



Fire and Smoke, the End of It All: Manikarnika Ghat

Acrylic on hardboard, 16 x 20

Varanasi crudely brings the truth home. It took me a while to absorb the stark reality of the end of human existence. For the first few days of my trip, I fearfully avoided this area, climbing up to the lanes and descending a few ghats away from the burning pyres. Here, bodies were lined up in preparation for eternal salvation, while the dom, the officiator, mechanically went about his chore of organizing the rites. ❖ One day, emboldened by the nonchalance all around me, I took some time to observe the whole scene and found myself mesmerized by its darkly captive magic. I looked past the somber flames that shot up the wood pyre and saw the temple spires and watchtowers ominously gazing down upon this landscape as they have done for centuries. ❖ For the living, life moved on, just as it does everywhere. Children were flying kites, laughing. Women laden with baskets of flowers on their heads were headed for worship at a nearby shrine. Boatmen lay in wait to ferry the next load of passengers, one fixing a plank that had fallen loose. The four-legged menagerie of dogs, goats, buffalos, donkeys, and cows were making the usual nuisance of themselves. ❖ I sketched this “another day in the life” scene in about fifteen minutes, using color pencil to capture the interplay of light and shade. Later I completed an acrylic painting on hardboard that I prepared myself.

CHAPTER FOUR

INDIA ❖ VARANASI

DANCING TO THE DRUMBEAT: IN SHIVA’S KINGDOM

I was indeed in a land of contradictions. Here, what would be sacrilege seemed rather sacred. Hindus thrive alongside Buddhists and Jains. Sacred chants waft to the clang of bells in the breeze that ruffle the Ganges even as funeral pyres, otherwise shunned as unholy, hungrily consume the dead near hallowed shrines.

I was in Shiva’s kingdom — Varanasi, the City of Light, where sinners have been transformed into saints, where the demure Ganges washes away the horridly impure to reveal pristine goodness.

This is the holy kingdom of Shiva, where this divine caretaker watches over his citizens. In this city known as the “Great Cremation Ground,” he destroys Time in order to transport both the living and dead to a luminous beyond, forever liberating them from the interminable cycle of earthly strife.

Here Shiva whispers a secret mantra in the dead man’s ears, ensuring eternal salvation,” Mohan, our boatman, told us, heaving his oars against the swift current. Far away from his highland abode in the misty Himalayan mountains, this Hindu god rules over the age-old city of Varanasi, a land of inconsistencies.

A full moon was rising as the sounds of clanging bells and prayer fluted in the breeze. The flames of Manikarnika Ghat (left) roared hungrily, reducing the unending train of human



Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus Natus Est: Bethlehem

Watercolor on hot-pressed paper, 11 x 14

In the darkness of the grotto lit only by the flicker of oil lamps lay that revered symbol of Christianity: the Star of Nativity. In the center of this gleaming silver circle is inscribed the words: Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus Natus Est. Here, Jesus Christ was born of Virgin Mary. ❖ It was a solemn moment witnessing this emotional scene. The devout from far and wide had just fulfilled their single-minded goal, that of catching a glimpse of the spot where a savior had been born, one who would someday endure the sins of humanity. Many broke down, while others closed their eyes in silent prayer or bent down in front of the altar to kiss that magical star. ❖ It was hard to find a spot from where I could snap a quick photo, and I eventually had to nudge my way forward. Within the curtained enclosure of the altar, an array of lamps suspended from chains flickered in front of marbled walls, cloaked in what seemed like ancient Persian hangings. In the center of the flow, a multi-pointed silver star gleamed. ❖ I later sketched the scene and proceeded to paint this in watercolor, ignoring those finer details and symbols that are an important part of religion and faith. Later, I realized to my dismay that I had finished and signed a work with a star that was short of three points. The actual star has fourteen points, symbolizing, some say, the genealogy of Jesus, which encompasses three periods with fourteen generations each. ❖ Altering any work of watercolor is a challenge. Worse, I had painted this on light, hot-pressed paper, so rubbing off the paint with paper towels would inevitably destroy three days of dedicated work. Boldly, I painted a white acrylic coat, masking my eleven-point star, and layered several washes to create a star with its correct fourteen points. ❖ I couldn't have rested knowing I had incorrectly depicted something so deeply symbolic.

other. Violence was rife during the regime of the Ottoman Turks. The church even withstood a massive earthquake and a great fire.

With the jostle of eager pilgrims, it became quite congested within the cave. A narrow flight of stairs led me down to the Grotto of the Nativity, controlled by the Greek Orthodox, where it is believed Jesus was born. Marking the spot is the famous, glimmering silver Star of Nativity (left), kissed by countless pilgrims. Across from it is a recess where Jesus had lain in a manger.

Later in the evening, I walked past colorful markets to visit the Tomb of Rachel, one of Judaism's most sacred shrines and also revered by Muslims and Christians.

