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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2011

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TELLING STORIES IN HIS OWN WAY

By Barbara Coyner

Mian Situ remembers his grandfather and the hard times in China very well. And it is, perhaps, the memories of his grandfather and the sacrifices he made that in some way color Situ's paintings. The reflections on those harsh days of the Chinese Cultural Revolution provide the passion and emotion that the California-based oil painter finds essential in his work.

"Those days give me more understanding of the farmers and the rural people," says Situ, who was born in 1953 in a small Cantonese village of 100 households, with many of the families related to one another. "I paint from life experience. I can clearly remember my parents working full days, from early in the morning until late at night. My grandfather took care of us. He was a very kind man, and those were very bad times. We never had enough."

Here Situ digresses, noting that his grandfather once had some amount of economic success, until the Communists abruptly rearranged the government, social order, and economic system. Like other families, Situ's family was eventually routed to a new home, a place within walking distance of the old village, but a million miles from the old ways. Times changed considerably, as Situ's grandfather exchanged the role of family patriarch for the role of family babysitter. "He didn't have a job after the Communists took over," Situ says. "I saw my grandfather sacrifice for us, and he was always doing without. He was so skinny."

Yunnan Market, oil, 38" by 52"

"This is a marketplace in Yunnan Province in Southwest China. The local market is a place where people from the area get together for trading their farm products. It is normally held twice in 10 days. Friends and relatives also make it a social gathering."



Chinatown Merchants, F. S., 1905, oil, 32" by 38"

"For those early Chinese immigrants who were fortunate enough to have family here, they kept their family members close. Their children always helped in the family business."

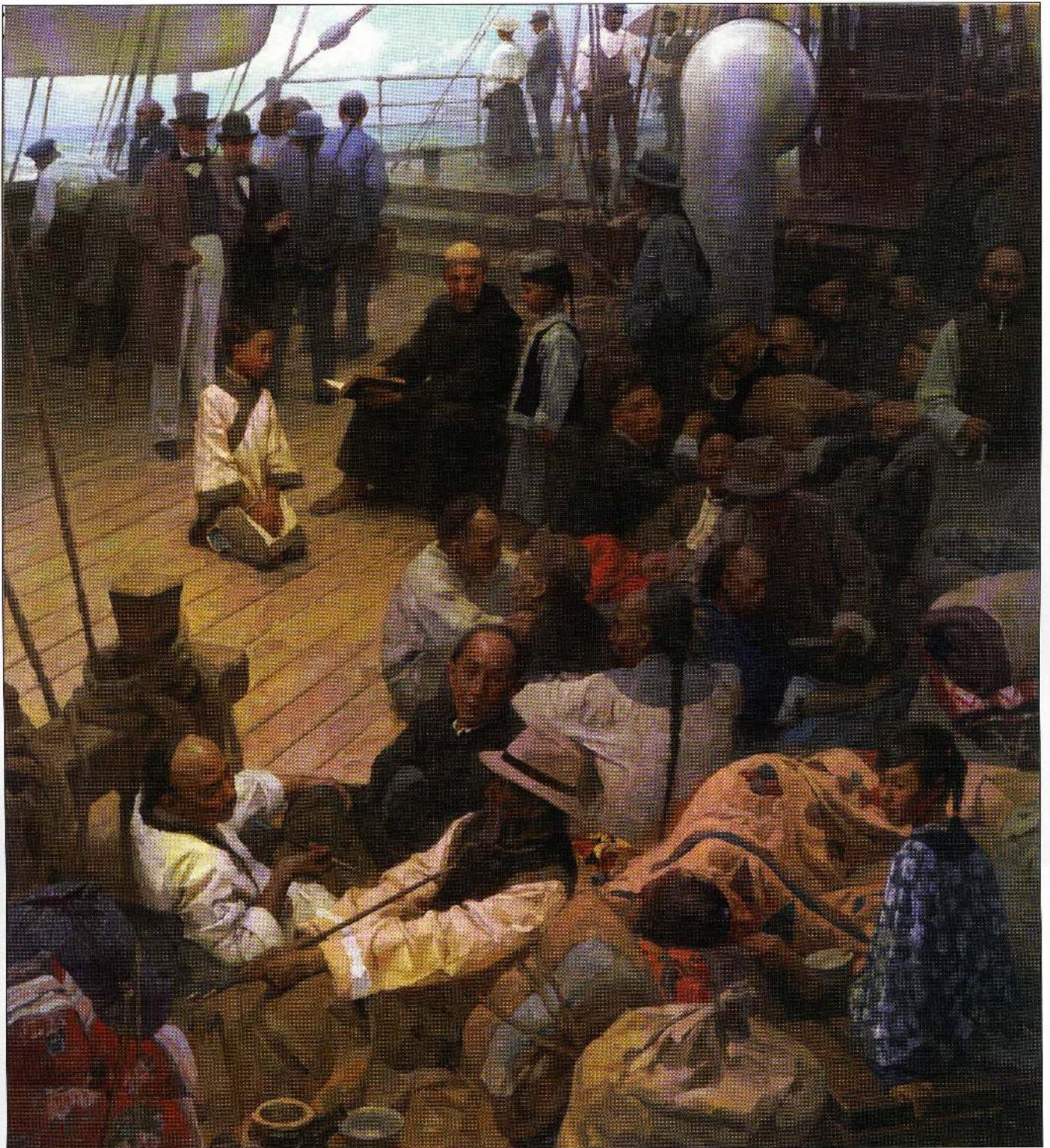
For a man who admits he'd rather paint his feelings than describe them in words, Situ nevertheless conveys strong passion when he talks of his youth. "I miss my childhood," he says. "I miss the old culture. I love the countryside. I can remember sitting in the doorway, and it was so quiet and the birds were singing. It was so peaceful, but things changed so fast."

