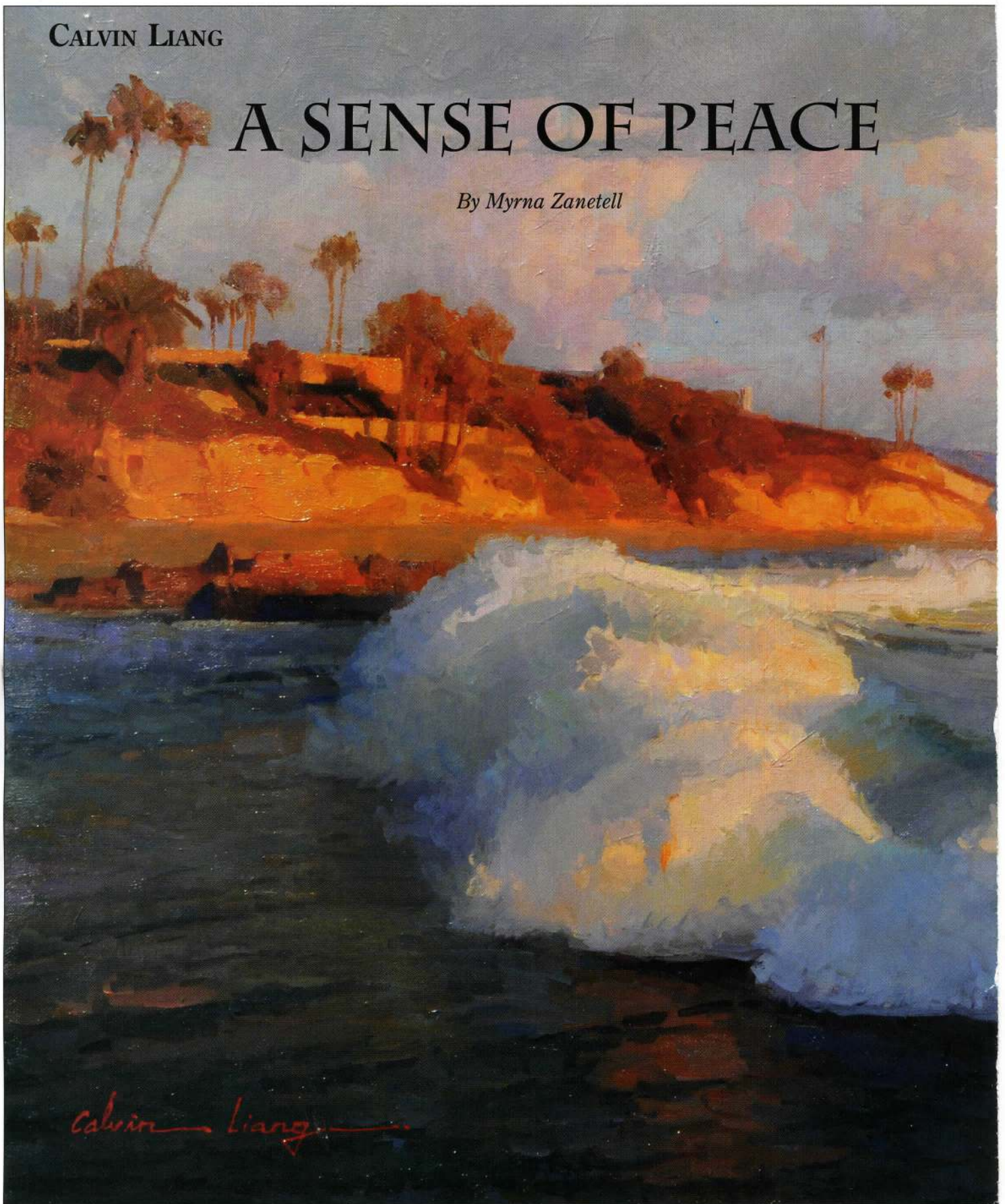
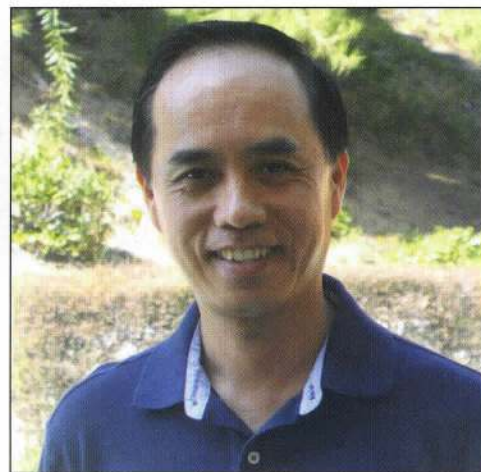


