

The World Is Your Studio

THERE'S NOTHING QUITE LIKE SKETCHING AND PAINTING FOR CAPTURING THE MEMORIES OF YOUR TRAVEL ADVENTURES. TAKING THE TIME TO OBSERVE THE DETAILS ALLOWS US TO SEE THE WORLD WITH EYES WIDE OPEN.

By Anne Hevener



The 19th-century writer-naturalist Henry David Thoreau said, "It's not what you look at that matters, it's what you see." It's a statement that perfectly elucidates the benefits of traveling with your sketching materials. To make a sketch of that bustling piazza or glorious cathedral requires time. It demands that you slow down enough to really take notice of the scene in front of you. That extra effort, however, is also the payoff, for an unhurried pace assures a deeper experience and a greater appreciation of your subject.

Suhita Shirodkar, Stephen Harby and Hazel Soan are three artists who clearly know how to relish the joys of travel. In the following pages, you'll see how brush and paint are vital to their experience of a place.

Hazel Soan loves painting the Maasai cattle herders in their colorful blankets. "The Maasai are tall, which makes for elegant shapes," Soan says. "In *Companions, Maasai Herders* [12x26], I'm intrigued by the gaps and spaces between the limbs and robes of the men and the cattle's legs. I painted this watercolor across the spread of a Khadi paper sketchbook; hence, the middle seam. This paper is a rough, long-fibered cotton paper, which holds water longer, making it easier to work wet-into-wet in a hot climate." She used yellow ochre, cadmium red, violet, ultramarine blue and brown madder.



Suhita Shirodkar made this small sketch (about 7x9) of the Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of Fine Arts) in Mexico City from the top of the Torre Latinoamericana building. "I worked quickly and nearly in blind contour with the line to capture this complex angle without any real perspective setup," she says.



I made this in my 5x8-inch Pentalic sketchbook on site in the Piazza della Rotonda in front of the Pantheon in Rome. This structure, built in 112 A.D. by the emperor Hadrian is widely viewed as the greatest wonder of the world. I blocked out a rough pencil outline, then applied a series of layered washes using a single tone (a 1:4 mix of ultramarine blue and burnt sienna). The first layer is diluted and covers the page except for highlight areas where I leave the white of the paper for maximum illumination.

Suhita Shirodkar

The Life of the City

Working primarily in pen, ink and watercolor, artist Suhita Shirodkar (suhitasketch.com) does most of her sketching on location, working quickly to capture an impression of the world around her. “That first, quick, almost calligraphic capture is the one that gets to the heart of the subject,” she says. Shirodkar is also a freelance illustrator, and a teacher, who travels the world with the Urban Sketchers Symposium.

Q Tell us about your traveling life.

A My travel experiences range from trips I take to teach urban sketching and trips I take with my family. My husband and I have two children, ages 10 and 12, and I’ve painted on all of our family travels since they were 2 and 4 years old. Seeing me work is second nature to them.

I travel domestically and internationally, and I love it all. I think I could live out of a suitcase with just a few trips back home for a little break now and again. In reality, though, I travel about three or four times a year—usually a week or two at a time.

Q How do your travels impact your art-making?

A Most of my art is plein air urban sketching and painting, created on location. It’s an unedited response to where I am, what I see, and what it feels like. That’s what makes traveling such a great space in which to create: I see more keenly than usual, and I’m more aware of experiences.

Q Describe your sketching process.

A Each sketch is made quickly in a single pass—almost always in less



than an hour, which forces me to work small. I never touch up my pieces later; I like to preserve that first impression. So, I leave in the dripping paint, the “unfinished” bits, the smudges and smears; they’re a part of the experience. Also, most of my work is done with colors mixed wet-into-wet: It makes for less predictable results, but allows for the watercolor to work its magic.

Q What do you carry with you?

A I carry a sketchbook, typically a 9x12-inch Stillman & Birn Beta; a small travel-sized palette with a mix of artist watercolors; water; brushes; and pens. My “portable studio,” as I like to call my sketch bag, accompanies me everywhere I go—not only when I travel, but also in my everyday life.