Yet it was the changes in the Chinese culture that fueled Situ's steady climb into the world of Western art. The seeds of change were planted firmly in his youth.

Once the Cultural Revolution took hold, school was disbanded, and Situ and his friends were cut loose to spend their days outside the classroom. Although he hadn't displayed any artistic tendencies in school, Situ resorted to sketching to pass the time.

"Suddenly, our classes were closed, and I was 13 with nothing to do at the time," he says. "I watched my friends do art, but it was really propaganda. We sketched Mao's portrait as a great leader and tried to make him look like a hero. I thought that was art." Situ laughs at the





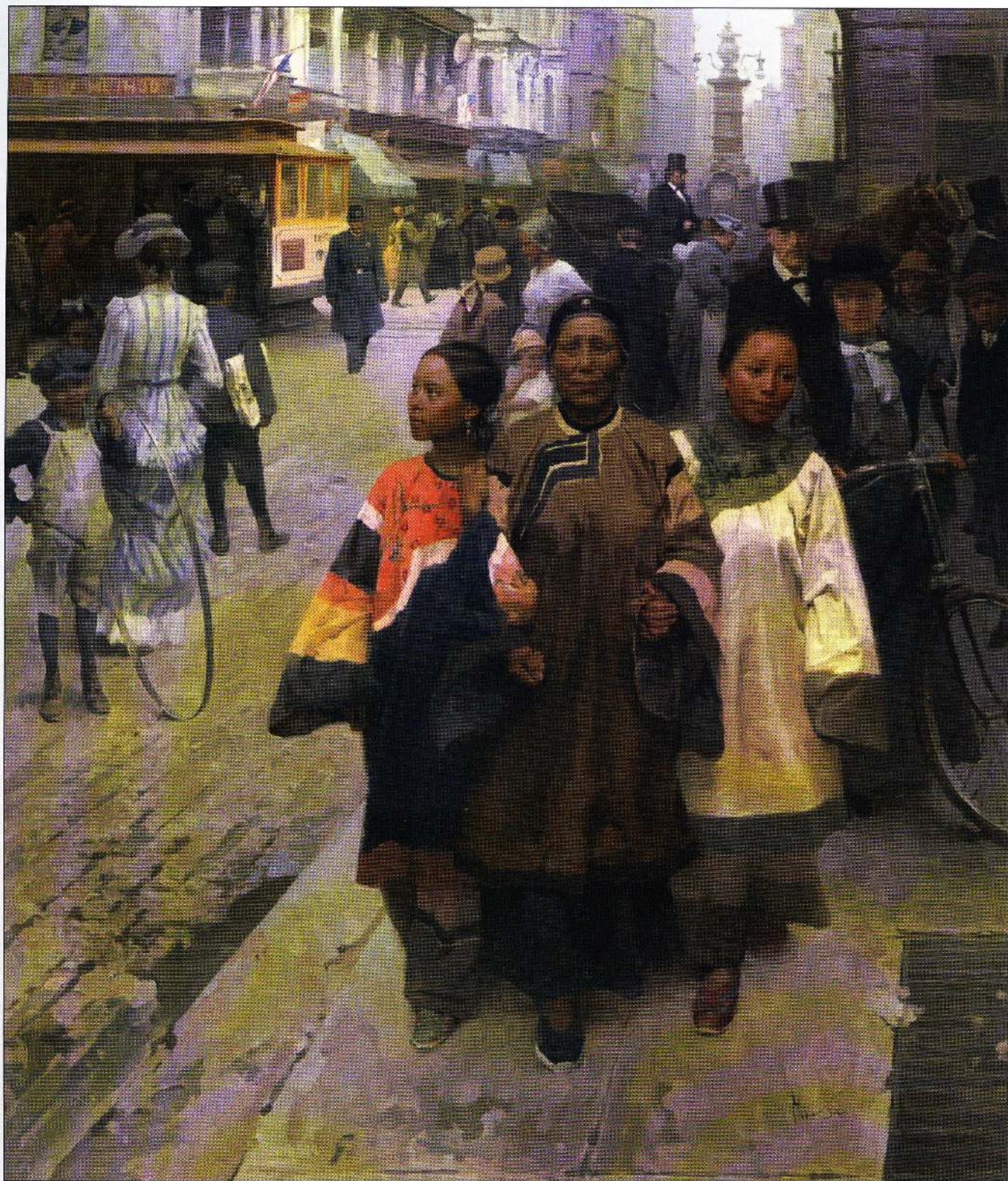
Journey of Hope and Prosperity, P.M.S.S. Great Republic, 1880, oil, 54" by 48"

"During the last half of the 19th century, thousands of rural Chinese emigrants booked passage aboard ships from their homeland to America. This was an arduous month-long voyage, and they were restricted to the upper deck, unless weather conditions forced them below. Most were uneducated, hard-working people looking for a better life."

memory now, but the circumstances ultimately helped to develop his figurative art skills.

"At the time, if you could draw, you did Mao's portrait," he says. "But then I found books about France and about Europe, and I saw that art was not just pictures of some leaders." Because the art of some of the various European masters had influenced Russian art under the Czars' leadership, both the Russian and Chinese Communists allowed some European influences to filter into the new regimes. Situ eagerly sought out the Western styles and influences that were available to him, and he became his own teacher.

As Situ's sketchbook branched out beyond portraits of Chairman Mao, he opted for the next step: university training. Applying to the Guangzhou Institute of Fine Arts, he once again felt the hand of his grandfather helping him along, although this time that help was unintentional. "College was kind of a lucky thing for me," he recalls. "Not everyone

