

Life's daily portraits as captured by the brush, pencil and clay of artist Hugh Zeng – an Interview

Written by Jean Bartlett

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Hugh Zeng in his Millbrae shop. November 2017. (Jean Bartlett photo)

"If I could just do my art, I would do the daily life of this society – of the United States," Hugh Zeng said. "Real life is my subject. It's very interesting to me. I believe that art has to be from the life around you – the everyday activities, the people around you. It is that direct contact and that direct experience. Historical events are very interesting to me as well."

Hugh is the owner of Millbrae Frame-Art on the El Camino in Millbrae, California. From his shop, he also runs his art school, generally teaching individual lessons to anywhere from 12 to 15 students, ranging in age from 5 through 80. He teaches each student in accordance with that student's need, but the list of arts he excels at is quite extensive.

He works in oils, watercolor, acrylic and pencil. He makes ceramics and sculptures and specializes in Chinese calligraphy. As a portrait artist, he is frequently commissioned. This is also true of his sculptures which he begins in clay and then casts in bronze. Years ago he did a mural of the Grand Canyon, as it traveled from day to night, inside the AT&T headquarters in Pleasanton, California. He has worked as a graphic artist for a Chinese newspaper. Not long after his arrival in California, he worked for several animation companies as a background designer including: Colossal Pictures and Fox Animation Studios. His credits include the 1992 fantasy film, "*FernGully: The Last Rainforest*."

Additionally over the past 30 plus years, Hugh has colored and restored antique maps and prints for Prints Old & Rare, (<https://printsoldandrare.com>), located in Pacifica, California.

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Hugh Zeng – Capturing life's portraits through brush, pencil and clay (page 2)



This color steel engraving by James Smillie shows San Francisco's Golden Gate from Telegraph Hill. Titled "1873 View of the Golden Gate," it is one of thousands of works hand-restored by Hugh Zeng for Prints Old & Rare.

I first met Hugh in July of 2012. I was writing arts and features for Victoria Monroe's "*Peninsula Progress*." This beautifully mastered weekly community newspaper that covered the San Francisco Peninsula cities/towns of Brisbane, Colma, Daly City, Millbrae, San Bruno and South San Francisco, was in need of a Millbrae story and the goal was to feature a Millbrae artist. My first Internet search produced a seven-word result: "artist Hugh Zeng, owner, Millbrae Frame-Art." There were no online samples of his art to look at, no website, no Facebook page, no biography. I drove to Millbrae.

His shop is small but large enough to house all the product and equipment needed to have a successful framing business. But then there was the wonder, the kind of wonder that holds you in place when the extraordinary presents itself. Throughout his shop were the works of a master artist – one who could have been the top graduate of the famous portrait artist John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), if it were not for the impossibilities of time. Like Sargent, Hugh's work often holds allegiance to the light and color of Impressionism, yet at the same time, presents the rich tonal palette of 17th century realist painters such as Anthony Van Dyck and Diego Velázquez. And like Sargent, Mr. Zeng's art is filled with "subject" insight.



"The Liberation of Dr. Sun Yat-sen," oil on canvas by Hugh Zeng.

Born in 1866, Dr. Sun Yat-sen was the first president and the founding father of the Republic of China. The medical doctor was also a writer, revolutionary and a philosopher. In the early 1900s, Dr. Yat-sen was held "incommunicado" for 17 days in a detention shed which was the precursor to the Detention Center on San Francisco's Angel Island. This painting by Hugh Zeng represents that time in history.

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"The Liberation of Dr. Sun Yat-sen" took the artist two months to complete.

"I did a lot of studying to put it together. I checked old photos. I went to Angel Island. I visited the museum. The painting represents a specific date: 1907. You don't want it too young or too old."



Hugh Zeng at work in his shop, July of 2011.

"The first layer is important," Hugh explained, "as it gives you a direction of how to improve and further construct the art piece."



In this photo taken in 2011, the artist is at work on the wedding portrait of Hermina and Yee Ong.

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The completed wedding portrait of Hermina and Yee Ong by Hugh Zeng, 2011.

"I am a self-taught artist. The fact that I am an artist is sort-of by accident."

