

EQUINE IMAGES

Year of the Horse
XIANG ZHANG

ALISON RIEDER
Animal Dreams

**Paul
MELLON'S
BEQUEST**

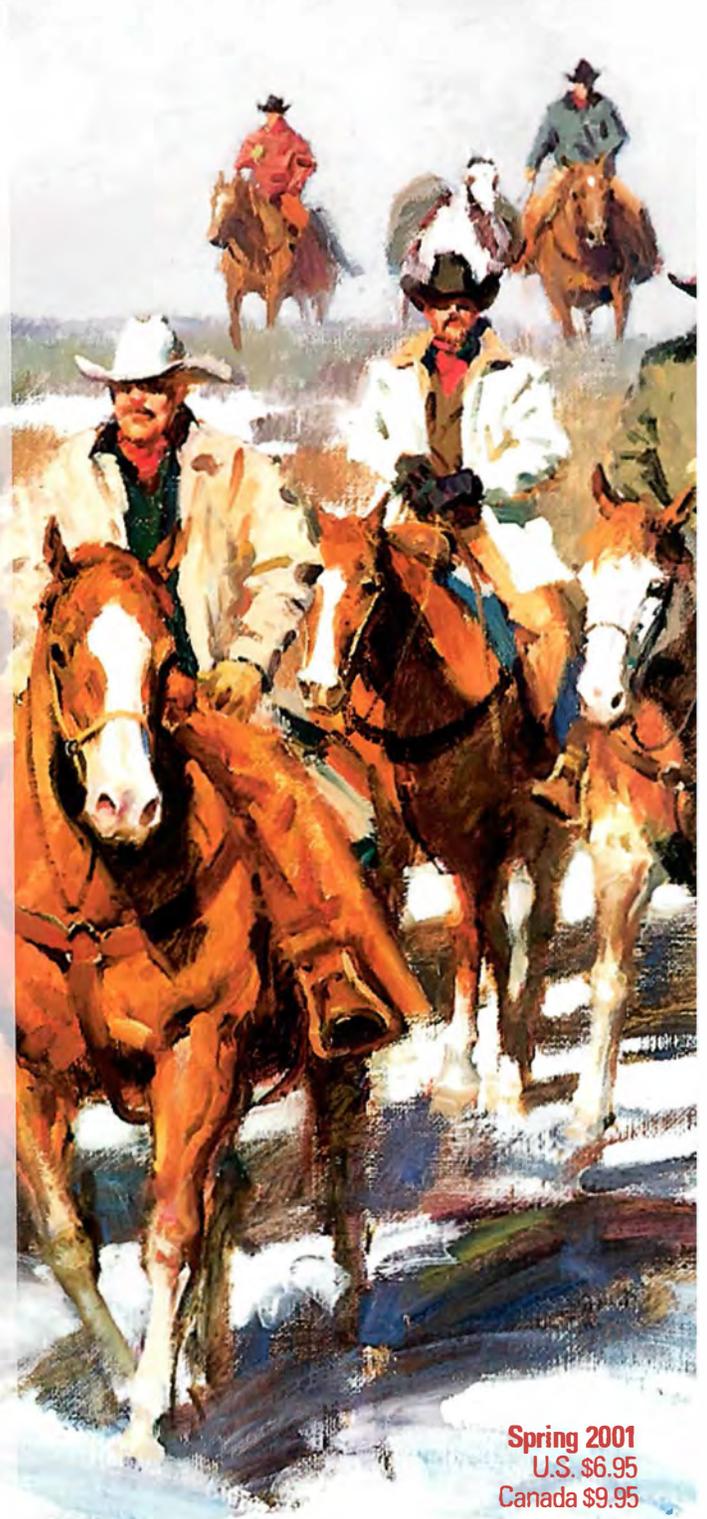
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XIANG

