered with calves' blood and mud. It was a windy day when I was on the fence taking pictures, with dust sweeping into the air and into my long lens, which made it hard to zoom in or out. Cowboys are tough. No matter if it's raining, hot, cloudy, or windy, they will get the job done."*



*Rope Master, oil, 16" by 20"*

*"I am always very excited when I watch cowboys roping. They are fast and handsome on horseback. The lovely horses know exactly what their masters want, and the two move as one. My cowboy friends told me that they practice roping twice a week. The father of one cowboy decorated his wagon wheel coffee table with an 18 carat gold buckle won by his son in a rodeo competition. I applied a few horizontal dry brush strokes to indicate the horse's fast movement."*

and James Coleman, who promoted his work and encouraged him to move into fine art fulltime. He's been a rising star ever since.

It's ironic that Zhang, born in the Year of the Horse, has found a kinship with working cowboys. It's also noteworthy that Xiang means "soaring" in Chinese, because Zhang's art and his life both have risen to great heights. These days, he often heads into the hill country to paint cowboys against backdrops of crystal-line streams and steep, rocky walls. He's even been called on to judge chuck wagon cook-offs. What could be more fun for a guy who paints from life?

"As an artist, I have lots of opportunity and people come to me," Zhang says. "In my art, I don't keep

*"I tell students who come to my classes not to expect to create a masterpiece in a few days."*

doing things the same way. I always try to explore what I don't know. Technically, new stuff gets me interested, and I do lots of experiments, some successful ones and some bad ones, sometimes ones so bad that I have to destroy them. Maybe the color didn't come out right, or the composition isn't what I thought it would be. Maybe I will try some new brush stroke that I have never used before, and it comes out better than I thought it would.

"I always like to paint ahead, and like artists say, 'Maybe tomorrow

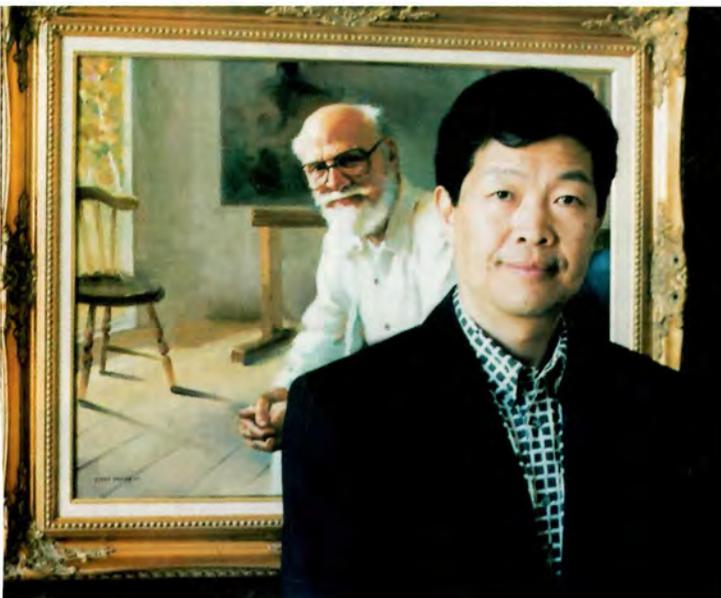
will be the best painting I've ever done.' The excitement of painting comes from my heart. When I'm painting, I learn a lot about the philosophy of life, like some things aren't as good as I thought, which is a lot like real life. Sometimes life is disappointing and we want to give up, but what I learn is to never give up, because there is always something new."

Zhang applies the same kind of wisdom when teaching his students. "I tell students who come to my classes not to expect to create a masterpiece in a few days," he says. "Some come with too much expectation, and I remind them that they come here to learn, that they need to be happy and not put too much pressure on themselves. In my classes I



*Branding, oil, 32" by 40"*

*"Just as I sign my name when I finish a painting, cowboys need to put their logo on the cattle. One of my leather chairs still has a logo 'CA' on it. No wonder it is worth so much trouble to brand the cattle. Of course, the cowboys give them shots and cut their horns, as well. The smell of burning hair and skin, the shouting of the calves, and the dust almost blocks the hot sunlight. All this made a wonderful atmosphere for the picture."*



try to encourage them. In my own work, I can be picky but, when you pick students apart, they lose confidence. Then the class becomes boring and everybody worries."

Zhang approaches each day and each canvas with renewed enthusiasm, and the rich contrast in his colors shows a depth of feeling and mood. "In my painting, I take the images from life, but I might change the color to show what I am thinking at that time," he says. "It's not always realistic from life because, as artists, we paint what we see with a feeling combined from experience and thinking, not just a copy of what's in front of us. Our techniques change. We keep going because there is excitement and always something new to discover and explore." 

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