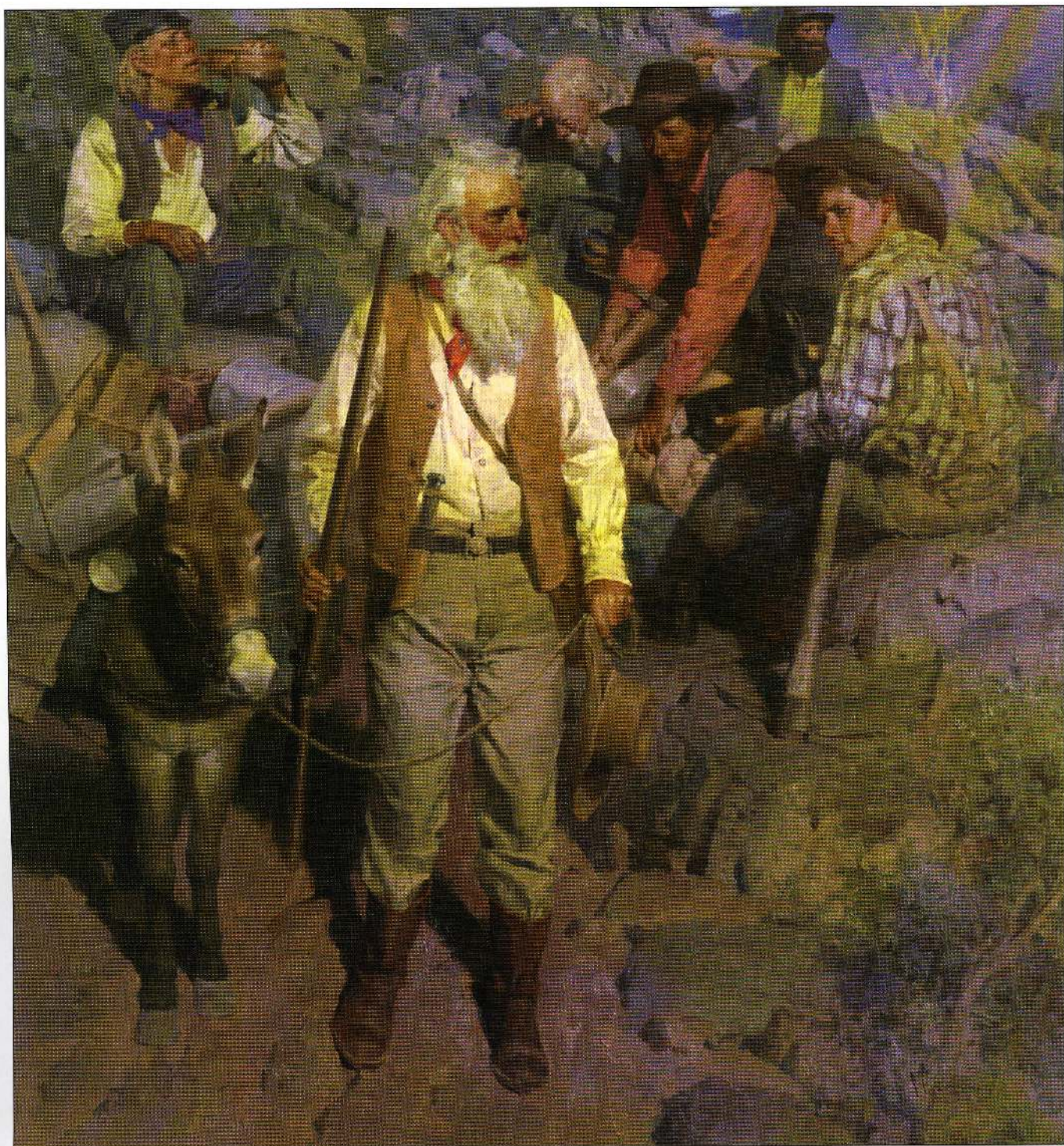


Convergence of Cultures, oil, 60" by 50"

"When the early Chinese immigrants came to the United States, they were facing a totally different cultural environment. To the Chinese women, it was even more shocking. It took some courage for them to step out of Chinatown."

got in, and they would choose based on family background. My grandfather had become poor, and they loved poor people. Then they would see who had talent, and they picked me. But from there, you had to make your own way and find backers."

The pathway was laid out for Situ and, as he entered formal training, his passion for painting and studying the Western influences only increased. "My teachers were fantastic, even during the Revolution," he says. "You could learn and be honest in expressing yourself. The teachers were real artists themselves and told you what real art was. We had good instructors, and they were very strict."



