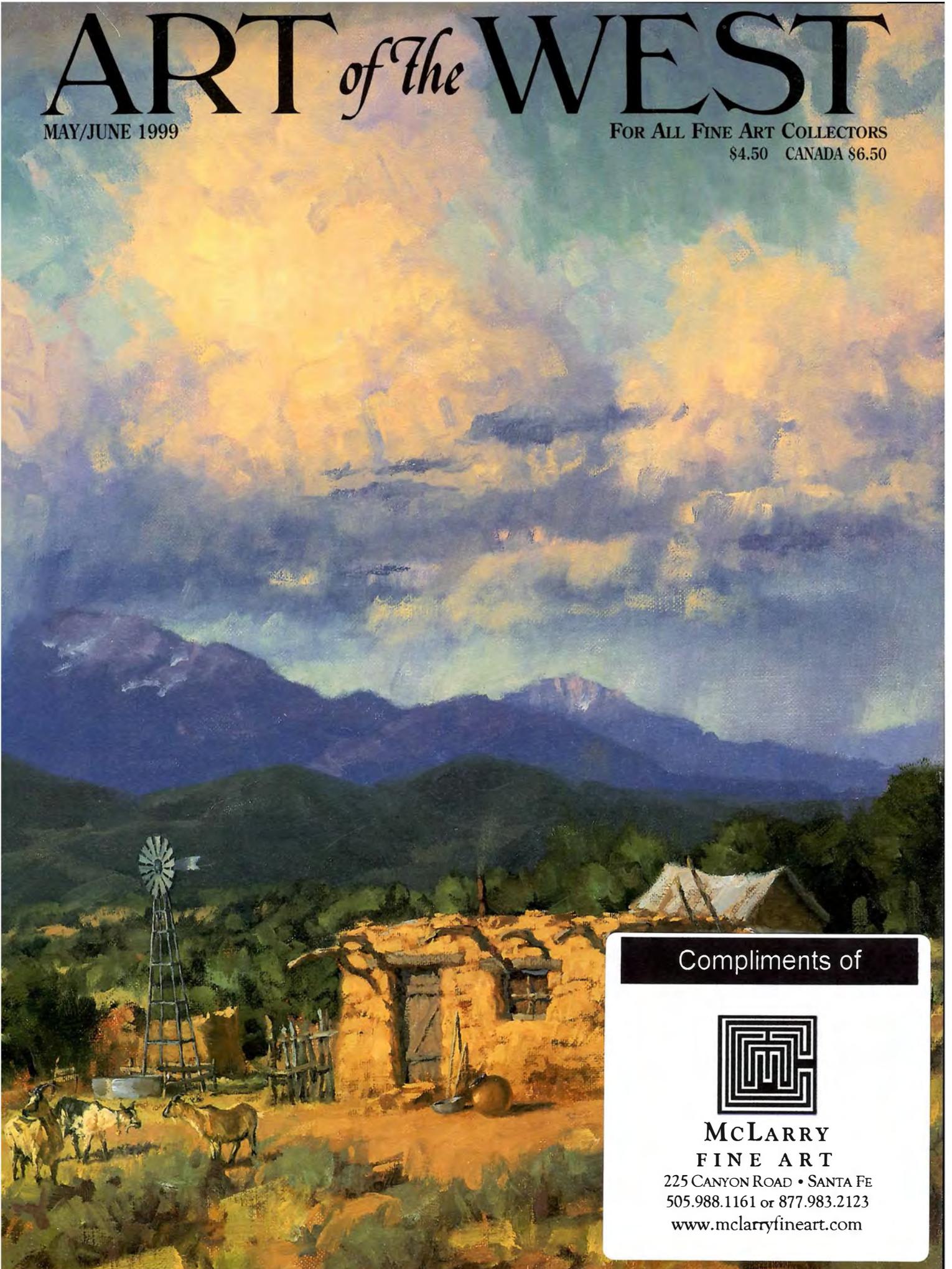


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Getting Ready, oil, 16" by 20"

"Horses never talk, but they understand what the cowboys want and do their best. The big brush strokes and strong value contrast show the horse's muscle."

