

LIGHTING THE WAY



By Vicki Stavig

Peter Adams admits to being somewhat of a rascal in his early years. When he was a junior, the military school he was attending instituted an art program. Unimpressed with the artwork created by the teacher and students and displayed in the cafeteria, he took action.

"I took it all down, stole some paints and put my paintings up under the nom de plume Von Seitz," he says. "I put my paintings up all over campus. About five years later, I was back at the school for some event, and there was a sign that said, 'Von Seitz, come back; we need you!'"

That, in essence, was the start of Adams' career as an artist. He went on to study at Cal Western in San Diego, California; at the Art Center College of Design in Los Angeles, California, and at the Instituto de Bellas Artes in Mexico, before he found what he was looking for. "I wanted to paint like the Old Masters," he says. "Then I found a teacher who admired Theodore Lukits, and I studied with him for seven years at the Lukits Fine Art Academy."

It was an intense course of study, but one that Adams greatly appreciated and has put to good use in the years since. "We spent two years just on drawing," he says. "Sometimes we would spend three months on one drawing. And we studied painting. He would set up a still life and say, 'OK, paint this

Above:

Clearing Skies at Sunset, oil, 24" by 36"

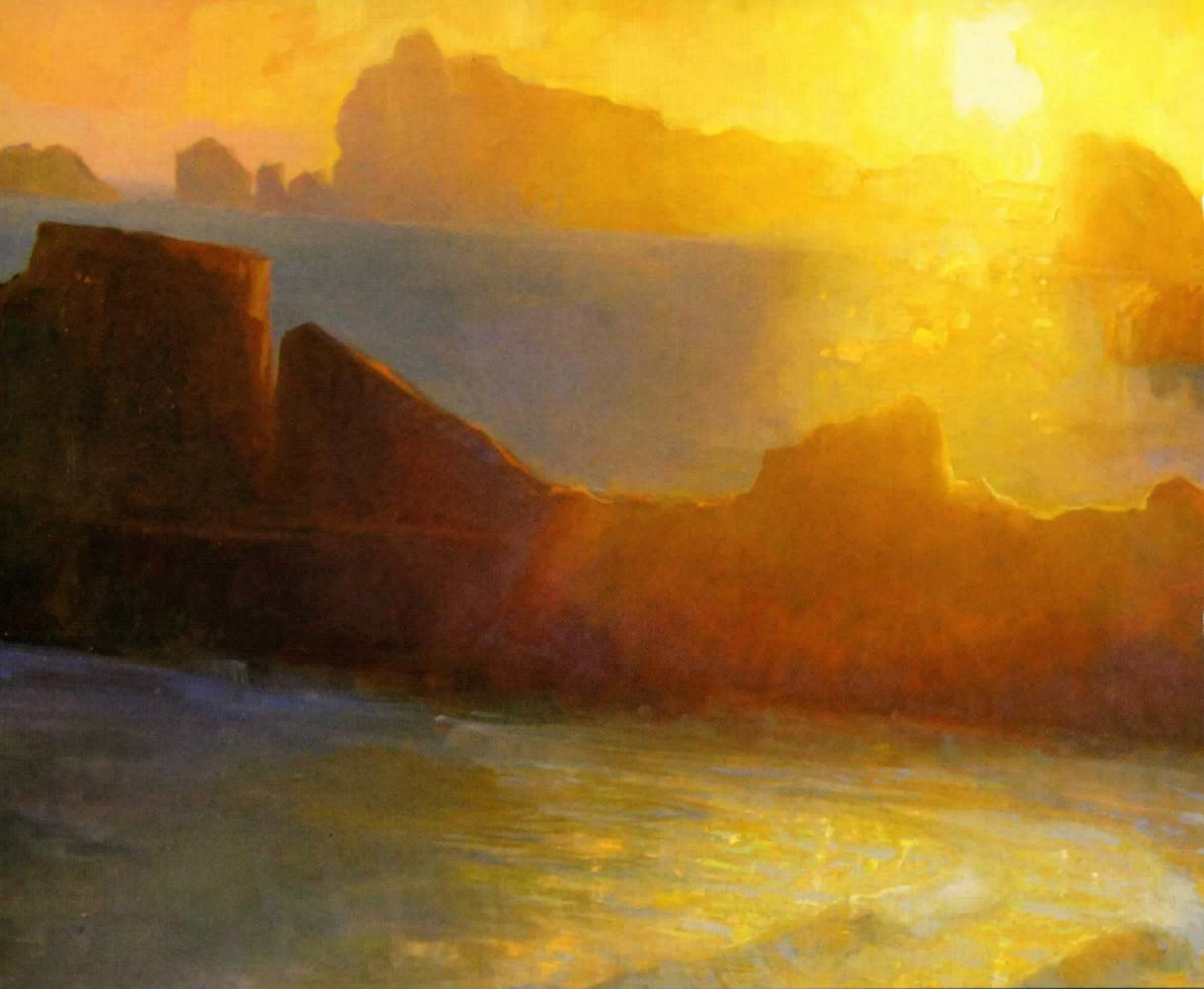
"I created this painting by referencing a pastel plein air sunset I composed in front of our beach house, after a rainstorm in Oceanside. The vivid red skies only last for a moment and are reflected off the more glassy, calm water beneath. Storms at sea can be terrifying but, when they break, they bring a particularly beautiful light that's filled with a sense of hope and promise."