CALVIN LIANG

A SENSE OF PEACE

By Myrna Zanetell





When Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution came to an end in 1976, China began to open its doors to the West. During the following four decades, several well-trained and highly talented artists journeyed across the ocean to America. Landscapist Calvin Liang was among the most gifted of those newcomers.

From the time he was old enough to hold a pencil, Liang knew that he wanted to be an artist. Achieving that goal, however, would require patience and determination; it wasn't until he was almost 40 that his dream became a reality.

By the time he was 12, Liang's career choice seemed promising. His parents arranged for him to study art with a family friend, but Chinese politics intervened and took him in another direction. Like many other urban youths, Liang was sent to a farm, where he spent his days tending cattle. His art became an escape from that dreary work and, before long, it dawned on him that his artistic talents might provide a way for him to better his life and that of his family.

Motivated by that belief, Liang applied for admission to a program to study set design at the Canton Opera Institute. Twenty would-be artists took the entrance exam; Liang was one of only two chosen for the prestigious program. Liang excelled at the institute, and was sent to study at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts. For the following six years, he designed and painted opera sets that often depicted serene, Chinese landscapes. The knowledge he gained while doing so would become the foundation for his future.

Liang went on to become one of the opera's principal set designers and, although he found the work rewarding, he still dreamed of a life as a fine artist. Longing to see original works by international greats such as Whistler, Sargent, and

Waves in Laguna Beach, oil, 18" by 24"

"I wanted to capture the breeze and the high waves in Laguna Beach."



Wyeth, paintings he had only seen in books, he applied for a student visa to study art at the Academy of Fine Art in San Francisco, California. Once there, in order to supplement his meager budget, he would set up his easel at Fisherman's Wharf, where he painted portraits and landscapes and sold them to tourists.

During the following five years, Liang continued to hone his skills—in both art and language—by taking classes in painting and English. He also changed his name. “When I went to apply for a social security card, friends advised me to choose a more English sounding name in place my given name of Ge,” he says. “After turning down several options, someone suggested Calvin. I was out of time to make another choice, so Calvin it was, though I didn’t even know how to spell it.”

As Liang began to settle into life in his newly adopted country, he married Cindy, a Chinese immigrant

he met while studying to become a U. S. citizen. His paintings also began to sell more consistently, but his big break would not come until 1997, when a representative from Walt Disney Studios offered him a job in the company’s animation department. It was an offer that Liang quickly accepted.

Taking advantage of Liang’s talent for using color, Disney assigned him the task of creating backgrounds for movies that included “The Little Mermaid” and “Cinderella.” He later moved on to work at Nickelodeon, where he spent five years doing animation for the hit children’s show “SpongeBob SquarePants.” He became best known for creating the character of Painty, a talking portrait of a pirate, who opens every show.

In his spare time, Liang continued to paint scenes along the local California coastline and at destination spots such as Catalina Island. Soon, his work was featured in local galler-

ies. Sales of his paintings quickly increased, and his work was featured in solo exhibitions. In 2002, Liang realized it was time to say goodbye to SpongeBob and focus on launching his career as a full-time artist.

