NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC VISITS CHINA

Aretha Sings at the White House

Touring Albany with William Kennedy
Marching Along Together

Last month I had the pleasure of seeing The Kennedy Center Presents, WETA's first collaborative effort with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. The event was an important moment for both cultural institutions in that their separate constituencies were linked through television. As I enjoyed the presentation, it struck me that WETA has contributed dramatically to the cultural life of the Washington area. I thought of the many years I have been privileged to be associated with the station over its long and productive history.

It has been over three decades that this joint effort between WETA and area cultural institutions has enriched the lives of the community. My children and I have benefited through the efforts of WETA to increase our understanding and enhance our appreciation of the arts. Our support of its efforts has been an investment in ourselves as well as our community.

One of the people most responsible for WETA's strong relationship with other institutions in the community is Senior Vice President for Cultural Programming Tamara Robinson. Tammy works with a talented staff and together they have forged solid bonds with local institutions as well as national ones. This month, in connection with two of them, WETA is presenting In Performance at the White House and National Geographic's China: Beyond the Clouds. Next month we will have a film biography of Frederick Douglass. WETA has coproduced television series such as Smithsonian World, the special For the Living on the Holocaust Memorial Museum and several radio series like the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra concerts. WETA has presented over a dozen films made under the aegis of the National Gallery of Art.

We at WETA welcome such associations. These strengthen the individual organizations and add new dimension and opportunity for both of us. The cultural, arts, science and history organizations in this area are resources for the entire country and WETA has an opportunity to be a wellspring for them. The scope of their collections, their research and their talent can be made available to all Americans through these programs.

Cultural organizations across the country are faced with shrinking resources. There are fewer corporations or individuals who are able to underwrite the cost of a major museum exhibition or a series of concerts or plays with minimum admission fees. Alliances with these other institutions whose goals and missions are similar to WETA's provide a chance to increase understanding, knowledge and access to particular disciplines and institutions. Such alliances can serve to inform and enlist new generations of concert-, theatre-, opera- and museum-goers. This also brings the arts to those who can no longer attend live performances.

When like-minded institutions unite to present a concert or play or film, everyone benefits: WETA, the institutions and, most of all, the public.

Marvin Weissberg
Member, Program Committee
WETA Board of Trustees
I spent April of 1991 working in China on an air pollution study in Yungang Grottoes. The Grottoes, near Datong in the People’s Republic, have been designated a World Cultural Heritage Site by the United Nations and are located in a region with severe air pollution problems. The Grottoes contain about 50,000 carvings on the walls and ceilings, dating back to the 5th century A.D. and efforts to preserve or restore the sculptures from assault by abrasive and possibly chemically reactive airborne contaminants are underway.

The lake at Black Dragon Park, north of Lijiang, reflects the snowy peaks of Jade Dragon Mountain, one of the area’s many serene and beautiful scenes. There are similar spots amidst the bustle of the 20th century throughout China.
I was traveling with two co-workers: Christos, a Cypriot graduate student from Caltech, and Po-Ming, a research fellow at the Getty Conservation Institute (sponsor of my research). We had 170 kilos of excess baggage: several crates of equipment that hadn’t been ready to ship in advance. We worried what the airline security would make of all these little electronic gadgets we were carrying, but they didn’t bat an eye at the weird stuff in my bags going through the x-ray, and instead concerned themselves with the buckles on my shoes setting off the metal detector.

We arrived in Datong just before sunset [on the third day of our trip from Los Angeles]. Everyone from the train seemed to be in a tremendous hurry to get out of the station as fast as they could, though they did take time out to stare unabashedly at the strange foreigners on the platform.

Our work went more smoothly than we ever dreamed possible. We had done similar studies locally and at the Grand Canyon, but the China project was going to be considerably bigger in scope and over a shorter period of time and much too far from home to run back to the lab for that piece of tubing we forgot. Fortunately, we didn’t forget a thing and we were even able to make all of our equipment function on the somewhat erratic Chinese power supply, supplemented by two 5,000-watt generators for the more sensitive instruments.

After nine days, we took a breather from work to explore our surroundings. Yungang has two main streets, the first runs parallel to the front of the caves and dead ends into the other, main shopping street of the town. At the post office, trying to mail some letters, we ran into trouble. The people in Yungang refused to accept our foreign exchange certificates when we tried to use them, both at the post office and in local stores.

Christos led us on a desperate search for coffee, taking us to every shop in town; none to be found, however. The shops had an odd assortment of goods, each very like all the others. They had beer, cigarettes, flashlights, tea, soda, peanuts, shoes, sewing gear, sardines, sometimes film or cooking pots.

Work continued falling more or less into a routine for the rest of my stay. My husband joined me in Yungang, as we were setting off on our own adventures after my work was finished.

At last, the time came to say good-bye to the friends we had made. Everyone got into a gift-giving mode during the last couple of days. I had taken a lot of books with me (for all that spare time I never had) and I gave most of them away.

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