Q How do your travels continue to inspire your art-making at home?

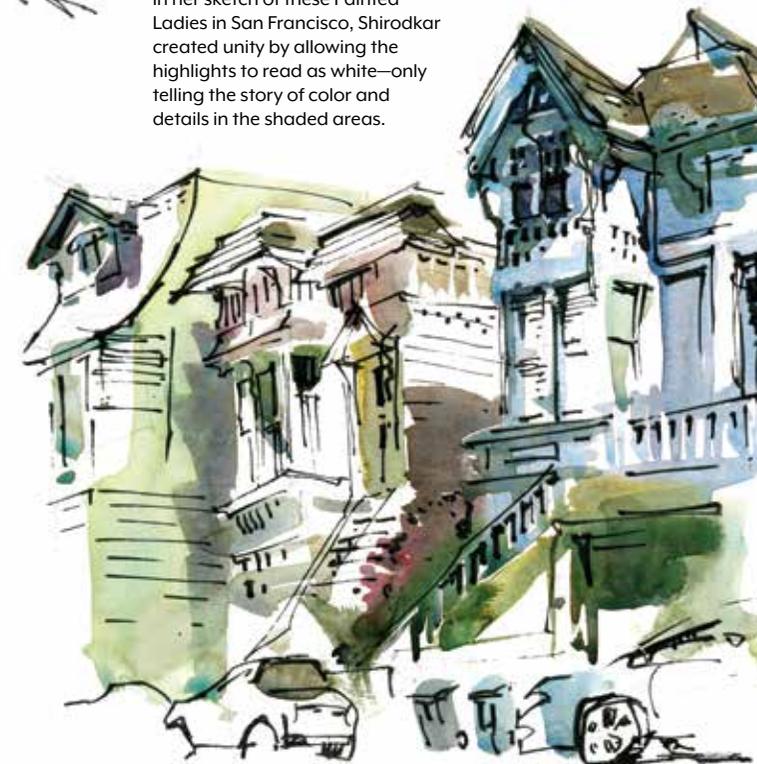
A I try to keep a bit of the traveler in me even in life at home—to help me see the unusual in the everyday and

[Brian: Switch out for Spitting Fountain] Shirodkar visited Chicago in 2017 for an Urban Sketchers Symposium, and sketched in the city during breaks in her teaching schedule. “The energy at Crown Fountain is exactly what I love about cities—the buzz of people gathered together in shared spaces,” she says. “Here, the kids and adults romped in the cool water while the huge fountain ‘spat’ water at them.”



After sketching the Empire State Building on a New York City street, Shirodkar turned to face south and caught this lively scene with pedestrians and taxis in front of the Flatiron Building.

In her sketch of these Painted Ladies in San Francisco, Shirodkar created unity by allowing the highlights to read as white—only telling the story of color and details in the shaded areas.



mundane stuff. The little things that happen in life then become events and scenes worth capturing.

