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Building Bridges

Huihan Liu's vibrant portraits forge bonds between the people of China, Tibet, and the United States

BY NORMAN KOLPAS

ALMOST 8,000 miles and a vast gulf of cultural differences separate the subjects of two paintings completed this past spring by Huihan Liu. *THREE GENERATIONS* depicts a grandmother, mother, and baby in the snowy wilderness outside a remote village in northern Tibet. In *VISITORS*, three teenage schoolgirls sit in the foyer of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, reviewing their assignment as they wait to enter.



Obvious differences aside, however, these works share much more in common. Realistically rendered with subtly impressionistic grace notes, they display a masterly grasp of composition, color values, and forms that bespeak classic atelier-style training and carefully honed craftsmanship. More importantly, they undeniably capture the spirits of their subjects: the Tibetan women's serene pride, the young Americans' eager intelligence. In brief, both canvases irresistibly connect with the viewer.

"As an artist," explains Liu, "I love to paint subjects from my heart. If you can see people's expressions, even if you don't understand their language, my paintings can be bridges."

For most of his 59 years, Liu has been building bridges through art—first as a

schoolboy in southeastern China, next as an art student during that nation's cultural revolution, and then as a guest and finally citizen of the United States. Through it all, he says, "The most incredible, wonderful thing to me as an artist has always been expressing my feelings to people, and then seeing them understand and enjoy it."

Making that simple yet profound emotional transaction hasn't always come easily. Growing up in Guangzhou, the capital of Canton province, Liu experienced firsthand the extreme hardships of life during the early years of the People's Republic. "I always felt starving because food was at a shortage," he says. So were the art supplies he craved. Though he was





Visitors, oil, 20 x 20.

given lessons in drawing and Chinese brush painting in grade school, at home “we didn’t have drawing paper or pencils. I had to save my money to buy them.”

Meager materials in hand, young Liu would go out into the countryside to sketch trees and houses, and to the zoo to draw animals. In middle school, he received classical-style training in realist painting, following the influence of the Soviet system. “We drew from plaster casts to understand the basics—forms, shapes, perspective, values, light and shadow, proportions,” he recalls. “Before,

I just spontaneously sketched, but this really helped me improve, to draw correctly, to sharpen my eye.”

THAT IDYLLIC training came to an abrupt halt in 1966, when Chairman Mao launched the Cultural Revolution. Conceived to root out the last traces of capitalism and cement the power of the Communist Party on a massive, nationwide scale, it wreaked havoc on large-scale political and small-scale personal levels alike. Liu’s father, a teacher of ancient Chinese litera-

ture in a local Christian school, was uprooted from his job and sent, along with the entire family, to the countryside for “re-education” in socialist principles.

Meanwhile, Liu’s subject matter changed dramatically. He and other middle school art students were required to create works glorifying the party and its leaders. “I did endless propaganda paintings of Chairman Mao, and the Red Guards, and Mao’s slogans,” he says. “I was lucky to still be painting. At that age, I wasn’t really sensitive to whether my subject was Mao. I just enjoyed using my paintbrush. I was happy. And I could still do landscape painting outside of school time.”

He also managed, for the first time in his life, to expand his horizons. In 1967, he and a friend paid an extended visit to Liu’s older sister, who was living in the far west of China. “The costumes and lifestyles there were quite different from Guangzhou,” he remembers. “That was my first exposure to other cultures. It was a great inspiration to me. It opened my eyes.”

Artistic glorification of the Chairman did not, however, guarantee him a future in his preferred career. Following the Cultural Revolution’s strict egalitarian principles, and possibly in retaliation for wholly imagined slights against the state by his intellectual father, Liu was assigned to work in a machine factory after graduation from high school. But he did manage to leaven the daily drudgery by joining a local art group and painting in his spare time.

When the decade-long oppression began to ease in 1972, Liu learned that his hometown’s prestigious Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts was accepting applications. He prepared a portfolio for submission, only to learn that he not only needed permission from his factory to apply but also that unfounded rumors about his father’s political past might block his way. However, with the stalwart support of one of his teachers, Zhang Ton, Liu finally received the factory’s consent, cleared his father’s name, and won admission.