Opposite Page:

Pools Above Sturtevant Falls; San Gabriel Mountains, oil, 40" by 30"

"This painting shows the secluded and quiet pools that are situated above the popular and more visited Sturtevant Falls in Angeles Crest Forest. This is one of my favorite places to go swimming with the dogs on a hot day, after a four-mile run. The afternoon light, illuminating the white limestone and granite rocks, makes this narrow ravine an intimate and tranquil place to paint."





in three hours.' It was similar to painting color effects outdoors. And sometimes he would put gauze over the whole thing and say, 'This is like painting in foggy conditions.' We also did plein air painting in pastels. That's where I came to love plein air painting. He also always talked about getting that feeling of light, of trying to capture those fleeting moments of light."

Capturing that light and using it in a magical way, no matter what he is painting, has become a trademark of an Adams' painting. "A lot of times you do paintings that have more to do with light than image," he says. "That, to me, is exciting; it's mystical, when you're emphasizing the light. You're not painting a lot of detail which can become superfluous. It becomes very mysterious

and attacks the imagination, because you lose some things in the light, just like you do in the dark, so viewers start to fill in those questions of what they're looking at. That's always been fascinating to me."

Adams, who lives in Pasadena and has a second home on the beach, grew up in California, where the light plays on a diverse landscape. A fun-loving boy, who loved to surf and play sports, he first discovered his natural artistic talent, when he was a teenager. "When I was 16, I started to draw a sycamore leaf, and it was fantastic," he says. "That was the start of my interest in art."

Later, armed with intense training in classical art, Adams had his first exhibition at his uncle's home in Los Angeles. "I think I had about 65 paintings in the show and sold well

over 50," he recalls. "What sold the best were landscapes I had done on location. One person, a collector for a men's club in Los Angeles, bought 14 of them; he started my career."

Soon galleries in Beverly Hills and on Sunset Boulevard were carrying Adams' work. And, although he enjoyed painting locally, Adams began to travel and paint. In 1981, he was the first American artist to travel and paint unescorted throughout the People's Republic of China and, six years later, painted with the Mujahideen rebels in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan.

"After a second trip to Asia in 1987, I had a big show of 116 paintings and sold 85 the first two nights," he says. The third night of the show, Adams met Elaine, and the two have been together ever since. Now married



*Dragon Rocks Fire; Crescent City,
oil, 24" by 48"*

"The Dragon Rocks of St. George Reef are in Northern California, just 20 miles from the Oregon border and near the town of Crescent City. This menacing collection of giant, jagged rocks and submerged ledges was discovered in 1579 by Sir Francis Drake. I came upon this spectacular scene in the late afternoon and spent three days there, sketching in oil and pastel. I was most intrigued by the glare of the setting sun and how it diffused the appearance of these threatening rocks."

for 26 years, they are partners in every sense of the word, including their shared love of representational art, which led them to revitalize the California Art Club. Founded in 1909, the club grew from 75 members to almost 2,000 in a span of just four years, thanks in large part to their help.

Adams also is a signature member of the Pastel Society of America, a master signature member of Oil Painters of America, and an emeritus member of Plein Air Painters of America. His work has earned him countless awards, but those honors are not what drive him. Rather, it is the challenge of creating a painting that meets the high standards he has set for himself.

