# Jove Wang:

## Thinking Big, Painting Big

Students learned in a recent California workshop that the process of developing large paintings involves doing extensive research, making numerous studies, and bringing each area of the picture to the same level of completion.

—

**by Molly Siple**

—

Wang began his demonstration with a discussion of his compositional sketch.

Photos: Bill Dow, Van Nuys, California

**OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE**

Wang explained details of his painting technique in his studio where the workshop was held.

**OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW**

Wang is an animated workshop instructor who is passionate about teaching and leads his classes with great earnestness and energy.

**Jove Wang explained to the 10 workshop students who recently assembled in his Alhambra, California, studio that the primary reason for creating large oil paintings is the potential for expressing a sense of power. Big formats afford an opportunity to paint important subjects such as epic, historical, and biblical themes; allegories; mythological stories; and other types of complex imagery.**

In this workshop, one student used the large canvas to paint stately Masai warriors, another to paint an imposing double portrait, and another to show a contemporary Afghani classroom filled with girls enjoying their newly granted right to education.

Wang began teaching classes on large-scale oil paintings several years ago, in part because he was gaining an international reputation for his own massive figure compositions. Artists in the United States wanted to understand how he conceived and executed the monumental pictures he created while living in China and that he continued to develop after immigrating to the United States. Those who aspired to go beyond the standard 18"-x-24" and 24"-x-36" gallery picture or the 9"-x-12" plein air oil sketch started to request classes with Wang.

The workshop Wang agreed to teach last fall extended over 10 consecutive days of hard work and artistic breakthroughs. Throughout the daily sessions, he lectured and advised—with brief statements in English and longer ones in Chinese that were made intelligible thanks to a translator—and he painted a demonstration for the benefit of both the 10 students and *Workshop* readers. In turn, the participating students gave their all as they tackled huge canvases while violin music played in the background.

Wang began the workshop by explaining that students would be introduced to an approach, not actually completing a large oil painting. The focus was on the thought process required for working big, the necessary steps to take in developing a composition for a large format, and the goals to keep in mind as one's painting progressed. He stressed that the preparation phase of the process was especially important for producing a successful painting.

Wang pointed out that the first step in producing a large work is gathering information about the subject matter, preferably in photographs taken by the artists for the specific purpose of developing a large painting. Those photographs, and various sketches developed from life, would be combined into a design concept. The instructor also asked students to come to the workshop prepared to develop three schemes for large paintings. He gave a tip for taking the necessary photos as source material: After taking a shot of the actual subject, such as a group of people, zoom out to capture the overall environment and zoom in for close-ups of faces and hands. All that extra information would be needed to fill up and complete the large work.

## Making Value Sketches

Once the workshop students found a place to work, they sorted through their photographs and sketches to identify the best combination of source material to work from so they could begin plotting a composition in a charcoal value sketch. Wang recommended they group objects (buildings,

**ABOVE**
Wang's palette revealed his approach to color mixing, which involves pulling warm and cool pigments from opposing sides and mixing them in the middle.

**RIGHT**
Wang made the rounds to review the students' paintings and advise them on what needed correcting.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**
Wang, with the aid of translator Peggy Chang, ended the workshop with a half-day critique of student work, exploring what the students had learned and what was holding them back in their paintings.

figures, landscape elements) into larger, somewhat geometric shapes made up of light and dark areas. Negative areas were also reduced to simple geometries. The goal was to simplify the design by grouping forms and eliminating extraneous elements to arrive at a composition containing a few basic geometric shapes, such as a triangle and a circle.

The composition that emerged from this simplification process was then used to determine the details that might be added to the picture. Wang warned students not to place an element in their compositions just because that's where it appeared in a photograph. The source material may inspire the composition but need not determine it. The artist's job is to select, eliminate, move, enlarge, and shrink elements, placing them in shadow or light to create the best design.

According to Wang, a good composition is one with rhythm, contrast, and movement—qualities that symmetry can sometimes destroy. One way to correct a symmetrical arrangement, he told students, was to cover some of the centered object with an overlapping shape. Another potential problem is that shapes of similar size and geometry can deaden the rhythm of a composition. The solution in that situation would be to alter the shapes or rearrange them to enliven the design.

