

# Walking a Sacred Path



*With a Monumental  
Commission*

## Peter Adams

undertook a challenging commission: to re-create a traditional Stations of the Cross series for a newly constructed church. The results show the power of art and religion acting together.

by MICHAEL GORMLEY



**P**eter Adams has just finished erecting a large cross in front of his studio in Pasadena, California. He begins to explain how it's rigged to hold a life model in a crucifixion pose, but he pauses when he notices that his guest—yours truly—is having a rather difficult time taking in the scene.



### LEFT

Adams staged a re-enactment of the 1<sup>st</sup> Station, from which he created studies and photos to use as reference for his painting.

### ABOVE

1<sup>st</sup> Station (The Condemnation)

### OPPOSITE PAGE

Adams in his studio with studies for the Stations of the Cross.

Adams explains that he is in the final stages of a commission that began two years ago: to paint all 14 Stations of the Cross for Our Savior Church and University of Southern California Caruso Catholic Center, currently under construction in Los Angeles. The *Stations of the Cross*, also known as the *Via Dolorosa* or *Way of Sorrows*, is a series of artistic representations depicting the final hours of Christ. Many Roman Catholic churches contain such a series, generally small relief plaques or paintings, and the images are typically placed at intervals along the side walls of the

nave where they serve as a focus for devotions. Clergy and devotees move from station to station to recite text, meditate, and pray.

“This project has been unique for me because it has given me the opportunity to study a short period of the life of Christ in great depth,” Adams says. “The Via Dolorosa may have only taken one-and-a-half hours to walk, but I have spent more than two years in preparation, studying every aspect of Christ’s journey of Passion. I travelled to Jerusalem and spent a month walking and re-walking every step, as well as consulting with leading scholars, theologians, and even an archeologist. Perhaps the most wonderful



ABOVE

Study for the 4<sup>th</sup> Station (Jesus Meets His Mother).

BELOW

Re-enactment of the 4<sup>th</sup> Station.

thing I have come to understand is how it must have felt to actually be in the crowd and follow Christ on his route to Calvary.”

The Stations have their origin in a long history of Christian pilgrimage, in which physical markers, which came to be called “stations,” were placed around churches to trace Christ’s route to his crucifixion. Gradually, the stations came to be represented inside churches through art and sculpture. Fourteen standard images emerged, beginning with Jesus being condemned to death and continuing through his crucifixion and entombment.



Painting the Stations of the Cross seems an unusual project for Adams, who is known for his Southern California seascapes and landscapes, but the artist welcomed the opportunity to paint a commission with such a rich history and one that would offer all sorts of challenges. “By painting the Stations of the Cross for a newly constructed Catholic church, I am entering the realm of mural painting, which is far different from plein air painting,” he says. “My objective for plein air painting is to be spontaneous and to work directly on location in order to capture mood, light, and atmosphere. In this commission, as a mural painter, I am focused on telling stories and relaying different Christian messages through the interactions between the personalities in the scenes. However, my figures are all suffused in the outdoor daylight of Jerusalem, which happens to be similar to the light of Southern California.”

Unlike most contemporary studio production, in which the primary aim of the artist is to realize a subjective vision, patron-funded commissions generally

have contractual obligations with specifications governing the artist’s work. The artist must negotiate a host of variables that may include site and media specifications, patron’s preferences, prevailing tastes, and the anticipated viewing audience. Producing artwork for a religious context offers further challenges, as an artist must balance his or her creative vision against the requirements of a commission rooted in centuries of tradition and faith. “Ultimately, it’s people that provide opportunities to artists, so it’s important to treat patrons with respect,” Adams says. “I try to hear their ideas and then incorporate them and make them my own so that the work becomes even stronger.”

The process through which Adams applied for this commission was not much different from other art competitions and applications for public works. He completed a formal submission process, was contacted and interviewed by a selection committee, and thoroughly described his vision for the project. Adams does not know what the deciding factor was that led to him winning the commission, but it likely had to do with his extensive preparation. “Before I obtained the commission, I decided I needed to talk to as many Roman Catholic priests and monsignors as I could,” he says. “I also did as much reading as I could on the Stations, and visited many Catholic churches to see their interpretations of the Stations.”

Adams’ plan was to stage elaborate re-creations of the Stations, from which he would obtain studies, videos, and photographic reference for use in creating the finished paintings. This theatrical component to the project falls in line with Adams’ training—his longtime teacher, Theodore Lukits, often worked from costumed models and elaborate setups, and Adams maintains a collection of costumes.

“I made a list of characters that would have prominent roles in my depictions of the Stations,” Adams says. “Jesus,

**CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT**

Adams painting in the evening while being watched by an Israeli soldier at Nabi Musa in the Judean Desert.

Adams and Father Angelo Beda Ison on the rooftop of the Austrian Hospice of the Holy Family, overlooking West Jerusalem.

