

Hungry Eye: Peter Adams – Remembering Afghanistan

by Kirk Silsbee

AFGHANISTAN HAS EXPLODED INTO THE NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS AGAIN. OUR TWENTY-YEAR military presence, with short bursts of ferocious action, often lulled Americans into complacency. That national trance momentarily obscured the fact that our troops were in harm's way in a faraway hot spot. Generally speaking, order in Afghanistan had been established and was being maintained. But an abrupt and chaotic withdrawal thrust that ravaged area front-and-centre in the headlines and on cable news stations. For artist **Peter Adams**, the episode carries a bittersweet poignancy. Thirty-five years ago, during the worst part of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he was there. That was more than fifteen years before the Americans became officially involved.

In the fall of 1987, Adams travelled alone—often on foot—for six months to Western China, Tibet, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. It was a gruelling travelogue for a surfer from Pasadena, and it was occasionally fraught with danger. Had he undertaken the same tortuous odyssey for the State Department or been part of an espionage network, the trip would have made more sense. But Adams smuggled no secrets, currency, or contraband, and he carried no weapons. Armed only with gouache, watercolours, and pastels, he painted every day. You might say Adams was on his own personal fact-finding mission.

A fascination with his maternal grandmother's collection of Asian exotica (netsukes, jade trinkets, Chinese ink paintings, and Japanese screens) gave him a love for the design, craft, and costumes of Asia. His own early paintings utilized the collected exotica (kimonos, Kwan Yin carvings, silken robes, terracotta Tang Dynasty horses) of his mentor, artist **Theodore N. Lukits (1897–1992)**. So, in 1981, Adams travelled to Burma,



Peter Adams painting *en plein air* with the NIFA Mujahideen in Kunar Province, Afghanistan, October 1987.

Thailand, India, Nepal, Hong Kong, and the People's Republic of China. "I was the first Western artist who was allowed to travel unescorted through China," Adams says, at the **American Legacy Fine Arts** gallery in Pasadena, where he exhibits his work. In China he communicated by the cards he carried with him at all times written in English on one side and Mandarin on the other.

ADAMS OFTEN FOUND HIMSELF IN remote villages, where he was as much a source of curiosity for the locals as they were for him. "My watercolours amused them," he recalls with a smile, "some had never seen hair on a man's arms; they'd blow on mine to see it wave." Adams would often attract crowds of up to 100 people watching him paint. Sometimes there were those who would get directly in his sightline, blocking his view, but, when he would ask them to move, they would always comply with good-spirit. "When I got home," he continues, "I knew I wanted to go back; I had already been to East China. Now I

wanted to see West China."

His appreciation for Asian art came into play. "I could see that some of the ancient culture and craft was fast disappearing," Adams points out. "I wanted to record and preserve some of it before it was lost forever." The Soviet occupation, begun in 1979, added a moral imperative to his Far East sojourn. "I knew the Afghans were suffering," he adds, "and I wanted to see what was happening and if I could help in a humanitarian way." A second trip was in order, with the dual purpose of returning with saleable art, and aiding the Afghans who were struggling against the Soviets. As preparation, Adams contacted an organization called **Free Afghanistan** that was based in Washington DC, which helped him connect with the **National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (NIFA)**, who led him through remote villages in that war-torn country. He also contacted **International Medical Corps**, a humanitarian relief organization based in Los Angeles, California, that was established in 1984 by volunteer doctors



Giant thangka of the Present Buddha being unfurled at Tashilhunpo Monastery in Shigatse, Tibet. To grasp the sense of scale, note the people standing at the top and bottom of the Thangka Wall.



Peter Adams
Tibetan Monks, 1987
Procession of the Panchen Lama with the Yellow Hat Monks
Oil
Private Collection

and nurses. They addressed the critical need for medical care in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation. They trained and supported Afghan civilians as advanced medics, supplying them with the help they needed to treat residents in their home communities. “Though International Medical Corps didn’t help me get into Afghanistan, I came to recognize they were the most sensitive and best American relief

organization over there, and I feel honored to have supported them ever since,” Adams adds.

Before travelling to Afghanistan, Adams made his way through western China and Tibet. He was entranced by the centres of Buddhist mysticism in the Himalayas. In Shigatse, Tibet’s second largest city, Adams was able to witness the return of the **Panchen Lama**, who had been under house arrest in Beijing for twenty years. He

witnessed the unfurling of the tremendous Buddhist Tangka painting that stood approximately 75-foot high by 130-foot wide that was exhibited in honour of his return. His own painting *Tibetan Monks* (1987), depicts the red-robed Panchen Lama, Tibet’s second highest holy man. The glow that emanates from the men in the image betrays the admiration Adams gained from the people and the place.

“I saw the Buddhist culture as civilized



ABOVE:
Peter Adams painting head studies of patients at NIFA Hospital in Peshawar, Pakistan.