Born in Canton, China, Hugh grew up during China's brutal and decade-long Cultural Revolution. His parents were intellectuals and they wanted their son to have a good education but given the time, that was not a possibility. Per government dictates, at the age of 14 the high school student was sent to the countryside to learn farming. "No one stayed with their parents."

"There was no real education. I was good at calligraphy and the school asked me to do propaganda things. Later they needed someone to do paintings and so I did propaganda posters of work soldiers and of the leaders, including Mao. We learned at work how to do art. You watched others do it and then tried to do it."

Hugh was an art natural.

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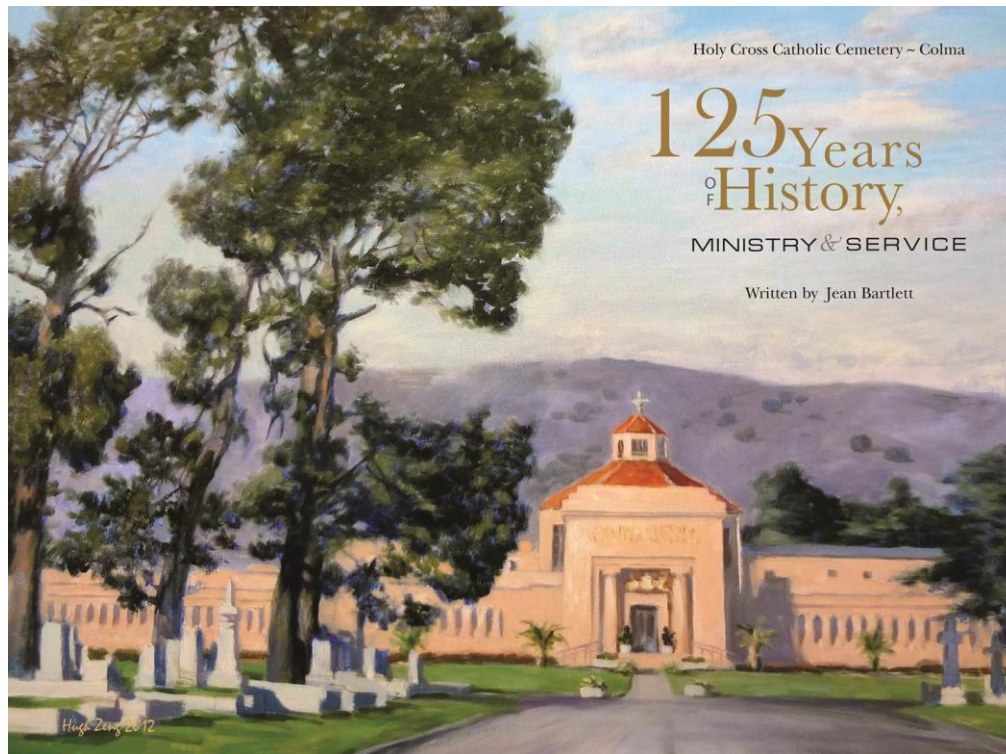
"Western art was considered capitalism. The Impressionists were off limits. It was very hard to learn. But we wanted to learn. We wanted to have formal training but it wasn't allowed. We would look for art books and we found some very good ones. We tried to collect copies of certain artist's works. Then we followed them step by step. We did all of this in secret.

"I studied Western artists and John Singer Sargent is my idol. I also studied Russian classical, realistic style artists such as Ilya Repin and Vasily Surikov. My style is realistic and they all influenced me.

"My high school friends and I went to cemeteries to find skulls that were just lying on the ground. We would find one, clean it and then draw it to learn its structure. We didn't have the luxury of live models.

"I started doing a lot of artwork. I started painting. But I couldn't do it in public. At the school every month we had a big area for the paintings and the slogans, and some articles about the revolution. I was put in charge of it. Actually from that I learned how to handle things like deadlines. But there was no other education so it became my major thing. In 1978 things changed. A few years later I moved to the United States."

Most of Hugh's works are in private collections except for the painting in the reception area of Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma, California. (<http://www.holycrosscemeteries.com/locations/colma.htm>.) In the summer of 2012, I was commissioned by the Cemetery to write a historic guide book in honor of their 125th anniversary. (More than 370,000 have been laid to rest at Holy Cross.) Hugh's artistry, his love of history and (I learned) his fascination with cemeteries – made Hugh the choice for the book's cover.