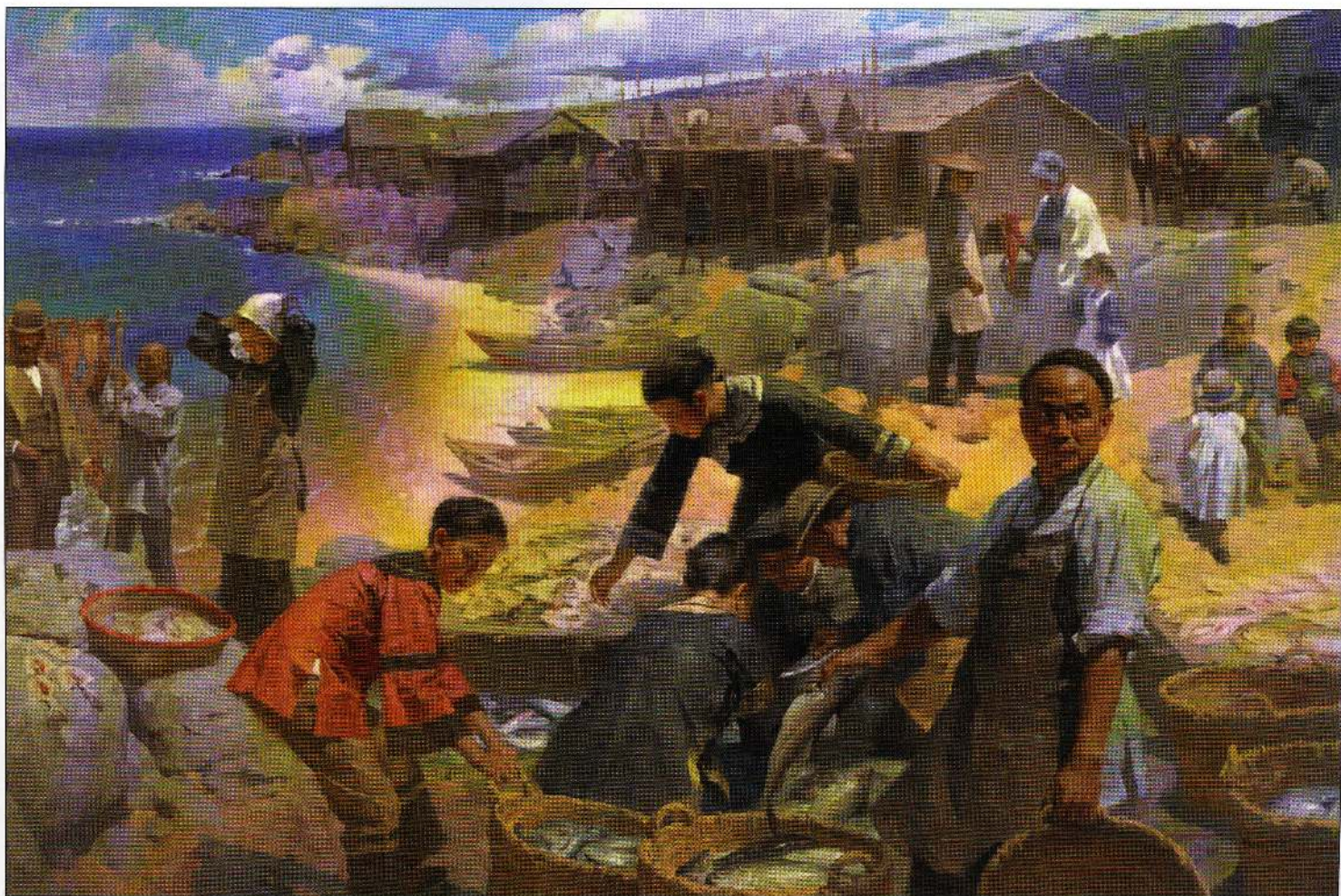
Studying at the institute from 1972 to 1975, and then continuing for his Master Degree from 1978 to 1981, Situ concedes that he studied very little of the ancient art of his homeland. "We didn't do much traditional Chinese art," he says. "Chinese art wasn't that creative, because they tell you what to do. Western art teaches you to observe directly from life, and that sounds much more reasonable to me. You should observe for yourself, not do what another artist says."