Xiang Zhang

Quenching the Thirst

By Barbara Coyner

Bold colors and heavy brush strokes fill the canvas. The artist works steadily, painting from his heart and mind: seasoned cowboys in denim and leather, wide Texas skies, broad-flanked cow ponies with sweat glistening from their sides. And cattle, lots of cattle. It's a world Xiang Zhang savors. For the past two years, he's immersed

himself in a crash course in "cowboyology," painting the Southwest cattle-ranching scene. Not surprising, the Chinese-born artist, who now lives in Texas, was born in the Year of the Horse. The irony is, Xiang (pronounced Shong) has never been in the saddle himself.

"No, never," he admits. "I never got a chance to ride. When I go to

the ranch, everyone is busy branding, giving shots, and tending to the cattle. I'm like a reporter. I sit on the fence and sketch, and I'm invited to the chuck wagon for lunch. Maybe I should ask, 'How about you let me ride?' I see the little cowboys who have grown up around this life, and they are very good. They got an early start."



XIANG ZHANG ©

They Are Coming, oil, 30" by 40"

"The cowboys look like cavalries when they are galloping toward you."

A frequent visitor to a ranch in the Texas Panhandle, Xiang studies cowboy ways. He senses a harmony when man and horse work together. And he senses a lifestyle in transition. "At the turn of the century, the men were out for weeks at a time. They didn't get a bath for two months, yet everybody smiled," Xiang chuckles. "These days there are vehicles, and cowboys can often go to and from work. A big ranch is like a commune, and the employer pays for housing and utilities, and gives the men meat. It's part of their salary. Their life is still the traditional cowboy life, and I'm impressed

with the personalities of the men. They are real men. Some are shy when you first meet them, but then they open up and talk more. They live their lives without pollution, enjoy wonderful air, and really live a simple life."

Xiang paints his Western men differently than another of his favorite subjects: women. While his cowboys are rendered in painterly fashion with bold impressionistic strokes, his women are painted in translucent shades with more realism. Skin tones are soft, colors muted, and expressions more defined. He likens his painting preferences to the

Chinese yin-yang philosophy, which portrays male and female forces in harmony and balance.

"Half my work portrays women and my brush strokes are softer to express the beauty of the female figure," he says. "The other half of my work is with cowboys and horses, which is more masculine and muscular, so there's a lot of sweat with sunshine reflecting on it. The scene is more wild, so I use the brush as a vehicle to catch the strong, wild scene. In a more muscular look, you want strong color contrasts and heavier brush strokes to convey the feeling with your heart."



At Back Stage, oil, 20" by 16"

"When the little girls dress up in tutus, they look like beautiful angels."



At Noon, oil, 24" by 30"

"The cowboys' life is very simple, but they enjoy the tranquillity and fresh air every day. How's that?"

"I love people, and they are central to my work. I paint lots of girls and females, yet I need lots of balance, too. The cowboy very strongly expresses my interest in the masculine, muscular side. Out on the ranch, the cowboys' faces are covered by hats, so there is a shadow across their faces, and they are very handsome. It's not necessary to get a lot of detail, but the body motion and the action between the man and horse, the way they perfectly cooperate with each other, express harmony with the animal. This is a contrast to city life with its smog, people, and traffic. I love to go to the countryside to see another side to life, and feel my whole soul and heart getting peaceful and feeling a harmony with the land."

Born in China and educated at the

Central Academy of Drama in Beijing, Xiang is no stranger to smog, people, and traffic. Though his father was a university chemistry professor and his mother was a math teacher, the urban-based family occasionally saw horse-drawn wagons coming from the countryside into town. The animals walked slowly, so Xiang followed behind, memorizing the details in his mind and sketching them later.

His father secured a tutor to nurture the young artist, but Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution in 1965 put a stop to that. Books on Russian painters and international music—indeed, all things cultural—disappeared underground and Xiang's father was forced to move to the country to farm. Amazingly, Xiang harbors no bitterness now for Mao's

disruption to his young life, attributing many of Mao's errors to his limited exposure to world thinking.