“It was a wonderful experience,” he says of his three years at the academy. After graduation in 1975, the state put him in charge of organizing meetings for the workers’ union and painting portraits of Chairman Mao (who died in 1976) in its meeting halls. “And in my spare time,”



Three Generations, oil, 36 x 18.



Hello Buddy, oil, 24 x 18.

he adds, “I was painting for my family, friends, and neighbors.”

Thusly Liu’s life continued for four years. Then, in 1979, he was recommended for and accepted a teaching job in a new pre-college arts program at the Guangzhou Academy. “Finally,” he says, “I was happy. I was teaching and could do any paintings I wanted.” He even took on some freelance work, producing illustrations for textbooks. Those creative years, in turn, led him to embark upon graduate studies at Guangzhou from 1985 to 1987.

As his professional experience grew, Liu increasingly felt a desire to study

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abroad. “In my early thirties I wanted more and more to get to know what was happening outside of China, to visit museums and look at original paintings,” he says. He also faced having to make a five-year work commitment within China if he completed his third year of grad school there. With that in mind, he applied to schools in the United States and was accepted at the Academy of Art College in San Francisco (now the Academy of Art University). Painfully leaving behind his wife, Weizhen Liang, and their 1-year-old son, Liu headed for America.

The adjustment was difficult. At the time, the Bay Area school—now widely respected for its classical training—emphasized a modernist approach to fine art. “That was not my favorite,” says Liu, who opted instead for the school’s outstanding illustration program. Meanwhile, he missed his family desperately. “At that time in China, only powerful people had telephones, so my wife had to go to the home of friends who had a phone, and the cost of a long-distance call was higher than my rent in Guangzhou.”

A year after Liu left for America, his wife and son finally joined him in San Francisco. “After they came, we decided to stay,” he says. The reason was very simple: “We enjoy the freedom. Here there are more choices, for my wife and me and for our son.” (Liu obtained his green card in 1995 and became a U.S. citizen in 1999.)

Liu went on to earn his master of fine arts in 1989, and then worked for four years as an ad agency storyboard artist. Meanwhile, he painted oils during evenings and weekends and began exhibiting at local shows. But making the move to painting full time proved a challenge. “Most baby-boomer Chinese art-



Peace of Himalayan, oil, 24 x 36.

ists didn't have any sense about selling our work," he says. "I had no idea about galleries, no direction. But gradually I became more knowledgeable."

A **TURNING** point came in 1995, when Liu traveled to Tibet, an area he had first visited eight years before. "I saw the beautiful snowcapped mountains, the peaceful pastures, and the most wonderful nomadic people there," he says, his voice still hushed with wonder. "Those people stayed in my heart, and I felt that if I could communicate my passion for them, people in America would want the paintings."

Back in the garage studio of his East Bay home, Liu reviewed the countless sketches and photographs from his trip, working his way from basic composition drawings to small-scale value and color studies to full canvases measuring as large as three feet by five feet. Filled with keen observation and deep passion, and executed with finely trained skill, the resulting paintings quickly gained notice, winning top Oil Painters of America awards for Liu in one regional and two national juried exhibitions during 1996 alone. Respected galleries signed him up. At the age of 44 his career as a fine artist was finally launched.

Travel, and the locals with whom it brings Liu into contact, remains a cornerstone of his creative approach. In all, he has now made six trips to Tibet. He travels the country roads of America, too, recording reference images of cowboys and Native Americans he encounters on journeys with his wife, a former playwright who became a professional painter herself after beginning serious studies under his tutelage in 1998. "We love the West," he says. "And sometimes you can see similarities between the native people in America and the native people in China."

Meanwhile, in China, Liu has won respect and renown equal to what he enjoys in the States. Indeed, the Tianjin People's Fine Arts Publishing House has, to date, published two large-format, full-color volumes of his work, describing him in their subtitles as "The Overseas Oil Painter of China."

It's a rare and admiring distinction for a man who, while living through so many years of his birth nation's tumultuous history, struggled resolutely to reach his destiny as an artist. "To me," he concludes, "expressing universal humanity, the human spirit, that is the core of my art." And, by extension, that deeply human spirit is the core of Huihan Liu himself. ❖



Peach Season, oil, 24 x 18.

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