After six years as an instructor at Guangzhou, Situ realized he had to get to America and experience art from a true Western perspective. In 1987, he headed to Los Angeles, California, to study the English language and to paint. He found his way to Chinatown, where he could speak his native language, but he also sensed that some of the people never got out of the familiar native culture, because of fear. Sensing adventure, he stepped beyond familiar language and social circles

Move on to Yuba River, oil, 52" by 47"

"With little to show from their present diggings, these less-experienced miners have decided to join this old-timer, who has shared with them the news of a recent major strike at the forks of the Yuba River."

to explore. Because immigration was easier in Canada, he settled in Ontario. "I saw my future in North America," he says now. "In China, you can never choose to paint full-time. I like the freedom here, and to oil paint Western style you have to be here."



Points Along Fishing Village, Monterey, California, 1875, oil, 48" by 72"

"The Chinese living in the fishing villages in Monterey Bay during the 19th century were boat people called Tanka in southern China. They came directly from Guangdong Province in Chinese junks, during the early 1850s and established fishing camps along the California central coast."

Situ's prestige as an artist rose during his years in Ontario, although his first marriage failed. Later, he met Helen; they married in 1995 and now have a 15-year-old daughter, Lisa. By 1998, Situ had decided to settle in the United States and moved to San Dimas, California. With a mix of happy family life and creative influences swarming around him, he concentrated on his painting, exploring new subject matter and techniques. In the Western art world, his star was rising as he was invited into prestigious shows and galleries. A year ago, the family moved to Laguna Beach and now enjoys the amenities of the coastal art Mecca. It's another plus for Situ's painting, and Lisa and Helen have adapted well to the new setting.

Predictably, Situ's past still contributes some of the strongest elements to his work, as he paints real, everyday people, immortalizing their stories in oils. "Passion is the most important thing in art," he says. "Technique is important, but the foundation itself doesn't express anything. But, as they say, without

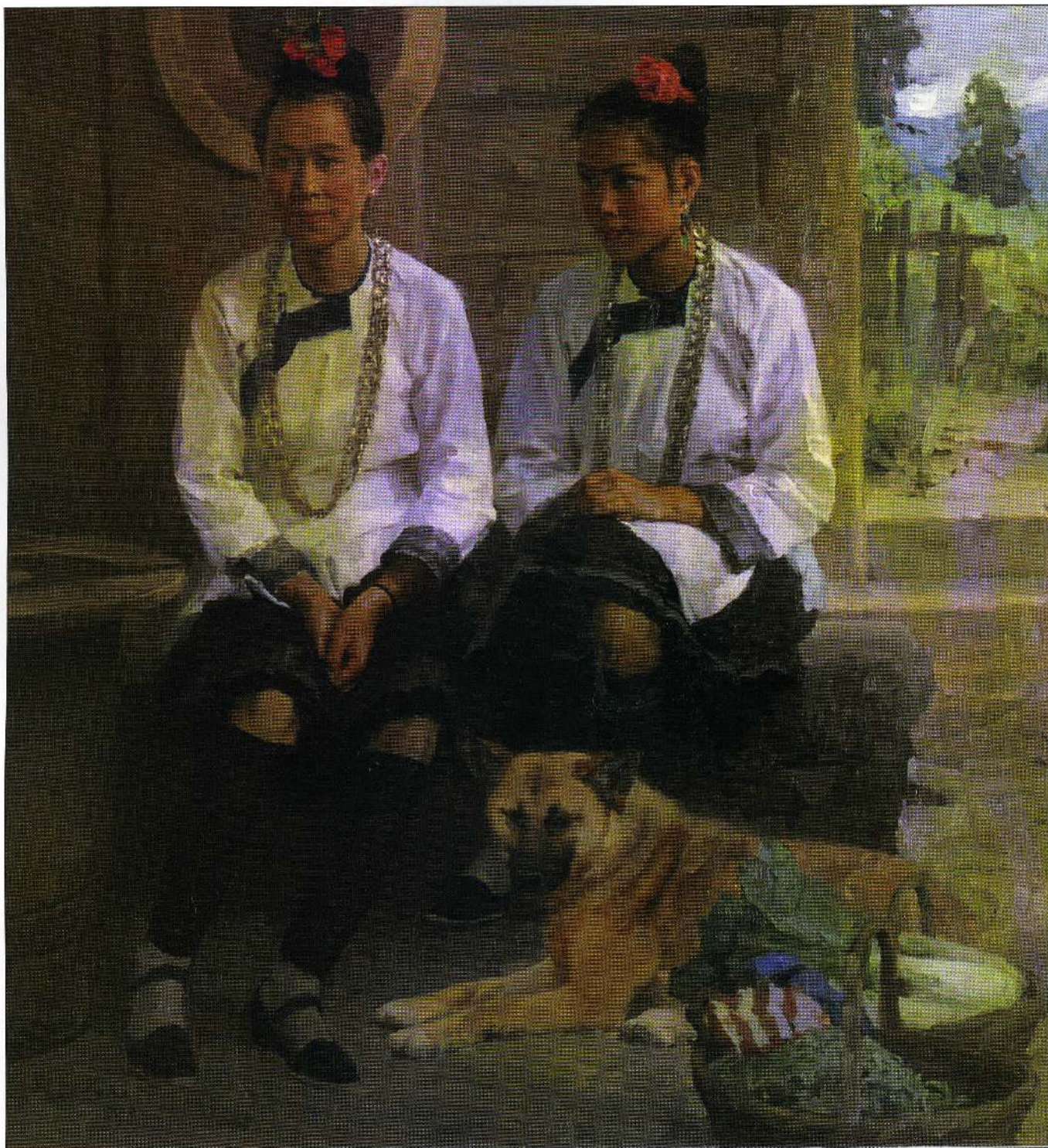
the foundation, there is no house. Emotion is what moves people. It's what's personal to the artist. You have to tell the story in your own way."