"He had a good dream, but after he established his new China, he didn't know how to make people's lives better," says the 45-year-old artist. "The people just turned against each other. All the schools closed, and some of my father's university students were sent to search our home to see if there was any evidence that my father was against communism. There wasn't, but my father had a stamp collection, and they liked it, so they kept it. There was no rule, no law. It was a miserable time."

For Xiang, however, it was time to make lemonade from the lemons life was handing out. One of this father's associates was a medical professor.



Before the Storm, oil, 24" by 30"

"Going home early to beat the shower. I chose the dark clouds in the background, so you can see the last sunbeams on the cowboy and his horse."

Like others, he was forced to close his office, so he smuggled skulls and detailed anatomy models to Xiang, who showed a keen interest in human anatomy. Xiang studied the models thoroughly, drew them from different angles, and gained a deep understanding of the human body. His mother, meanwhile, was startled by the skulls in her son's room, asked where he'd gotten them, and insisted that he put them outside. A typical boy, he hid them under his bed.

"If it wasn't for the Cultural Revolution, I might not be an artist now," Xiang says of his unexpected education.

For him, the Cultural Revolution's climax was a celebration. "It was just like the Renaissance," he says. "For years, Mao didn't allow the people to think. Then there were all these books and new music and movies. There were long lines at the book-

store, because everyone was excited to see what was new." Xiang pauses to interject an obviously favorite personal note. "It was 1979, and I was in line at the bookstore with a classmate, when I heard this beautiful voice say, 'What are you reading?'" he recalls. "I turned and saw a beautiful girl with a beautiful face. I told her I was learning English, and she said she was learning English, too. She found out I could draw and said, 'I love to draw; would you teach me?' She became my student, then my girlfriend, then my fiancée, and then my wife. I thank art. Art has brought me a lot of good things."

Not only did art bring Lily into Xiang's life, but it allowed him to get a top-notch education at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing. The four-year program introduced him to art forms beyond China, and combined theater and fine art to give him a solid designer background. A

full-ride scholarship to Tulane University in New Orleans followed, and there he gained an even deeper understanding of theater design. "You really learn to use your two hands to utilize knowledge you learn from books to make a real thing on stage," he says of the in-depth theater training.

Xiang pursued art—and life—in New Orleans, designing for both the Opera House and Mardi Gras, and doing paintings on the side. The legendary French Quarter gave him great jazz subjects, and the Mardi Gras float designs limbered up his watercolor technique. He also met Dorothy and James Coleman, fine arts lovers whom he still regards as treasured friends and patrons. When Lily accepted a job in jewelry design in Dallas, Xiang traded theater arts for a brief stint in computer-generated illustration and design. But his heart was still at the easel.



Spring, oil, 30" by 40"

"The cowboys started gathering the cows throughout the ranch. At 8 a.m., the cows' screams filled the hills. I was impressed by the spring morning light focusing on the cattle."

"I mastered the computer, but this was not my goal," Xiang says. "I still wanted to be a full-time fine art painter. One day I went into work, and I heard this little voice talking to me, so I explained things to my boss. She understood and asked

that I finish my current projects. Then, all of a sudden, I realized that, 'Oh, my God, I no longer have to prioritize my time. I can paint all the time. That will be oh, so nice. But uh-oh, no paycheck. I'm scared. My friends all tell me it takes five years to establish, but I'm already 40 and have no time to wait. I will try."

In 1995, with Dorothy Coleman hosting his first one-man show and the honor of earning a spot in the Top 100 for Art For the Parks, Zhang launched a career as a full-time fine artist. Today, Xiang's paintings hang in a multitude of galleries, businesses, and homes and have earned many awards

and honors.

Comfortably settled in Plano, Texas, Xiang now paints every day, often taking over the family's formal dining room or moving his easel outdoors. Meanwhile, on the domestic scene, he and Lily are doing their best to keep up with daughter Stephanie, who is in high school, plays the violin, and performs in drill team.

Xiang still hangs out at the ranch whenever he can, quenching his thirst for cowboy action. And he vows that he will ride a horse sometime in 1999. □



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