Inspired by the ever-changing vistas along the California coast, Liang quickly built a reputation for his painterly, marine imagery: harbors filled with sleek sailboats, tranquil sunsets with light shimmering over secluded coves and inlets, and powerful scenes of crashing waves. Those scenes remain a favorite for Liang, who makes regular trips up and down the coastline, from

Above - Waiting for Sail in Seattle Harbor, oil, 16" by 20"

"The warm light and shadow on the boat's sails were my inspiration for this work."

Opposite - Mission San Jose, San Antonio, oil, 18" by 24"

"The mission walls, glowing with sunlight, urged me to make this painting."



Calvin Liang



Venice, oil, 24" by 36"

"I was always curious about the architectural style of Venice. I could not contain my excitement to paint this subject!"

Laguna Beach north to Monterey Bay and Carmel, with sketchbook and camera in hand. He uses the sketches he does on site as the basis for larger works that he completes in his studio.

"I simply love the feel of the wind and the smell of the salt water," Liang says. "Being by the ocean takes away the pressure of working towards deadlines. Here, I am relaxed and happy, and I think I am able to translate that sense of peace into my paintings."

Seeking to broaden his horizons,

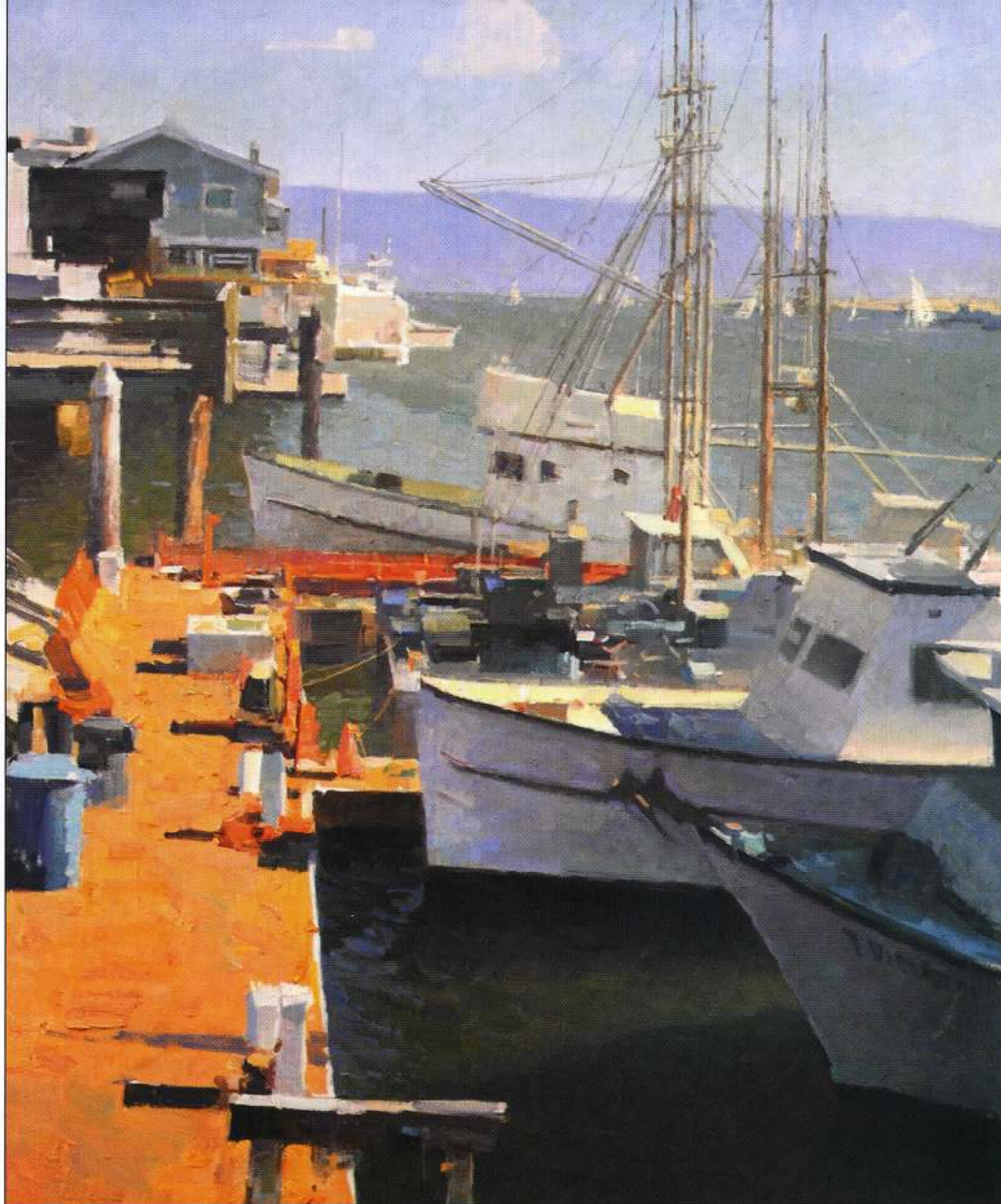
in 2003 Liang joined a group of 21 well-known artists on a painting trip to Arizona's Canyon de Chelly. From that point on, he began to expand his subject matter, as he continued to spend time in the Southwest and began to travel to foreign locations such as Italy and Spain. Before long, Liang's oeuvre included stark vistas of Monument Valley and the Grand Canyon, the diverse imagery of canals and bridges in Venice, European cathedrals and historic homes, Spanish missions of San Jose and Conception in San Antonio, Texas, and even a rose garden or two.