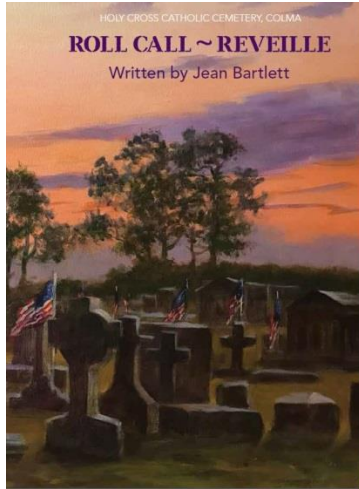
From the back of the book to the front of the book, this is Hugh Zeng's 2012 cover-to-cover artwork for "Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery ~ Colma: 125 Years of History, Ministry & Service." Original work is in the lobby of Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma, CA.

In 2016, Hugh did the cover-to-cover artwork for my second commissioned Cemetery book: "*Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma: Roll Call ~ Reveille*." This book introduces readers to the lives of 55 individuals, now at rest at Holy Cross, who served in wars dating back to the U.S.-Mexican War. Hugh achieved this thought-provoking goal for the project – to paint a sky that serves as a memory of war.

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The front jacket



Hugh Zeng's 2016 stunning artwork for "Roll Call ~ Reveille."

Every visit to the artist's shop reveals new treasures.



This ceramic sushi plate by Hugh Zeng, photographed here against a white background, is titled "Tatami" (Japanese bed). This is the only "Tatami" plate by the artist not sold. "It is a ceramic glaze," Hugh explained. "But in this one, I made a mistake. The night should be dark blue but it became green. With ceramics, you never can be sure what color it will become."

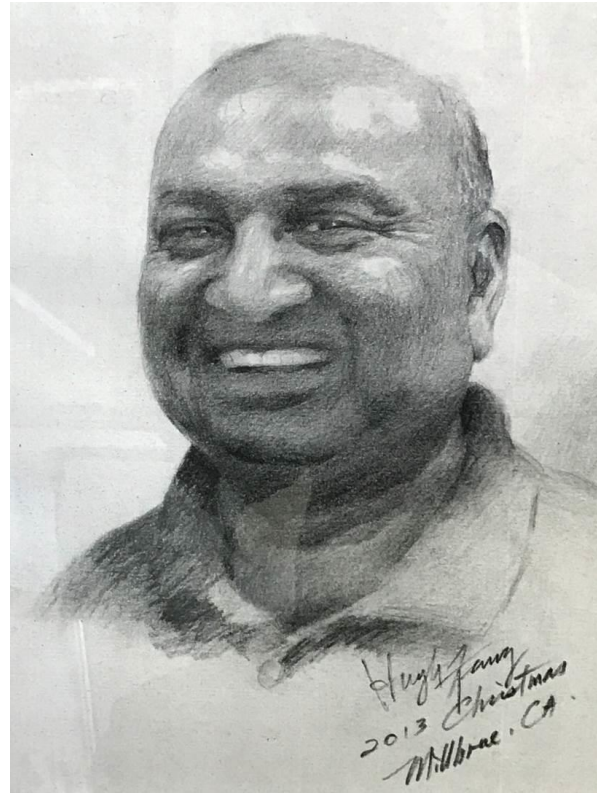
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Portrait by Hugh Zeng.



Portrait by Hugh Zeng.



Hugh Zeng with his painting of baseball legend Willie Mays.

Jean Bartlett 2012 photo

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Portrait by Hugh Zeng.

