



Peter Adams: Researching Fertile Subjects and Compositions

Peter Adams is known for painting dramatic scenes illuminated by intriguing combinations of natural, reflected, and artificial light. These subjects often require him to conduct extensive research and develop plein air sketches and compositional studies.

Peter Adams has carried his painting supplies in remote villages in Bhutan and Tibet, to war-torn Afghanistan, into the crowded streets of New York City, up into the Sierra Mountains, inside opera houses, into candlelit cathedrals, and — most recently — to Jerusalem. In each location, he gathered plein air sketches, digital photographs, historic accounts, and firsthand impressions of subjects

that became the focus of his studio paintings. That studio is in Pasadena, California, on the second floor of a building that has been a storage facility and the headquarters for the California Art Club (of which Adams is president), and is now the offices of American Legacy Fine Arts, a gallery owned by his wife, Elaine Adams.

A tour of the well appointed studio makes it clear that Adams blends a wide range of

This page:
**St. Jerome and the Virgin
Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem**
2010, oil on panel, 16 x 20 in.

Next page:
Altar at the Church of St. Saviour, Jerusalem
2010, oil on panel, 16 x 12 in.





Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Night

Rome

2010, oil on panel, 16 x 12 in.

influences in his life and art. The custom-made furniture reveals an interest in classical forms. The pastel and oil paintings show landscapes and figures illuminated by theatrical lighting that reminds us of his teacher Theodore Lukits (1897-1992). And the scenes of operatic performances, biblical stories, and literary themes make it clear there is an intellectual depth to his art.

“Peter bought the property about 24 years ago, four years before we were married, and at the time the studio looked like a barn,” Elaine recalls. “It was poorly insulated, didn’t have adequate storage, and was not a comfortable place for collectors who visited. In time we painted the stairway and deck on the outside to look like a Pompeian mosaic floor.”

Inside, the couple constructed decorative elements, such as pilasters capped with sculptures of Hercules, and created Pompeian-style panels and gold-leafed putti painted and sculpted by Peter. Next, they added insulation, track lighting, a kitchen and closets, and a drop ceiling to accommodate a large air conditioning and heating unit. They remodeled the bathroom and built display panels on tracks that hold up to 100 pastel paintings (works in progress), a work table with storage space for paintings, and a neoclassical-style bed. “Now,” Elaine says, “it is a functional painting studio and a professional environment where clients feel welcome.”



1. Peter Adams painting at Latrun Monastery, northwest of Jerusalem.

2. Adams painting at Nabi Musa in the Judean Desert.

3. The kitchen area in the Pasadena studio.



4. Mahogany storage cabinet on casters.

5. The custom-made studio bed with storage beneath.

6. The 19th-century French Empire furnishings in a corner of the studio.



Copper Canyon Falls
Angeles National Forest
2010, oil on panel, 48 x 36 in.

Although Peter Adams spends a great deal of time in his studio creating imaginative paintings, figure studies from life, and landscapes based on his plein air paintings, he often travels in a van outfitted with painting supplies. “I’ve owned a number of vans that allowed me to store painting supplies and food out of the reach of my dogs, transport 70-80 pieces of artwork to exhibitions, travel with friends to painting sites, and head off with Elaine to locations near and far,” he explains. “When I was younger, I did a lot of camping when I was out painting on location, but in recent years my schedule has only allowed for shorter excursions in the van.”

While on location, Adams works in both pastel and oil, depending on the subject and the amount of time available. “I normally work on 12 x 16-inch or 16 x 20-inch gessoed Masonite panels for oil paintings, or 12 x 16-inch sheets of Canson paper for pastels,” he says. “I tend to lose myself in the painting process and can sit outdoors, inside a church, or in a private garden for three or four hours without being aware of what is going on around me. On long painting excursions abroad, I usually return home having painted an average of one painting per day, although I may finish four paintings in a single day and then devote the other days to travel or museum visits.”

In recent years, Adams says, he’s done more studio paintings of figures and still lifes than plein air landscapes, “although I may position some of my outdoor studies

within view of my easel in the studio so I can use the information gathered on location as I work on the large oil paintings.” For example, he is currently developing compositional studies based on paintings he did during a three-week trip to Jerusalem and a 10-day visit to Rome. Adams researched the Stations of the Cross for a commission he received from the University of Southern California’s Our Savior Catholic Church; his paintings will be installed in a new 20,000-square-foot complex that will include a limestone church and bell tower.

“While in Jerusalem, I was fortunate to spend a great deal of time with a Franciscan priest, Father Angelo, who for the past 18 years has been leading processions of 200 to 400 Christian pilgrims along the path of the Via Dolorosa, which is presumed to be the way Jesus went while carrying the cross to Calvary,” Adams explains. “Father Angelo helped me understand the Catholic Church’s interpretation of the sacred stations as a spiritual pilgrimage of prayer. Throughout the history of the church, that pilgrimage has included as many as 30 Stations of the Cross and as few as 11. With so much interpretation being brought to bear on the subject, my paintings will have to be more allegorical than factual. I plan to paint them on horizontally shaped panels to suggest the kind of broad space and the crowds of people that witnessed the events being commemorated.”

Adams wanted to paint studies inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, believed to stand on the site where Jesus was crucified and buried. “Because the church is home to six different religious denominations, it is always crowded with pilgrims and tourists,” he says. “I was able to arrange special permission to spend a full night locked inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I did many paintings and was captivated by working under candle lights’ reflection off gold and silver icons, illuminating holy sculptures and coursing through the architectural forms.”

Wearing a miner’s head lamp to light his panels, Adams painted all night long. “I’ve always been fascinated by the idea of painting at night or inside darkened churches because there is a strange, mystical quality to the combinations of moods and lights,” he says. “And since my teacher had me draw from plaster casts and paint subjects illuminated by colored lights, I’ve always been challenged by that kind of visual stimulation.”

After traveling to Jerusalem and Rome to research his commission, Adams enjoyed a more genteel plein air outing at a private country club in Beverly Hills with 20 other artists, most of whom are represented by American Legacy Fine Arts.




7. The view from the studio toward the balcony, with Peter and Elaine Adams.



8. Adams at his easel, with sliding racks of pastel paintings behind.

“Elaine organized an extraordinary weekend outing at one of the most exclusive country clubs in the world, culminating two weeks later in a gala dinner and sale of artwork,” Adams explains. “Almost all the art sold, and the members of the country club were thrilled to be introduced to the artists and to own paintings of their beloved club.”

Adams is giving serious consideration to conducting workshops in his Pasadena studio, surrounded by lush gardens. and at nearby locations in the San Gabriel Mountains. “Very few workshops offer students the chance to work from the figure outdoors under changing light, and I think there is a need to explore that subject matter,”

he says. He will also be participating in a series of events marking the centennial of the California Art Club in the spring of 2011, including museum exhibitions and a momentous book about the club by Rizzoli International. For more information on Peter Adams, visit www.americanlegacyfinearts.com; for more information on the California Art Club, visit www.californiaartclub.org. 

All artwork courtesy American Legacy Fine Arts, Pasadena, California.

M. Stephen Doherty is editor-in-chief of *PleinAir Magazine*. E-mail: steve@pleinairmagazine.com.