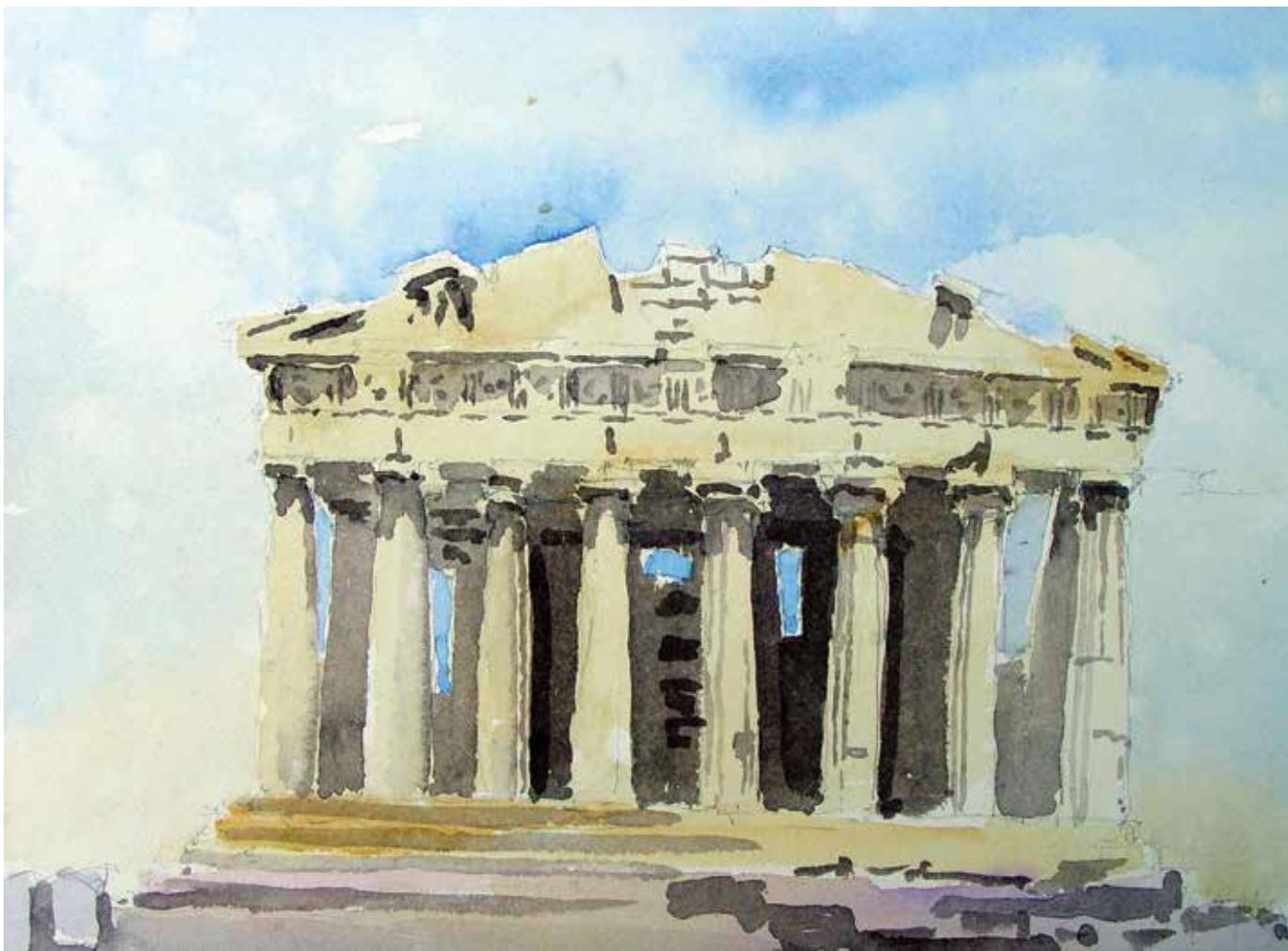
Q What types of places do you recommend for the best sketching opportunities?

A Travel to places that attract your interest. Some people are drawn to quiet places in nature; others to great architecture; others to busy city streets. Each has its own challenges, but as long as it’s a place that speaks to the artist, any challenge can be resolved. Standing in New York City at a bustling intersection to sketch isn’t an obstacle for me; it’s my happy place. Find your happy place and then try to capture the spirit of what moves you in your work.

4 Tips for the Traveling Artist

1. Even if you’re primarily a studio painter, carry a sketchbook wherever you go. Sketch the little things—the impressions that may get lost later if not noted: a gusty breeze, the light at a particular hour, the feeling of being in a crowd.
2. Learn to paint with a limited color palette and a (relatively) easy setup. The more mobile you can be, the more adventurous you can get with where and what you paint. Since I love to paint in the city, I’ve learned how to work standing up, while holding my supplies, in a crowded space.
3. Be truly interested in the places and people you encounter. It makes a huge difference to your art if you feel a personal connection to a place—no matter how many times it has been painted before.
4. Be flexible and willing to change a plan to respond to what you might encounter. When traveling, the best paintings often arise from grabbed opportunities.