LEFT:
Yurt under Mt. Bogda, Xinjiang, PRC, 1987
Oil on panel 30" × 18"



Lal Mohammed, 1987

Gouache 17" × 13"

One of the NIFA patients who was suffering from a gunshot wound to the face.



The armed guards that escorted the covered body of Peter Adams by ambulance across the Afghan border.

and friendly," Adams offers. "The people were sweet, kind, and generous." He was free to paint anywhere he wanted, but at 17,000 feet up in the Himalayas, he had to add vodka and gin to his paints, lest they freeze. Adams next travelled through western China (Xinjiang Province) via the ancient Silk Route. On his way, he often stayed in yurts with Uighur and Kazakh families. He entered Pakistan by the Karakoram (Khunjerab) Highway and made his way to Peshawar where he spent a month. Peshawar is the capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province and is situated on the border of Afghanistan.

PESHAWAR WAS A CITY FULL OF intrigue and danger, where kidnappings and restaurant bombings were de rigueur. Pakistan's soon to be elected **Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto** passed through town. "I will always remember the cheers and the men dancing in front of her motorcade," Adams recalls. Unfortunately, Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in 2007. While Adams waited in Peshawar for his mission to be arranged to enter Afghanistan, he visited the NIFA hospital every day to paint portraits of wounded soldiers who were patients there.

Through the escalating war, he moved from Pakistan via a snow-covered pass in Kunar Province with a group of fifteen



Poplars of Afghanistan, 1987

With ruins of a 19th-century English fort in Kunar Province

Gouache 9" × 13"

members of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan. To blend in, the blonde and blue-eyed Adams grew a beard and dyed his hair dark brown, and dressed in the garb of the Mujahideen. He was spirited into Afghanistan in an ambulance while he was covered by a sheet and surrounded by eight armed Afghan warriors. Under the flinty eyes of border guards, he posed

as a slain soldier on his way home for burial. Once inside Afghanistan, his escorts all carried Kalashnikovs and occasional Enfield rifles. An armed thirteen-year-old boy guarded Adams while he painted in remote areas. "They told me," Adams relates, somewhat ruefully, "that they thought they'd be fighting the Soviets for the next twenty years."



Afghanistan Market, Peshawar, 1987
Gouache 10" × 14"

Adams is not a blood-and-gore artist; you won't see brutality in his work. His paintings portrayed his hosts as defiant yet amiable. Carrying his materials—painting and photographic—in a backpack, he stayed in the homes of Muslim families, in a mosque, and in rebel command posts. Adams relates, "Our mission in Afghanistan was to carry medical supplies to different clinics and ammunition to remote areas for the NIFA fighters." The painting *Afghanistan Supply Line* depicts their rugged group carrying supplies through a snowy pass.

ADAMS RECOUNTS, "WHEN I WAS inside Afghanistan, I never saw any combat or fighting up close. I was glad for that. Perhaps the most harrowing experience I had was when I woke up one morning and estimated that I had between 100 and 200 flea bites all over my body. Some of the Mujahideen that I had been sleeping alongside of, who had not received a single flea bite, had complained they heard a cat meowing most of the night. Apparently, the cat had fallen down a 90-foot dry well, just outside the mosque where we had been sleeping. I volunteered to go down and try to save the poor cat. As the men lowered me down with a rope and a bucket, I thought to myself, 'This is crazy, but if I don't come back, perhaps someone could put on my epitaph: 'He wasn't a well man!' When I reached the bottom, I put the cat in the bucket and the men hoisted the bucket up. When it got to about three feet from the top, all the Mujahideen led out a great cheer and the cat got scared and jumped out

of the bucket and fell down the well again and landed on my head. I will never forget the sight of that cat as she fell. She actually helped to break her fall by running in descending circles down the well walls. I was able to tie her back into the bucket and this time, they successfully pulled her to

safety. After getting back on terra firma, I wondered if that cat might have been the source of all my flea bites?"

Adams maintained an admirable work ethic on the trip. He produced at least one gouache or pastel painting a day, though there were days when he'd produced two or three. The photographic slides he took and numerous studies he made became the basis for several canvases that he later executed in his studio.

