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Westward Bound by Gretchen Reynolds
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Branding the Beast, oil on canvas

Horses inspired Xiang Zhang to paint - and they eventually drew him to the Texas ranch where he feels most at home.

PAINTER XIANG ZHANG (pronounced Shong Zang) was born in Sichuan China, in 1954, the Year of the Horse. This birth sign would prove to be prophetic: Horses have been a touchstone throughout Zhang's life. "I grew up on the grounds of Sichuan University," he says today. His parents were professors at the university, which was, at the time, a stronghold of relatively urbanity and intellectual curiosity in the China of the 1950s. But his elementary school was set about 2 miles outside the university's walled grounds, and each morning young Zhang would walk to school through a rural countryside and past, inevitably, horses. "I began to look forward very much to seeing those horses," he recalls. "They were so patient and hard-working, pulling the carts and helping with the harvest. They seemed such admirable and beautiful animals."

Zhang began sketching the gentle, plodding horses, drawn to the process of drawing even more inexorably than he was drawn to the animals. This budding interest in art was a surprise to his family. His parents weren't artistic. "My father was a chemistry professor," he points out. But Zhang's need to draw and paint proved to be innate, compelling, and stubborn. "I began to draw during math classes and literature classes," he remembers. "Every chance I had, I'd sketch." His father was bemused by his son's obsession and quietly encouraging. He bought the boy a book of paintings by the famous Chinese artist

Xiu Biehong. The paintings, evocative black-ink images on rice paper, were primarily of - what else? Horses. Zhang was entranced and, from that moment, effectively lost to any career other than that of a fine art painter. But it took many years, several prolonged side steps, a relocation to an entirely new continent, and, most decisively, a reconnection with horses to bring him at last to the place where he had wished all along to be. "It has been quite a journey," he says.

ZHANG WAS FORTUNATE, IN A WAY, to have been born in China when he was. He was only a boy when the Cultural Revolution swept the country in 1966, forcing every professional artist in the land into a single pursuit. "The only thing anyone was allowed to paint was portraits of Chairman Mao," he recalls.

At that point, Zhang was himself a painter, although a youthful and secret one. His father had hired a tutor for him, a fellow chemistry professor who had developed a love for and facility with oil paints. The tutor, who'd studied Western techniques in addition to traditional Chinese painting styles, set

to work teaching the young Zhang sturdy draftsmanship as well as the secrets of working in oils. They labored together over how to compose a painting, how to capture shadow and light, how to transfer movement and life onto an empty canvas. As the Cultural Revolution took hold, Zhang continued surreptitiously to cycle to the countryside, where he would ask farmers to pose for him. He painted scene after scene of these gnarled, dignified old men and their powerful, plodding horses. He showed them to no one but his parents and friends. To anyone else, he said he was painting the face of Chairman Mao.

Then, as abruptly as it had begun, the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 with the death of Mao. By a happy coincidence, that was also the year that Zhang was to begin his university studies. "I was very lucky to be among the first generation to go back and



Morning Drive, oil on canvas

really learn," he acknowledges, "to be allowed to be exposed to the outside world and to cultures beyond our own."

After some debate with himself, Zhang decided to attend college in Beijing, China's capital, instead of in Sichuan. "It was the cultural center of the country," he explains. "I knew I would see great art and great things." And indeed, he was exposed to major traveling collections of works from European and American museums. "It was so much beauty," he recalls. "It made me want to work harder."



Singing for Supper, oil on canvas

At the time, Zhang was studying set design, which he'd chosen for practical purposes. He thought he'd be able to get a job after school. The Chinese approach to the discipline stressed fine art. Zhang painted every morning, then studied the technical aspects of set creation in the afternoons. When graduation neared, he put together a portfolio of his efforts. It included a number of technically masterful oils.

He sent the portfolio to a half dozen graduate design programs in the United States. "Design was much more advanced there," he explains. "If I wanted to learn more, that was where I had to go." The universities' admissions departments were rather stunned by the sheer artistry of his portfolio. Fine art wasn't stressed in U.S. set design programs, but they knew talent when they saw it. He was accepted into every program. But only Tulane University in New Orleans, LA, offered him a full scholarship. He accepted and, with little sense of what he was getting into, embarked for America.



