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Pasadena artist commissioned to paint Stations of the Cross for USC's new Catholic Church

By Janette Williams, Staff Writer

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Artist Peter Adams of Pasadena has been commissioned to paint the Stations of the Cross for USC's new Catholic Center-the Caruso Church of Our Savior. To prepare for the mammoth 14-painting series, Adams went to Jerusalem for research and to soak up the atmosphere. Adams wearing one of the many traditional outfits that models will wear for his 14-painting series on Station of the Cross. Peter Adams with his preliminary sketch painting on the first station, when Jesus was condemned to death Thursday, July 28, 2011. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Walt Mancini)

PASADENA - Spending the night locked in Jerusalem's ancient Church of the Holy Sepulchre, with a light attached to his head, was just one way artist Peter Adams prepared to compete for his biggest-ever commission: painting the 14 Stations of the Cross for USC's new Church of Our Savior.

Adams said he went to Jerusalem to be inspired by the most sacred sites of Christendom, including the 14 stops described in Jesus' tortuous progress along the Via Dolorosa from trial to entombment.

"I did five paintings while I was in the church," recalled Adams, whose trip paid off - he just got the commission by unanimous vote of the USC church's 11-member art committee.

"I was all alone, except for a Greek Orthodox priest who didn't seem to like me being there," he said, smiling. "I think he kept trying to swing his incense toward me to get me to move away—or perhaps he was trying to bless me."

"Walking the Via Dolorosa with pilgrims from all over the world literally changed my perspective," Adams said. It showed him how he could use the changing light to pinpoint the time of each stop on the journey.

"You think about those three hours, what happened, and how He suffered," Adams said. "I have a straightforward faith, and it's hard to go there and not feel a tremendous reverence."

Ruth Weisberg, dean of fine arts at USC, said Adams - best-known for his plein-air paintings and figure studies - had impressed her and the entire selection committee.

"He's right for this commission," Weisberg said. "I think we all have great respect for his artistic skill ... he really tends to bring things to life."



Peter Adams
Altar at the Church of St. Saviour; Jerusalem
Oil on panel 16" x 12"
(Painted en plein air)

Adams' knowledge and his extra effort in going to Jerusalem to "walk the streets and actually follow in the footsteps" of Jesus gave him an edge, she said.

Committee member and artist Gayle Garner Roski, for whom USC's Roski School of Fine Arts is named, said Adams presentation was "so moving that we knew this was going to be very special." Adams, she said, commented this would be one of the greatest commissions of his life. "And for us to have a great artist of our time and our city, who advocates contemporary traditional art, made it so fitting that his art would be kept alive in this church."

Adams has completed preliminary sketches for more than half the 21- by 23-inch paintings that will hang counter-clockwise, in a line starting at the south-west corner of the church when it opens in fall, 2012.

In his search for authenticity, Adams said he has accumulated 30 costumes for the models - "mostly friends or friends of friends" - to portray the small-scale Biblical figures in the Stations of the Cross journey.

"I don't know if it's because his dad was an actor ... he really gets into the role," Elaine Adams joked, as her husband donned the robe and headdress of Simon of Cyrene, the man the Bible says helped Jesus carry his cross.

Elaine Adams, who went with her husband to Jerusalem, said it was easy to get caught up in the city's ancient history, much of it buried 40 feet below today's city.

"It's a step back in time," she said. "You're at street level, at a restaurant, and you see the top of an arch ... or you're staring at a block that goes back to Christ's time."

Adams said he wants to take a fresh look at portraying the Stations of the Cross, focusing on the sacred meaning of each stop rather than the brutality of the journey.

And there are a few details he's noticed in looking at some "almost standardized" portrayals.

"For example, Simon of Cyrene at the fifth Station, usually you don't see him again, and he's supposed to have helped carry the cross," Adams mused. "That's odd. I want to bring a fresh set of eyes to the journey."

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