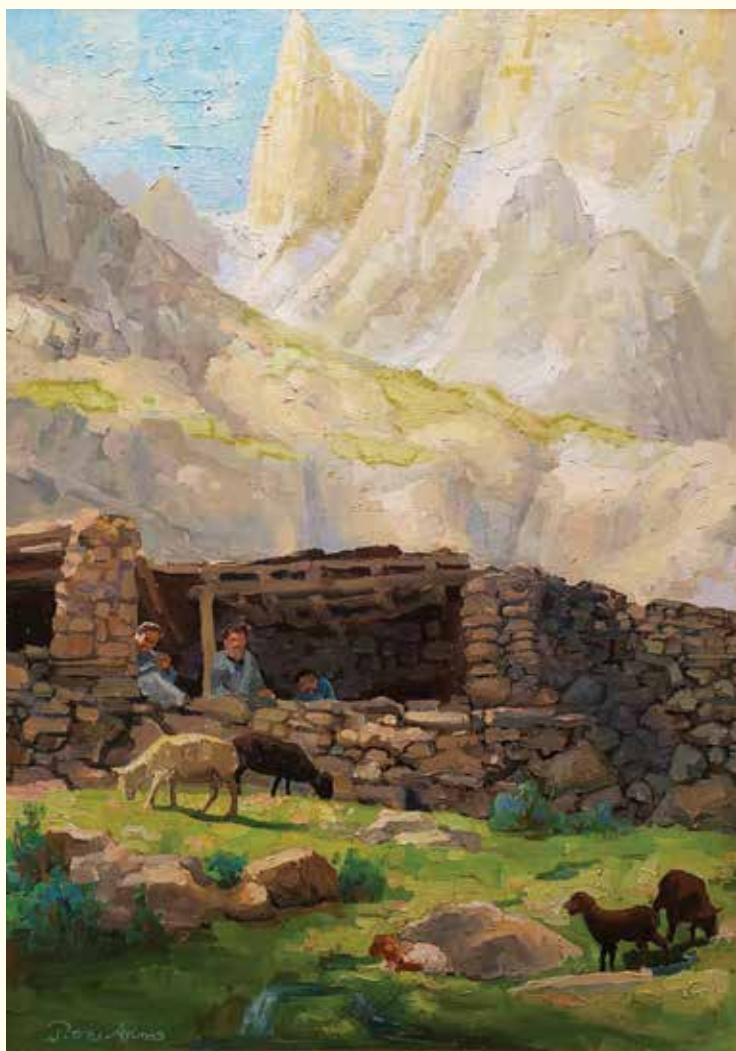
What did the six-month intensive experience do for his painting skills? "Oh," he answers quickly, "it made me a better artist, because I had to come up with something very quickly. It's like a chess game, where you jump in quickly, and then you have to come up with a strategy. It's very helpful to paint all the time; it's intensive training."

He had sick days, and days when the high altitude affected him and he would become faint, nauseous, and couldn't eat. At the end of the trip, Adams had shed thirty pounds. One truly harrowing experience was when Adams learned that the Soviets paid bounties for westerners—dead or alive. Physicians were worth \$7,000, and journalists brought in \$10,000. It was no doubt tempting to his Mujahadeen hosts, and Adams is moved by their actions today. "I encountered very few mean people on my two six-month trips," he concedes. "But my big takeaway was the general decency, kindness, generosity, and humanity of the people I came across."

He returned with 180 paintings, which he exhibited at the **Adamson-Duvannes Galleries** in West Los Angeles. Three nights of receptions added to the sense of his show being a grand event. "Most of the paintings sold the first two nights,"



Afghanistan Supply Line, 1988
Oil on panel 48" × 60"



Shepherds of Hunza, 1987
In the background is Ladyfinger Peak
(Bublimotin), 19,685 feet
Oil on panel 30" × 20"

he says with pride. On the third evening, Adams indulged his penchant for exotica—appearing in a Tibetan hat, a brocade Chinese jacket, Indian earrings, loose fitting pants from Thailand, and assorted jewellery from his travels, and a long braided black wig. That was the night Adams met **Elaine Shelby**; a year and half later they married. Together, they resuscitated the dormant **California Art Club**, making the organization the focal point and meeting place for figurative and landscape art in America.

TRUE TO HIS PURPOSE, ADAMS donated the proceeds of the sale of his paintings to International Medical Corps. More than thirty-five years after its founding, International Medical Corps is still in Afghanistan, delivering

services to nearly six-million people in fifteen provinces. Their team is made up of some 450 Afghan staff, mostly from the communities in which they work. They provide primary and secondary healthcare, support for women and girls, water, and sanitation and hygiene promotion. Adams adds, "They have saved countless lives, and are still saving lives and caring for the Afghan people—a people I came to know, love, and respect."

Adams concludes, "What I gained from my experience travelling through Asia as an artist is the importance of pushing beyond typical boundaries and to search for new environments, cultures, and ways of seeing things. My goal is to intertwine life and art and make it a process of discovery and adventure that I can share with others." 📷



A larger painting of *Afghanistan Supply Line* was later commissioned by a private collector.
Oil on panel 96" × 48"

Notes:

Kirk Silsbee writes about jazz and culture, and has written about art since 1990. His articles appear in various publications including L.A. Weekly, Downbeat, Artsmeme.com, Jewish Journal, and Downtown News. *Silsbee is known primarily as a music journalist, and has degrees in drawing and painting.*

Peter Adams is a Signature Member and President Emeritus of the California Art Club after serving twenty-eight years as President.

International Medical Corps is located at: 12400 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 1500, Los Angeles, CA 90025, 310/826-7800, www.internationalmedicalcorps.org