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Zhou Hua's Visions of Tibet

By WANG YING

ZHOU Hua grew up in Lhasa, capital of Tibet Autonomous Region, where she embarked on her painting career and has since worked as an independent artist. Her works are themed on personal observations of life in Tibet.

Focus on Tibet

Zhou's works portray the people and scenarios in Tibet she has known during the 30 or more years she has lived in the region. Tibet is her world.

Zhou Hua's father is also a painter. His love for Tibet brought him to Lhasa more than three decades ago, when Zhou Hua was four years old. Although fluent in Tibetan, she has not fully as-

simulated local diet and living habits, and is hence conscious of her Han origins.

Zhou's father, whose forte is traditional Chinese landscape, schooled her in the fundamentals of painting. After entering Tibet University she specialized in oils.

Schoolchildren in China learn Western art techniques, such as sketches, line drawings and gouache, as it is difficult for them to understand

and master the artistic conceptions of traditional Chinese painting. This is why Zhou Hua chose to study oils. The fast-drying egg-tempera medium of painting preceded oils. The 15th-century Dutch painter Jan Van Eyck is regarded as the father of oil painting in the Western World, having mastered the technique and excelled in the Netherlandish style.

In November 2012 Zhou Hua accepted an invitation to Amsterdam to hold an art exhibition on the theme of Tibetan faces, a main focus of her artistic creations. Her works in tribute to the stark beauty of the Tibetan people transfixed the art lovers that came to her exhibition.

Authentic Images

As a child, Zhou often accompanied her father to Jokhang Monastery. In wintertime, she would

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Tibet is the sole theme of Zhou Hua's works.



see pilgrims on Barkhor Street, the main Tibet thoroughfare, wearing clothes that denoted the various regions in Tibet they came from. They made their way on the journey to Lhasa from their homes in a series of prostrations every three and a half steps. It would consequently take anything from three or four months to a year to complete. The leather aprons they wore to protect their legs were shiny and patched from their constant prostrations, and their foreheads bruised and scarred from touching the ground. On arriving at the monastery, they would be radiant and at the same time humble upon receiving *hada* – white shawls betokening good wishes.

As a teenager, Zhou Hua would sit on the square and sketch. She later used a camera rather than sketchpad to capture the images around her, and did research in her studio to perfect details in preparation for executing painted portrayals of her vision. Over the years her oils have immortalized the pilgrims and everyday people coming to make their devotions at Jokhang Monastery.

Depicting real life, whether in Western fine arts or Eastern classical tradition, is a huge challenge. Endeavors, particularly in the West, to depict true life are apparent throughout art history. This is Zhou Hua's main mission.

Zhou Hua leaves Lhasa at least once a year to spend time in other parts of Tibet, such as the pastures in the north. Living among herders, clad in layers of clothes that help them withstand the harsh plateau climate, inspires and spurs her artistic creativity.

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She spent three winters with respected photographers in the Kangba area of Tibet. Children there wear robes made from sheep hides to protect them in freezing temperatures. Happy, hardy and slow to cry, they are brought up to show respect for nature and the unknown world.

In her *Shepherdess* series of paintings, Zhou used shades of gray, in contrast to the denser shades of blue and red that normally feature in her works, to express empathy and care. One painting is of goats hiding in a russet brown ravine while a girl, her braids secured with a turquoise ornament, sits on the ground holding a lamb.

These works inspired the *Little Lama* series. It is a tradition in Tibetan areas to send boys to monasteries. This ensures they have a good education and become versed in Buddhist doctrines. Zhou Hua has been to many monasteries. They are the source of her images of novitiate monks in red robes in which she combines the devout ethos of these temples with the pure innocence of her figures.

Artistic Passion

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A painting from Zhou's *Little Lama* series.



A painting from Zhou's *Shepherdess* series.

over a decade. Her early customers were mainly from overseas. Several European art dealers have shown interest in her works and held exhibitions of them. Over the past two years more Chinese art collectors have begun buying her works.

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Oil painting is one genre of art that has confronted challenges from computer design and photography. It took 500 years to reach maturity in the West, and many painters believe oils have exhausted their potential for further development. As oil painting became an aspect of Chinese art only a century ago, however, it is still a rising trend here.

Zhou Hua now understands the profound meaning of traditional Chinese painting to which her father is dedicated, but remains committed to oil painting. She feels there is room for growth in her artistic expression but has no idea what direction it will take.

She feels that the future is distant and the reality onerous, and so occupies herself with what she loves most – portraying the Tibetan people in oils. ■