Liang also has tried his hand at portraiture and figurative work. "I would really love to do more life drawings and portraits, but my

galleries primarily ask for the marine subjects and the Southwestern landscapes," he says. "For me, however, the subject is often secondary. It's really more about the colors, values, shading, light, and shadows that define my technique."

As his work has matured, Liang also has expanded his palette. "In my early years, my palette included about six basic colors," he says. "Now I have expanded that to about 15 to 20 different combinations. However, when I do plein air, or when I travel, I take only the original colors, because traveling lighter is much easier."

Although he had been invited to exhibit his work at the Masters of the American West Show five years



Harbor in Morro Bay, oil, 24" by 30"

"Fishing boats docked in Morro Bay Harbor. Seeing them gave me a glimpse of a fisherman's life at sea."

running and received the 2015 Artists Choice Award, in 2017, Liang decided that, for a time, he preferred to make his work available through gallery shows. His most recent gallery show was East Meets West in May of 2019, during which he shared the spotlight with Hiuhan Liu and Jie Wei Zhou. He also makes time to share his knowledge by conducting workshops at his studio in Corona, California, and at other locations throughout the country.

Liang also has been traveling back to China and recently participated in an exhibition in the region of Guilin. While there, he took time to do some plein air paintings that portray its timeless culture, and traveled to Kiaping, which is about two hours

from his birthplace of Guangzhou. "I love to paint the countryside in this area: the river, the houseboats, and even the architecture of the houses," he says.

Liang also traveled to a coastal area in northern China. "Even though I am still painting the Pacific Ocean, the scenes are very different," he says. "The fishing boats are much smaller and more traditional. Fishermen in America are always looking for the larger fish, so the boats are more sophisticated, even having freezing equipment to process their catch. In China, they are looking for smaller fish and even crabs. They go out early each morning, and then they bring their fresh catch in to sell at one of the open markets."

With collectors in both China and the United States, Liang has realized his dream of becoming a successful fine artist. One goal remains, however. "I want to develop a style that is truly recognizable, so when collectors come into a room full of paintings, they will be able to say immediately, 'This is a painting by Calvin Liang,'" he says. That kind of recognition should pose no problem. His paintings radiate a distinct sense of happiness and contentment that can only be conveyed by one who is doing exactly what he was born to do. 

Myrna Zanetell is a writer living in El Paso, Texas.