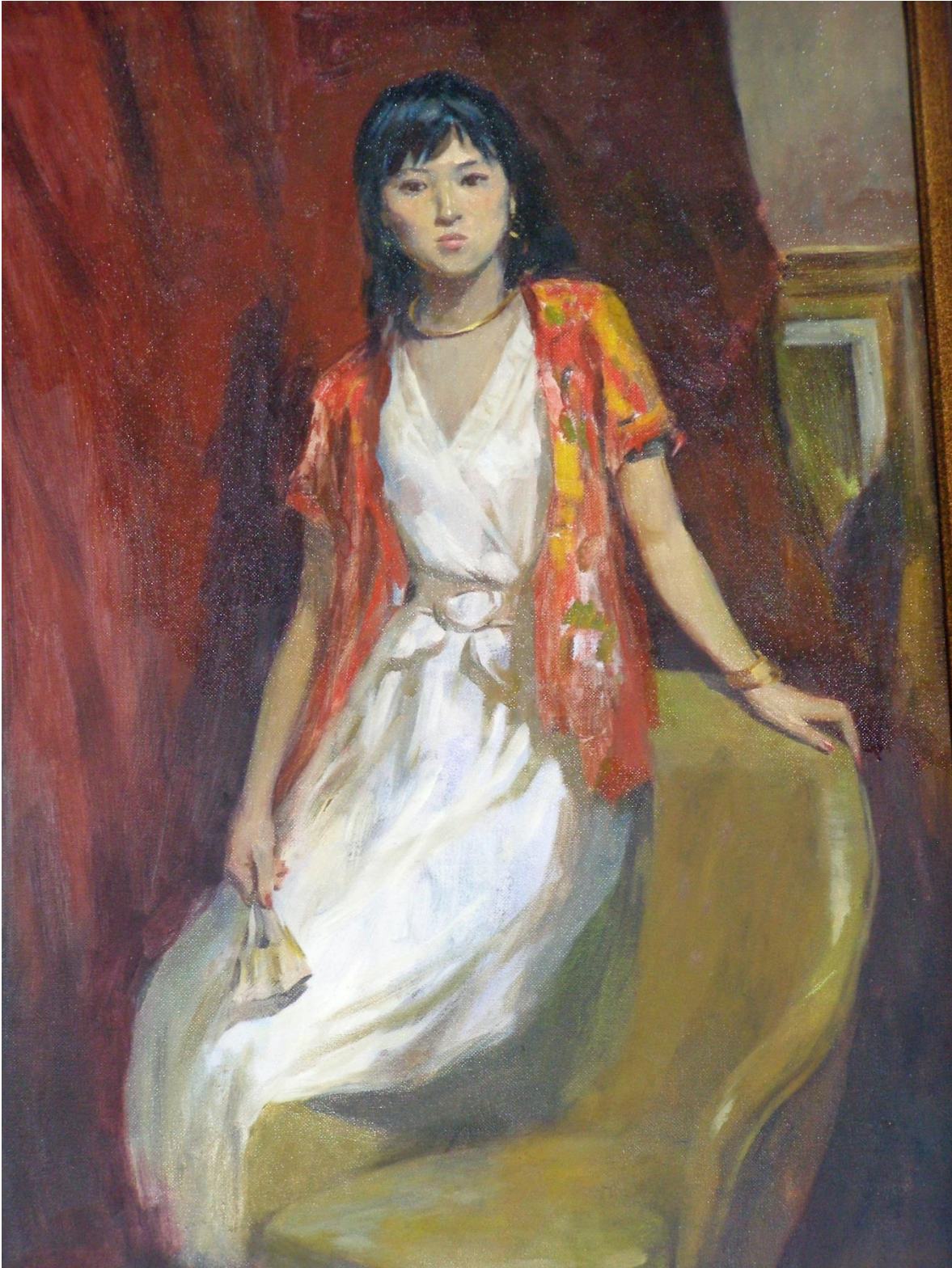


"European Scene" by Hugh Zeng.

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Hugh Zeng's award-winning painting: "The Lady in Red and White."

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In 1982, Hugh Zeng, far right, poses for a newspaper story with his clay sculpture, center, of his friend Bob Sunkel, left.



Sculpture of "FernGully" character by Hugh Zeng.

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In 2005, Hugh bought Millbrae Frame-Art which was then located on Broadway in Millbrae. In 2011, he moved his shop to its current location, 379 El Camino Real. A longtime San Francisco resident, Hugh is married to Michelle and the couple's daughter Karina is almost 10.

"I still admire the same artists that I always have, the old masters," Hugh said. "And I know that I have plenty to learn from them yet."



Jean Bartlett photo

Hugh in his shop with his daughter Karina, November 2017.

Hugh Zeng
Millbrae Frame-Art
379 El Camino Real, Millbrae, CA 94030
(650) 697-4836

Jean Bartlett, longtime Bay Area arts and features writer, *Pacifica Tribune*, *San Jose Mercury*, *Oakland Tribune*, etc., and now *Portraits & Roots*, www.bartlettbiographies.com.