The Horse as Immortal

By Barbara Coyner

ZHANG

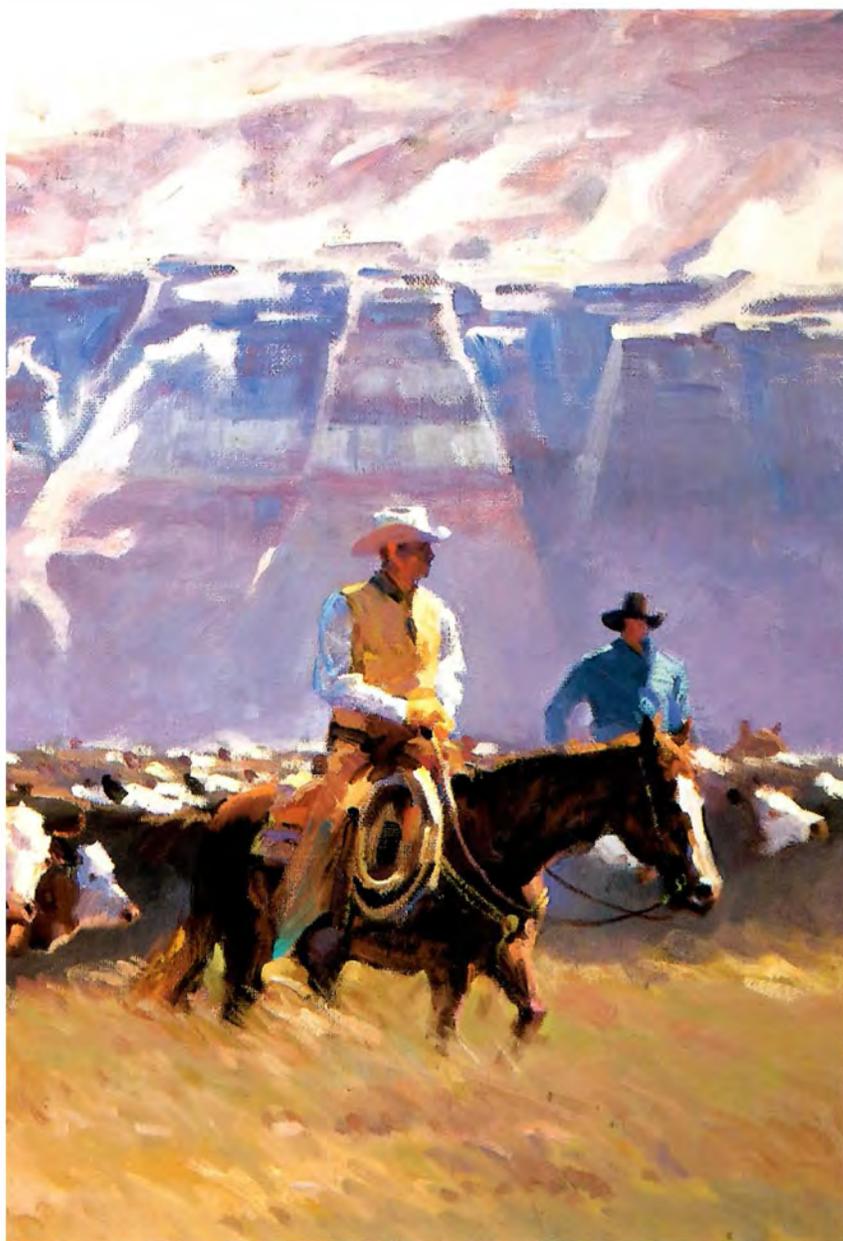
“I always laugh when they tell me that visitors at the gallery sometimes ask the question ‘Why does a Chinese guy paint cowboys so well when he comes from a different culture?’ ”

Cowboys and horses seem an unlikely choice of subject matter for a Chinese-born painter. But Xiang Zhang (pronounced Shong Zang) says he has a reverence for the horse that transcends genre. Born, fittingly, in the Year of the Horse, Zhang calls his appreciation genetic.