## Developing the Color Sketch

Painting at least one color sketch of the image was the next assignment given to the workshop participants. Wang asked that the study be a small, simplified version of the picture envisioned for the larger canvas. He said the students now had the opportunity to resolve issues of warm and cool color choices and to further develop the composition by deciding which dominant edges of forms should be made hard or soft. He also pointed out that this was the time to check the balance of contrasting values and to consider elements of the picture when it was easy to reject or accept them. As Wang pointed out, the color sketch was the time to experiment before working on a large canvas, when major changes would require more work and cause more problems.

As expected, these preliminary steps kept the students occupied during the first morning and during most of the first day of the workshop. Even the students who had worked on studies before the workshop had work to do when Wang suggested changes to their designs. For example, one student was advised to rearrange the figures in her color sketch of dancers in order to create two distinct groups that would establish a more interesting rhythm. Wang also showed the class another student's color sketch as an excellent example of how to prepare for the larger canvas.

## Moving to the Large Canvas

As Wang's students faced the daunting expanse of their large canvases, he told them to begin by roughing in the overall composition as they had designed it in their small sketches. He advised them to work on the major shapes rather than on one item at a time as isolated elements. He also recommended using large brushes and loose brushstrokes to map out the major areas of color.

One problem that soon became evident to Wang as he toured the class was that several of the students lost the proportional relationships of their original sketches when they moved to the larger scale. He explained that although he wasn't asking them to reproduce the original composition on a bigger scale, he did want them to maintain the relationships between the negative and positive shapes. The point was to transfer the feeling of the preliminary sketches to the large format. The first sketches were to be used only as reference as the creative process progressed.

When one of the students asked Wang about using a grid to transfer a sketched image section by section, the instructor said he wasn't opposed to doing so, but this approach wasn't required. However, he did recommend making a habit of developing the value and color sketches in a format with the same proportions as the final canvas. He also devoted class time to discussing the importance of exaggeration when painting on a large scale, explaining that there is a certain change in the way the eyes take in a large canvas. For example, the angle at which a road and an adjacent building meet

## Demonstration: Break at Marketplace

### Reference Photo

Wang chose this photo from his travels as the source material for his demonstration because of its strong composition, the way in which the two figures relate, and the opportunity to portray back lighting.

### Step 1

The instructor used an 8"-x-10" sketchbook and vine charcoal to begin developing his preliminary sketch. Looking over his source photo, he marked a rectangle and indicated the basic figure shapes and primary compositional lines. He added a circle to the composition, derived from the cart, to contrast with the triangle. Next he added a horizontal directional line in the upper-right corner of the composition. He told students that all these basic geometric elements would determine the rhythm of the picture.

### Step 2

Next, Wang developed a basic value pattern for his preliminary sketch, joining darks and selecting horizontal shapes for contrast and to imply distance. He also darkened the round wagon wheel to contrast with the triangle, which helped determine the rhythm of the final painting. Wang encouraged the students to let their feelings flow as they developed their value sketches and to be very passionate about what they were creating, even at this stage.

### Step 3

Wang stayed with the value sketch a half-hour—indicating that this was a very important stage not to be rushed—and then spent the next hour developing the color sketch. He daubed in the colors with his characteristic deliberate strokes and quick lifts of the brush, establishing warm and cool areas and adding notes of warm for faces and hands. Next, he added whites within the large dark shape to indicate the backlighting of the scene. Wang explained to students that the challenge of a backlit scene is finding color variations within the large shadow area.

### Step 4

Adding color notes came next. For the focal-point figure, Wang decided on a cool color for the shirt to contrast with the warm flesh tone of the face. As he painted, the instructor made rapid marks with his brush, lifting it quickly at the end of each stroke. He also took great care to keep dark pigment (mixed with Liquin) free of any whites, a key to the richness and translucency of his painting style. His palette reflects this requirement, with darks arranged along one side and lights on the other.

(continued...)