Greener Grass, oil on canvas

"America was so amazing," Zhang says today. "We had been told under Mao that capitalism was terrible, that it made people poor. But then I saw America and realized we were the ones who had been poor. Everyone had a car here. It was just amazing."

New Orleans, in particular, was almost overwhelming in its noise and color and flamboyance. Zhang couldn't learn and draw fast enough. He would spend hours in the French Quarter, making watercolors of jazz musicians.

School was easy. Graduating at the top of his class, he immediately landed the job of set designer for the New Orleans Opera House. The work was exciting at first. In his inaugural assignment, he created the sets for an acclaimed version of Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*. But then he sat around. "Most of the sets we used were rented. I just repaired and repainted them," he explains. This was not challenging. Zhang felt stifled.

By a stroke of good fortune, he was introduced about then to a man whose company constructed the floats for New Orleans' famous Mardi Gras parade. The company needed a designer. Zhang needed a challenge. The company took him on.

This job proved to be boundlessly entertaining. "I had to learn so much about American culture," he remembers. "The floats would have themes about Louis Armstrong or *The Sound of Music*. I didn't know about any of that. I was always at the library."

Throughout, he painted, mostly watercolors of New Orleans scenes. Friends bought the paintings, and he had a few small shows. But he felt a nagging dissatisfaction. "I hadn't

found my subject matter," he says. "I didn't know what I really wanted to be painting. But I was pretty sure it wasn't what I was doing."

He and his wife, also a native of China, visited Dallas, TX, on vacation. There the couple walked past a gallery specializing in western paintings. They showed cowboys and blood, chuck wagons and labor and dust. They showed horses.

That was it for Zhang: "I knew right away that this was what I wanted to be painting."

He and his wife moved to Dallas, where he got a job doing commercial art. They went on long drives into the countryside and, during one, fortuitously pulled into a working ranch. Zhang wangled an invitation to watch the cowboys at work. He sat on the fence and saw branding and roping. He took photos. He memorized every drop of sweat and flex of muscle. Then he rushed back to Dallas and painted. Not long afterward, he walked into his boss' office and announced-politely-that he was quitting. It was time, he decided, to be an artist full time.



Rush to Claim, oil on canvas

LOOK AT ONE OF ZHANG'S PAINTINGS of Cowboys today, and you would never guess that the artist is a native of a foreign culture. There's a fluidity of composition in his work that suggests a deep sympathy for the West. "I have spent so much time by now watching cowboys at work," he says. "I have developed great respect for what these men do and how they do it."

He's certainly taken to the research with relish. "I've learned to ride a horse," he says. "I've eaten red beans in the chuck wagon." He's also immersed himself in the traditions of western art, spending many happy days at museums and galleries. "I admire the work

of James Reynolds and Oleg Stavrowsky so much," he says. "They have an authenticity to their subject matter and true craft."

Like those influential models, Zhang works these days almost exclusively in oils. "Watercolor is nice," he allows. "But it isn't as serious, and it doesn't have the depths. Besides, I hate to have glass over my paintings, and with watercolors, you have to."

A self-professed western impressionist, Zhang does work from photographs, but only as partial references. "I have to have seen the scene myself," he says. "Photographs cannot capture the richness of the color, the varied light and shadow." They also cannot allow for his imaginative flourishes. Zhang frequently alters the deep background of his paintings, adding distant, snowcapped mountains or sweeping, camelhair-colored plains where highways and houses might, in reality, have existed. His intention is not to misrepresent the modern West but perhaps to soften it, to make it a West of the mind, his West. "You will never see a pickup truck in my paintings," he says. Only horses.

A few years ago, Zhang and his wife moved from Dallas to his dream locale, a 37-acre ranch in Sherman, TX, about 50 miles north of Plano. The country is wide, rolling, tawny green, and very American. A contented Zhang commissioned a 2,000-square-foot studio on his property, with multiple skylights and wide, north-facing windows. There, he paints daily, unless he's visiting ranches or photographing local, working cowboys. Even from his easel, Zhang connects to the West. His neighbor, a rancher, boards horses, and Zhang often watches as the animals graze or gallop by. Sometimes, he wanders over to stroke them. "It's my anatomy study," he reasons.

He pauses and sighs happily. "I am very fortunate," he says. "I have found the place I want to be, the work I want to be doing." The West has won him over, as it has so many before him. "This place, this way of life," he says, "it can speak to you no matter where you're from. It does get in your blood, doesn't it?"