—Suhita Shirodkar



BELOW
Harby created this larger-format piece on site at the Temple of Angkor Wat in Siem Reap, Cambodia. This is the great lost city of the Khmer kings whose heyday lasted from the ninth to the 14th century A.D. "I painted at sunrise," he says, "as the forms of the temple emerged from the mist right before my eyes. It's a reminder of the plein air challenge: While there's pressure to adapt to changing conditions, one must fix the scene to a specific point in time."

A I'd say that 80 percent of my past work has been done in the field during travels, which means that both the size and amount of detail is limited by the constraints of time on site and size of my luggage. Within the past few years, however, I've become more interested in working in the studio to complete larger, more complex paintings that are inspired by sketches and smaller watercolors I produced on site. Thus, my travel sketchbooks, of which I have dozens, serve as a catalyst for potential larger-format paintings.

Q What's your favorite location for painting and sketching?

A My favorite place to sketch and paint by far is Venice, Italy, just as it must have been for Whistler, Turner, Sargent and so many other artists before me. Called "la Serenissima" when it was an autonomous republic, its serene atmosphere results from the absence of the bustle and clatter of wheeled vehicles—banished since canals replace streets and roads.

The quality and movement of light, thanks to the city's marine atmosphere and the reflections off of the water, offer endless inspiration as does the wonderful architecture, which is always presented with great vistas and viewpoints.

I also find Rome, which I've had the pleasure to visit many times over the past 50 years and where I've taught architecture students for more than a decade, greatly inspiring due to its rich palimpsest of architecture from all ages. I'm sure I've done more sketches and paintings in that ancient city than anywhere else.



The Things He Carries

I always travel with at least a sketchbook, but often bring a setup for painting with an easel on larger sheets of loose paper. I never check luggage, so I've organized my kit to be as light and compact as possible. I use a lightweight camera tripod with telescoping legs, on which I've mounted a 9-inch aluminum strip which holds a sliding clip. This, in turn, secures a Masonite board cut to fit the side flap of my roll-aboard suitcase. Two of these boards sandwich however many sheets of paper I think I'll be able to use. I've created a thin plywood piece that slips onto two of the tripod legs to serve as a place to hold water, palette and brushes. This setup allows me to work standing up and eliminates the need for a folding stool, which took up valuable space.

—Stephen Harby



"I did this monochrome sketch at the Pyramids in Giza in my sketchbook," says Harby. "These are the largest man-made structures on earth and the only surviving wonder of the world as identified in Hellenistic times. I defined perhaps four gradations of light value from full sun to deep shadow using layered washes. The vast scale and emptiness of the space is conveyed and dramatized by these colossal objects."

Stephen Harby

A World of Architectural Wonder

Stephen Harby (stephenharby.com) is an architect, educator and artist. He maintains an architecture practice in Santa Monica, Calif., and is a visiting lecturer at the Yale School of Architecture, where he has directed the school's study program in Rome since 2002. He also leads cultural and artistic tours for small select groups to destinations all over the world.

Q Describe your experiences as a world traveler.

A I've decided that I was born to be a passionate traveler. My American parents were sojourning in London upon my birth and brought me home at six

months on the legendary Cunard Lines ocean liner, the SS Queen Elizabeth. Since then—well, since the age of autonomy—I've traveled as often as the spirit, funds and opportunity permit.

Q How does traveling impact your art-making?

A One non-negotiable tenet of the Yale School of Architecture was that students maintain a sketchbook to document phenomena observed in the built and natural environments. For me and others, watercolor made its way into these sketchbooks to give added clarity and vividness. It wasn't long before my images got larger and transitioned from the rather unforgiving paper of the typical sketchbook to the inviting surfaces of Arches 140-lb cold-pressed.

Q How do your travels continue to inspire you at when you're home working in the studio?

ABOVE
Harby made this full-color watercolor on 11x14 Arches paper. "The Parthenon, which sits atop the Acropolis in Athens," he says, "is one of the earliest buildings [447-432 BCE] designed by known architects, Iktinos and Kallikrates. The use of color permits the bright warm tone of the stone to be framed by the cool blue sky, and the gradations of light created by the sun-cast shadows define the forms."

