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What Peter Adams saw and painted in Afghanistan inspired him to donate part of resulting sales to International Medical Corps.

Art of War

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Pasadena Painter Captures the Essence of Afghanistan

By BERKLEY HUDSON, Times Staff Writer

Hidden under a sheet and surrounded by Afghan rebel soldiers in an ambulance, Peter S. Adams of Pasadena bumped his way across the legendary Khyber Pass into Afghanistan.

In billowy shirt and draw-string pants, he had adopted the look of a *moujahedeen*, or holy warrior. He wore a traditional Nuristani hat to cover his golden hair, now dyed black. His long beard and eyebrows were also dyed.

The only trace of his surfer good looks were his blue eyes. He had decided that contact lens to make his eyes look brown wouldn't be worth the trouble.

But even with the blue eyes, he survived the passage across the border and into the mountainous, landlocked country of southwestern Asia. And he survived those six weeks in the fall of 1987 with the rebels, who were fighting the Soviets.

Artistic Trip

Peter Adams went to this foreign land not to fight. He went to paint.

He sketched and painted his way across Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bhutan, Tibet, China and India, creating 200 works of art during his seven-month Asian trip.

For more than a year since his return, Adams, 38, has told the story of his trip. His Afghanistan paintings also tell the story of a land and a people wounded and disabled by war.

Last week, as the last Soviet soldier was leaving the country after Afghanistan's occupation of nine years, Adams spoke about his artistic journey. His work will be displayed



Adams, foreground, dressed to blend in with the *moujahedeen* troops on the front.

had as much to do with his desire to paint and travel as with political conviction or wanting to help Afghan rebels or refugees. He is largely apolitical, even though his sister, Aileen Adams, has been active in Democratic party politics. "I don't think of myself as

architecture and fascinating art.

"All this is disappearing and someday will be gone, just as our American Indian culture has vanished in comparison to what it once was." Adams wanted to record the culture before it disappeared.

Monday and Tuesday at Monterey Park's Bruggemeyer Library.

Adams sold about 45 of the paintings from his Asian trip when his work was put on display last year at Adamson-Duvannes Galleries on the Westside. His works sell for as much as \$15,000 and grace the walls of homes and galleries throughout California.

Last fall he exhibited pastels from the Asian trip at the Pacific Asia Museum in Pasadena. David Kamansky, the museum's executive director, said Adams' "sense of light, color and space is very beautiful" in combination with a traditional style.

That he went to Afghanistan, Adams said,

liberal or conservative, except on particular issues. But I did feel the Soviets were wrong."

But what he saw inspired him to donate part of the sales from his paintings to the International Medical Corps. The Los Angeles-based organization was founded to set up medical clinics inside Afghanistan and help refugees outside the country.

As much as anything, he made the trip because of his attraction to Asia. "I'm very much in love with the art, clothes and costumes and customs of the Orient. There are so many noble and enriching aspects of Asian cultures. Their histories go back thousands of years—with buildings,

In his Pasadena studio, a light and airy place of skylights and arched windows, he spoke about his trip. Gold-framed paintings, resting on easels and propped along the walls, told as much as his words.

The largest painting, a centerpiece work from his trip titled "Afghanistan Supply Line," depicts the band of 15 soldiers that he accompanied. The scene, in oil on a 4-by-5-foot canvas, shows the soldiers trekking across a rocky snowfield. The dawn sky of amber, grays and blues sets off the background of 10,000-foot-high mountains. In the foreground, two soldiers carry AK-47

Please see ART, Page 3

ART: Painter Brings War in Afghanistan to Life

Continued from Page 1

rifles. Another rides a burro and others carry boxes of medical supplies and ammunitions.

Another painting, inspired by his three-week stay in the Shangri-La-like kingdom of Bhutan, shows a red-robed holy man leaning on a staff.

A procession of Tibetan holy men inspired another painting. They were gathered around the Panchen Lama, who was the second-highest holy leader in Tibet until his death Jan. 28.

Adams' adventuresome artistic career was nurtured by a supportive family, he said.

His late father was a Los Angeles real estate developer whose first love was acting—he had a lengthy movie career that included being a stage husband to Claudette Colbert and Kitty Carlyle. Adams' father also appeared in such television shows as "Dallas" and "General Hospital."

An aunt was a sculptor and a paternal grandmother, a painter. And Adams' maternal grandfather, George B. Seitz, started out to be a painter in Philadelphia, but instead became a screenwriter, producer and director. Seitz, who was credited with discovering the late composer George Gershwin, also was known as a writer, actor and the producer of serials including "The Perils of Pauline." And, as an MGM director, Seitz helped make Mickey Rooney a star.

Collecting Sights

Adams first gained confidence as a painter when he was a high school student at the Harvard School in Studio City. Later, he briefly attended college in San Diego, because of its potential for good surfing, and came back to Los Angeles to attend the Art Center College of Design, which is now in Pasadena. But Adams dropped out at age 20 to become an apprentice of Theodore Lukits, a Hancock Park painter.

For four years Adams studied with Lukits, whom Adams describes as a 19th-Century-style painter. "It was like stepping back 100 years," Adams said. Then, as a journeyman, Adams stayed with Lukits for three more years before setting out on his own.

For the last 11 years, he has roamed the California countryside as well as the globe in search of images. "Painting gives me a good reason to travel, and I like color. If I wasn't a painter, I'd be a collector," he said. "You get going on a painting, and it becomes like a jigsaw puzzle. I'm always racking my brain and thinking about, how is this going to work and how is that going to work?"

In 1981 he traveled unescorted through China. He was, he believes, the first Western artist to be allowed to do so. In Afghanistan, however, he was quite happy to have escorts and translators, he said.

Impressed by Spirit

He didn't speak the language, and the approach he took in China would not have worked in an Afghanistan at war. (In China, Adams used note cards in Chinese to help him get around. But Adams, who is single, did not dare show the card that said: "Our eternal destiny is to be together.")

In his travels with the soldiers, Adams never encountered actual fighting, seeing only the aftermath. Even before crossing the border into Afghanistan, he spent one long and trying month in Peshawar, Pakistan, waiting to get word from rebels whom he had been trying to persuade to take him across. In Peshawar he went to the refugee hospitals almost daily to paint portraits of the wounded.

Today, when he looks at the photographic slides he took there, he still is touched by what he refers to as the undaunted spirit of the Afghan people. As he showed the slides to a visitor, he pointed out one of the most poignant images of the trip: a soldier whose arms had been amputated being served a cup of water by his smiling little son.

In Peshawar, a border city rife with rumors, reports of spies and counter-spies, and restaurant bombings by saboteurs, Adams said he felt more frightened than in Afghanistan.

His most difficult time with the soldiers came not from bullets but from fleas. After staying in a village home, he came away with what he estimated to be close to 200 flea bites.

And in western China, one unfortunate encounter was with a shopkeeper in a marketplace who became disturbed by Adams' painting and attracting a crowd. The man grabbed Adams' brush and ran it across the picture.

"A lot of time painting was kind of a battle. You get this idea that it would be so serene, Zen and peaceful and meditative. But in a marketplace you get hundreds of people crowding around and shoving. And you get an audience applauding."

On Dec. 28, he achieved that odd kind of momentary recognition that only Hollywood bestows.

The television show "Jeopardy!" referred to Adams when the clue card read: "While working in the Himalayas, artist Peter Adams had to put vodka and gin in his paints to prevent this."

Correct answer: "What is: 'to keep from freezing'?"