“I always laugh when they tell me that visitors at the gallery sometimes ask the question ‘Why does a Chinese guy paint cowboys so well when he comes from a different culture?’ They forget that we have horses, too, and we have cowboys in Mongolia, though our cowboys ride a smaller horse with a bigger head. Our army horses look more like western cowboy horses because they’re taller. Some people just don’t know China very well and think we all have a pigtail, but our



Ranch Wrestlers by Xiang Zhang, oil, 50 x 36 inches



I always loved horses because they are so handsome, so close to human beings' lives. They've contributed so much to human beings, how could we forget them?"

Zhang's history predestined him to paint horses with feeling and accuracy. As a small boy walking several miles to school each day, he inevitably followed a horse and wagon bringing farm produce or supplies from the countryside into the city. He studied the strong flanks propelling the load and tried to sketch what he saw.

"Because I was born in the Year of the Horse, I automatically love to see the horse image. I love to watch a horse walk and I was always drawing horses as a young boy. Many years

ago the Chinese artist Xiu Bei Hong drew the horse image with Chinese ink in the traditional form of Chinese painting on rice paper. This painting uses few brushstrokes to catch the shape and make things as simplified as possible. That's the beauty of Chinese painting. The white paper leaves you to imagine what is in the background.

"In the same way, when I do Western paintings, I try to reach a level and simplify everything — the color, the shape — so that less is more. It's not necessary to put in every detail. You have to leave some room for the viewer to put everything together," says Zhang, whose work is represented by Southwest Gallery in Dallas and McLarry Fine Art in Santa Fe.

Once Chairman Mao restructured China with his Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, Zhang watched his world change drastically. His father, a chemistry professor, was shuttled off to a farm, the nation's schools and universities closed their doors, and the links to Western culture were abruptly severed. China fell into a quiet isolation. Aware of his son's talent, Zhang's father hired an art tutor, smuggled the boy into the library to read forbidden *National Geographic* magazines, and allowed him to study anatomy by bringing bones home from the locked-up science labs. It was an unusual art education, yet Zhang managed to master the human form and the grace and strength of the horse.

At the climax of the Cultural Revolution, Zhang joined the national renaissance, the grand awakening to Western art, literature, and music. He also encountered his future wife Lily while standing in line at a newly

opened bookstore, and the two savored the creative freedom sweeping the land.

By 1982, Zhang had earned his bachelor of fine arts degree from the Central Academy of Drama at Beijing, and later headed to Tulane University for his MFA. It was an exciting time for the Chinese student, immersing in the New Orleans jazz culture and widening his creative horizons on the local drama scene. While doing theater sets and imaginative floats for Mardi Gras, he painted on the side, impressing clients with his talents at portraiture and the Western cowboy scene. Even now, the portraits satisfy his need to supply detail and delicacy, while the horse themes reflect his soul's yearning to

Xiang Zhang



Cutting Horse by Xiang Zhang, oil, 25 x 32 inches



Sunlight In Woods by Xiang Zhang, oil, 32 x 40 inches

paint the masculine nature.

It helps to have ranching friends and Zhang appreciates those who invite him out for brandings and roundups. Like a reporter, he watches and chronicles the action with his camera, then paints the sweat and muscle, the ruggedness and motion. He calls the teamwork “marvelous.” Ironically, Zhang didn’t get his own perspective from the saddle until 1999, when he took his first horseback ride at a Texas ranch. He furthered his equestrian education just last year, riding the hills around Santa Fe. It was a worthwhile undertaking, one that added to his ability to paint the horse with sensitivity and accuracy.

“I rode the hills where the ground isn’t just flat and I was very proud of myself,” he says of his Santa Fe ride. “I handled it, I didn’t fall and I didn’t get sore after being in the saddle that long. Best of all, I think I really did have a connection with the horse.” ♦