



ART & ARTISAN

In the Shadows of the Himalayas

California Artist Peter Adams in Asia

Photography by JLN Studios



"Afghanistan Supply Line," oil, 48" x 60"

SCALING PEAKS OF 10,000 FEET, SECRETLY crossing a heavily armed border and traveling incognito through a country immersed in civil strife might make you think of a valiant Hemingway hero. They are not pursuits most of us tangle with in everyday life. But, for California's Peter Adams, who became the first American artist to paint on location in Afghanistan, breaking into this war-torn country was the chance to match artistic ambition with humanitarian convictions.

"I have always been fascinated by ancient civilizations with wonderful art forms and customs. But these cultures are slowly disappearing—and nowhere is this as evident as in Asia," says the Pasadena-based portrait painter, who, in 1981, was the first American artist to travel unescorted through the People's Republic of China. "I wanted to try to help the Afghan refugees as much as possible. I felt it was an issue that one could not be against."

Adams, whose interest in Afghanistan increased with the dramatic 1979 Soviet invasion, conceived of his trip as having the dual purpose of aiding the Afghan Mujahideen resistance fighters as well as capturing on canvas the beauty of an ancient culture. "The idea was to paint what I saw and then sell those paintings upon returning to the United States and donate the proceeds to the Afghan cause," he says.

Dyeing his hair and donning the garb of an Afghan rebel, Adams slipped through the Pakistani border in an ambulance under the auspices of a medical team. Traveling with 15 Mujahideen of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (NIFA) and camping out in mosques, private homes or command headquarters, Adams managed to paint three to four canvases per

At left, "Tigers Nest," Bhutan, tempera, 13" x 16"



"Summer Palace," Beijing, oil, 14" x 18"

day. However, lugging a backpack with painting and photography equipment up steep passes was not without challenges. "The life of an itinerant artist is tough. There are some things you just can't get in Asia, such as pastels," he says. Perched 17,000 feet up in the icy terrain of the Himalayas, where he traveled after Afghanistan, he adds, "I had to mix gin and vodka in my paints to keep them from freezing."

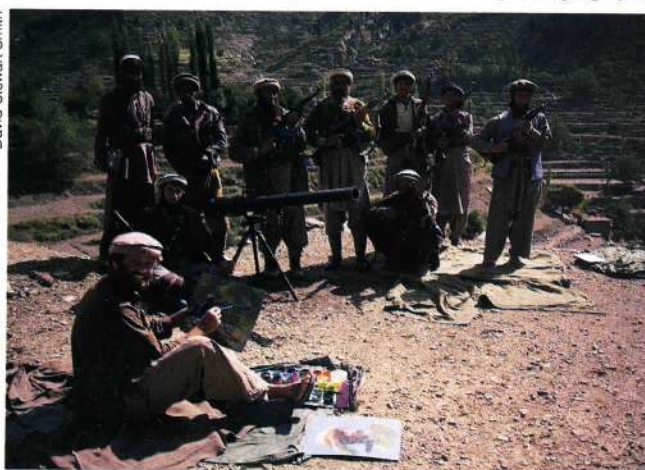
Although Adams spent a month in Peshawar, Pakistan, painting wounded Afghan refugees, his paintings are surprisingly devoid of human suffering. "I don't like to paint suffering—it is better left to photography. I'd rather paint the nobility in the faces or the grandeur of the country," he explains.

In "Afghanistan Supply Line," a caravan of mujahideen fighters display defiance without a trace of anguish. His paintings, including works from other Asian countries he visited, including Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal, reveal an uncanny warmth and optimism. In "Bhutanese Monks," men are bathed in a romantic, iridescent glow; Thick brush strokes portray jovial expressions in "Mujahideen Commanders," who are caught in a moment of pure ease. Adams, who attended the Art Center College of Design

and the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, studied for seven years under well-know California portrait and mural artist Theodore N. Lukits.

Upon returning from his expedition, Adams fulfilled his humanitarian hopes by donating the proceeds from sold paintings to the International Medical Corp, a Los Angeles-based organization that aids war refugees. When asked if he plans to continue globe-trotting to exotic locales, he says no, but then unhesitatingly adds, "although Cambodia and Northern Thailand are places I'd like to see!" No doubt, Adams will.

—Paula Fitzgerald



Adams strikes a painterly pose with his Mujahideen escorts in Afganistan's Kunar Province, October 1987.