At the root of those standards is plein air painting. "Painting from

life is a joy," Adams says. "I generally like to try to capture extreme lighting, or atmospheric conditions, whenever I possibly can. I am intrigued by the way lighting can cause a sense of other-worldliness, reverence, and mystery. While painting out of doors, I often try to capture the effects of sunsets, or sunrises, or momentary ephemeral effects, such as the sun's glare bouncing off the ocean and shining through the lip of a wave, or the prismatic effect of the first morning rays illuminating the top of a fog bank under an alpine peak.

"Indoors, I often use colored gels or theatrical lights on still lifes or models. That way I can create a sense of moonlight permeating through a window, by using a blue light shining down, or a sense of

candlelight or firelight by using an up light of orange or amber."

Lest you think that plein air painting starts with a simple drive or walk to a scene, Adams' treks often involve complicated strategies. "Sometimes I'll go into caves like Carlsbad Caverns, or Shasta Caves in Northern California with a miner's light on my hat and with my colored lights and hundreds of feet of extension cords," he says. "I'll then light the inside of a cavern to my liking and paint it.

"Actually, I first did that in China in 1981, when I went to Reed Flute Caves near Kweilin. The caves were beautifully lit with colored lights. I was mesmerized and, since I had my miner's light with me, I spent the entire day painting inside the cave. I've also spent a good deal of time



Elysium Moment, oil, 20" by 16"

"This plein air oil painting was done in northern Carlsbad's eucalyptus forest, a location that is sometimes referred to as Hosp Grove. In 1908, F. P. Hosp planted 219 eucalyptus trees on this California site to be used by the Santa Fe Railroad Company as railroad ties. However, it was discovered that eucalyptus wood was useless for this purpose, so the young forest was never harvested and grew and proliferated on its own. Because of their light bark, graceful limbs, clusters of foliage, and lyrical silhouettes, eucalyptus have always been my favorite trees to paint. Being surrounded by a forest of eucalyptus trees is even more exciting. Then, to have the sun's evening rays illuminating through the foliage adds an extra dimension. To me, it seems like a glimpse into another world—a higher realm—thus the title *Elysium Moment*."



Autumn Glare Through the Eucalyptus Forest, oil, 30" by 40"

painting inside Buddhist temples throughout China and Tibet and Bhutan and inside mosques in India and Pakistan. However, Rome is where I most love to paint at night. The statues and monuments there are handsomely lit. I've been fortunate to paint several nocturnes of the Victor Emmanuel Monument and Piazza Navona and have enjoyed painting a number of interiors of churches there, as well."

Most recently, Adams has been painting more Christian subjects. In 2010, when Our Savior Catholic Church at the University of Southern California commissioned him to paint the 14 Stations of the Cross, he traveled to Jerusalem, where he stayed for a month with Franciscan monks, who were caretakers of the stations. He currently is preparing for an exhibition at the Caruso Catholic Center in Los Angeles, which will include an 8' by 4' painting of the resurrection. "I hope to have 40 to 45 paintings in that exhibition," he says.

"This painting was created from a plein air study I did of one of California's oldest eucalyptus forests, located by Batiquitos Lagoon on the south side of Carlsbad. I have painted this area my entire career. Over the years, I have witnessed constant changes to the land and recall when there were hundreds of acres of magnificent eucalyptus trees, where now only a small fraction remains. Yet each time I return, I am struck by the magical light that emphasizes the sinuous silhouettes of the eucalyptus and the freedom of open space. As a landscape artist, I am particularly sensitive to our ever-changing natural environment and am moved to bring this awareness to others."

Adams also paints churches and missions in California. "I find painting in churches to be peaceful and serene," he says. "It is a wonderful way to paint while communing with God.

And he is finding inspiration at the opera. "One of my big passions in life is opera," he says. "I like to paint opera scenes; the lighting is so magnificent. I go to the opera and come home and paint them from memory."

It is, however, the ocean that most inspires Adams. "To me the ocean is magical," he says. "One day it can be so serene and the next, threateningly powerful. However, waves to me are a natural playground, where I can surf and swim and play on the beach with my dogs. We are fortunate to own a beach house in southern Oceanside on the water, and painting sunsets there is one of my greatest delights."

Asked to define his work, Adams says he would like to think it falls into the category of aesthetic realism that favors light. "To me," he says, "if I can capture that momentary sparkle, or glimmer that adds a sense of wonder and stimulates the imagination into higher realms, then I would feel that I have done something good."

Mission accomplished. 

Vicki Stavig is editor of Art of the West.