Peter and Elaine Adams with Father Angelo Beda Ison in front of the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, in Jerusalem.

**BELOW**

Study for the 6<sup>th</sup> Station (Veronica).



the Virgin Mary, John the Beloved, Mary Magdalene, Pontius Pilate, and many others, including unnamed soldiers, shepherds, priests, women, and children—all told a cast of 40. I contacted a friend, Beverly Crain, and commissioned her to make all the costumes. And I planned to hire professional models, secure livestock, construct props, and petition friends and artist colleagues to participate in the staging.”

Soon after receiving the commission, Adams realized that a staging alone would not be enough for him to create the paintings. He needed to travel to Jerusalem to walk the Via Dolorosa and see the city’s

important sites firsthand. This, after all, was the original aim of the Stations—to re-create that religious experience for those who could not make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Two summers ago, Adams and his wife, Elaine, packed up their painting gear and ventured to Israel, where they spent a month. Peter painted Jerusalem’s Old City, and they both took videos and photographs and attended processions through the Stations of the Cross. They returned home to Pasadena and spent months staging the Stations.

Following the practice of the artists he most admires, Adams creates preparatory drawings and color studies before



beginning a painting. The drawings help him work out figural groupings, narrative gesture, emotive expression, and proportions. With color studies, Adams explores lighting effects, color harmonies, and tonal contrasts that reinforce the compositional strategies initially worked out in the drawings.

Once he has arrived at a satisfactory compositional drawing, he transfers it to the painting substrate. He paints on ¼" tempered Masonite panels, gessoed twice on one side and primed with a gray middle tone. He notes that he prefers working on panel because of its texture and because if he needs to change his format he can saw off a section. The Stations series called for 14 21" x 24" paintings, and Adams painted studies the same size so that he could see how they physically looked in the church.

The luminous on-site studies completed during his tour to Jerusalem are notable for their broad, color-saturated strokes, which effortlessly capture

**RIGHT**

Study for the 7<sup>th</sup> Station (Jesus Falls the Second Time).

**BELOW**

Re-enactment of the 7<sup>th</sup> Station.

**BOTTOM LEFT AND RIGHT**

Studies for the 10<sup>th</sup> Station (The Taking of Jesus' Clothes).



structural form and glittering light. This virtuoso and lifelike paint handling extends to Adams' later studies, as well—no small feat given that the studies were largely composed in a studio setting from reference materials.

With this project, Adams is helping to connect contemporary representational painting with the world of public art work—two arenas that are not as closely aligned as they once were. “The traditional contemporary world of painting from which I come has little crossover into the realm of public works,” Adams says. “That’s sad, and I hope that will

change in time. A hundred years ago, it was not true. Mural painting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had built up over centuries starting with the Renaissance and the Baroque and continuing through the works of Tiepolo and the great 19<sup>th</sup>-century muralists John La Farge, Edwin Blashfield, Edwin Austin Abbey, John Singer Sargent, and Frank Brangwyn. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of mural painters throughout Europe and the Americas. Most of them painted monumental subjects, noble ideas that were uplifting. It is true that public-art projects are a fertile ground for traditional

artists, but unfortunately there is little call for truly monumental work, and the artists of today are generations removed from being trained to paint or to think on a grand scale.”

It is logical for Adams to reference the working methods of artists who elevated narrative design to a level of artistry that we rarely see today. “These artists understood that murals need to be ‘read’ from a tremendous distance, which they accomplished by developing dynamic compositions with sharp edges and flattened planes to give force,” he says. “I am also intrigued by



## ABOUT THE ARTIST

**Peter Adams'** paintings can be found in numerous public collections, and he serves as the president of the California Art Club. For more information, visit [www.americanlegacyfinearts.com](http://www.americanlegacyfinearts.com).

the elegant design and sense of mystery in Alphonse Mucha's Slavic Epic murals.

"For the past 20 years I have been developing an artistic interpretation that emphasizes spiritual exploration and aesthetic philosophy that I call 'mystical' or 'ethereal,'" Adams continues. "Many times I will work with unusual lighting conditions and theatrical colored lights to illuminate my models or still

lives and create a sense of mystery. This concept is similar to how I am handling the Stations. It is my hope that parishioners will be able to see themselves in these paintings. I have tried to depict a variety of people and how they individually react to Christ's suffering. Some are in shock, some are in sympathy, a few are in anger, and some are genuinely repentant."

Study for the 12<sup>th</sup> Station (The Crucifixion).

In addition to his creative goals, Adams' primary aim with

this series is to respect and advance the original devotional premise of the Stations—helping the faithful make a spiritual pilgrimage through prayer and meditation. Adams is executing a highly successful commission, and the paintings he has produced achieve the careful balance he aimed for—art that pleases both patron and creator. **W**

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