Relying mostly on photos, Situ can still be found painting plein air when he has time. But he won't start a painting without the visual elements firmly fixed in his mind. "I never create a figure without a real person," he says. "They are never from my imagination."

Admitting that he feels uncomfortable doing commissions, Situ treasures his freedom of expression. "I am not good with words, but when I use color and shape, I can express an idea," he says. "But I have to have that picture before I start painting. I am always searching for that image to paint. It's that visual element."

Situ remains drawn to the old culture back in China, visiting his homeland often. When he can, he prefers going to locations that still reflect the old traditions, the busy market scenes, weathered faces, and less tourist-influenced rituals of the countryside. The Yunnan Province, for example, is home to 25 different tribes, each with their own customs and dress. The marketplace brings the tribes together and it is there that Situ sees the old ways still in existence.

"Yunnan Province is so unique and you can see how people dressed 100 years ago," he says. Situ also travels to the places in the United States, such as the California gold rush country, where once the Chinese mined for gold and helped to build railroads. Those who returned to China with American earnings stuffed in their pockets once referred to the United States as the "golden mountain," because they came for the gold. Those early immigrants fascinate



Festival Time in Guizhou Province, oil, 26" by 24"

Situ, as he paints their rich histories of hard work and social struggle.

"Before I came to the United States, I didn't know that much about it, or even where California was," Situ says. "An older relative of mine never got out of Chinatown, and she felt everything outside of Chinatown was dangerous. But I feel, with the convergence of the cultures, we get courage from each other. We come from different worlds, and we need that courage."

"Dong and Miao people are two major tribes of the minority living in Guizhou Province. They keep their traditions alive for generations."

Feeling at home in the United States, one still suspects that the spirit of Mian Situ's grandfather remains a strong presence, as the 57-year-old artist paints. Reaching further into his mind and heart for the passion and emotion to express himself with his brush, Situ sums up his quest, saying, "Painting is the favorite way I can express myself and, when I get close to getting it right, I am the happiest." 

Barbara Coyner is a writer living in Princeton, Idaho.