As our bus wended its way towards Tel Aviv, gun-toting soldiers were inspecting every vehicle that passed through the border checkpoint. The place was noisy: traffic jams, honking cars, angry passengers breaking into fistfights. It was far removed from that quiet night seen by the Magi many centuries ago.

NAZARETH: IN THE LAND OF JESUS

Nazareth marks a major chapter in Christianity." Moshe, my guide, pointed out the colorful Gilead mountains of Jordan from across the lake of Galilee. "It was Mary's hometown. Jesus spent many of his childhood years in what was then a poor village."

We were driving towards an age-old place predating Christianity. Now it is one of the most populous Arab townships in Israel.

It was a noisy Saturday morning. Driving by modern buildings and the offices of several software companies, I witnessed an altercation between a group of Palestinian youths and some Israeli guards at a checkpoint. Could this really be, I wondered, one of the holiest shrines of Christianity?

Past the muezzin's call, I came across several of the many monasteries and convents tucked away throughout this modern town. Believed to be the home of Mary and Joseph before the birth of Jesus, many of Nazareth's attractions were located in the older part of town.

Like many ancient sites in the Holy Land, history was buried here among layers of



Paradise on Earth: An Afternoon in Tulum

Watercolor pencil and brush on paper, 11 x 14 (above)

Ink and wash on paper, 11 x 14 (right)

Was this the legendary Maya paradise on earth? ❖ I clambered up to this rocky outcrop, viewing Tulum's El Castillo from the Temple of the Winds. These shrines and watchtowers would have witnessed scenes both routine and bizarre over the years. This structure towers atop a forty-foot bluff above the beach, facing the fleck of palaces and smaller monuments. ❖ As a cool breeze muffled the splash of the waters, I could well imagine the uncontained excitement of the first Spaniard, Juan de Grijalva, who sailed to Tulum. The Castillo and its ramparts, then painted bright red with blue and white motifs, must have gleamed in the setting sun. Apart from being a sacred structure, ⇨



it may have also served as a beacon; lit with huge torches, it would help the Maya in their wooden canoes, journeying from the islands nearby, to keep from straying towards treacherous reefs. These curious traders would have sailed towards the Spanish Armada laden with their treasured cacao beans and pearls, driven only by innocuous hospitality. The rest is sad history . . . ❖ The place resembled a picture postcard: palm trees, sun and sand, all the elements that make for a true vacation paradise. A palm tree had made itself bold, eagerly bending forward, cutting the vista in half. Agave sprang up everywhere as did other lush green shrubbery, lending verdant vigor to the landscape. ❖ I wanted to use light colors, to paint the picture as the fantasy it seemed to be. Almost without conscious thought, I decided to use watercolor pencils with a light wash, leaving most of the pencil strokes intact. ❖ I did another drawing of the El Castillo facade using an ink and brush on paper.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THAILAND ❖ SUKHOTHAI

DIVINITY IN STONE



Monk's Prayer on a Surreal Morning Wat Mahathat from Wat Tra Phang Ngoen

Watercolor, 18 x 24

This was indeed a dreamlike scene. As sacred chants in the Pali language wafted from across the pond, an early-morning fog enveloped the landscape. In the distance I could make out the tall spires of Wat Mahathat and a few stone guardians that kept vigilant watch and blessed the pious. A lone monk clad in ocher robes was offering his worship at a Buddha shrine. ❖ As my guide chattered away with historical facts and architectural details, I lost him to the rapturous sight before me. In this special moment, there wasn't any need for dogma or man-made faith — just the joy of being there and my gratitude for being able to both relish and capture it. Words couldn't do it justice, nor brushstrokes make fair representation; the canvas here was infinitely more vast, handled by an artist with far more skill and expertise, and blessed with a color palette more intricate than a human hand could ever hope to mix. ❖ Nonetheless, I later sketched this scene and coated my cold-pressed paper with eight layers of washes before I could even faintly recreate what I had witnessed that morning. ❖ I returned to Wat Tra Phang Ngoen a bit later in the day to find the scene looking very different — the sun was now smiling down, bringing light to reveal every historical detail that an enthusiast could revel in! ❖ The artist's mystery that had so enchanted me was now a thing of the past.

Scattered throughout the quiet grounds were watchful Buddhas as far as I could see.

As I pedaled my rusty loaner bicycle past the ruins of temples, funerary monuments, and ancient palaces — now a site of hushed slumber — I couldn't help wondering how this ancient symbol of Thai power could, according to legend, have sent an invading Burmese army fleeing in terror.

Then I saw the thirty-five-foot tall colossus sitting in contemplative meditation under the famous fig tree.

And I understood.

Distant Buddhist chants wafted with the breeze that rippled across the pond of Wat Mahathat that Saturday morning. It seemed those gigantic figures were watching my every movement across this labyrinth of sacred spots: gigantic Buddhas towered everywhere, some seated in calm meditation, many standing in benediction, a few posed as if walking in meditative reflection, and some stretched in silent repose.