Hazel Soan

In the African Bush

On a painting holiday in Kenya, Hazel Soan's group was invited to paint in a Maasai Village in the Rift Valley. "The people were welcoming and even invited us back for a wedding," says Soan. "It was the colorful sarongs that attracted me to paint **Mother Africa** [watercolor on paper, 30x22], depicting three Maasai ladies engaged in a group conversation."

Artist Hazel Soan (allsoanup.com) grew up in the U.K., where she studied at Camberwell and Leicester art colleges. Her work has been exhibited widely in her home country and farther afield at venues in Namibia, Venezuela, South Africa and Zimbabwe, among other places. Soan has been traveling across Africa since 1981 and keeps a studio in Cape Town as well as in West London. The people and animals of Africa—particularly those in the Cape Peninsula and Malawi—feature prominently in her work.

Q Tell us about your traveling life.

A I travel often and frequently, sometimes for prolonged periods and always for painting. When I left college, a professor gave me three pieces of advice: Always maintain

a studio where you can work uninterrupted; always have an exhibition on the horizon that you can work toward; and always travel, so you never get into a rut.

Q How do your travels impact your art-making?

A Almost all of my work is made during my travels or back in the studio using reference from my trips, so my art-making impacts my travels rather than vice versa. I love to paint strong light and shadow, and I prefer to paint with yellows, reds, blues and browns than with greens, so I'm often traveling to places that offer abundant sunshine and arid landscapes.

Q How do you combine travel with your sketching and painting?

A Watercolor is ideal for travel as the materials aren't cumbersome. I carry my materials in a shoulder bag: brushes, an enamel palette with pans, 5-ml tube colors, three lightweight water pots, a kitchen towel, a pencil, a blade, an eraser and water. My paper [[Hazel: which is?](#)] fits inside the bag, unless I'm traveling by car, in which case I might bring something larger. The idea is to have the bag over my shoulder, with my right hand free, so that as soon as I see something I want to paint, I need only to flip back the lid of the bag; grab my palette, brushes, water and paper; sit myself down or lean on a wall; and begin.

I usually have a camera in my bag, too, for momentary subjects that are impossible to paint on site. I carry about 35 tube colors, but use very few in any one painting. Sometimes I'll go out with just three or six colors and a couple of brushes carried in my pockets. You can paint anything if you have a cool and warm version of the three primary colors.



"Elephants are lovely creatures," says Soan, "and artistically, they offer wonderful form and mass for painting. Being gray, they can be painted with yellow, red and blue in quick succession by building both the tone and color through the values inherent to those three hues." Soan's painting, **The Silent, Heard** (watercolor, 11x15), depicts a herd that had just come down from the forest slopes of Kilimanjaro to cross the plain at Amboseli.

Q What advice would you give to a would-be travel painter?

A Do it. While traveling to a faraway destination may seem daunting before departure, once you're on the road, it gets easier. In my experience, what you forget to pack is usually available in some form—or doesn't matter anyway. And, people are generally eager to help anyone in trouble. A motto on my studio wall in Cape Town says: "Fear is temporary, regret is forever." There's so much to see and paint; don't put it off. One last tip: Don't forget spare batteries for your camera! **WA**



"I used only Prussian blue and cadmium red for **Incoming** [watercolor, 14x11]," Soan says. "The painting demonstrates what I love about watercolor—that less is more. The white paper as the light, the power of suggestion, the descriptive brushstroke and complementary nature of color all combine to make an impact. The ambassador to the European Union in Southern Africa commissioned a life-size print, which hangs at the embassy in Windhoek, Namibia.

For the Love of Elephants

I first traveled to Africa in 1981 when I was offered an exhibition in Harare, Zimbabwe, just after the country gained independence. Unfortunately, I learned on opening night that I was forbidden by Customs and Excise to sell anything. So, I went off instead to the National Reserve and fell in love with elephants! I've returned to Africa almost every year since, painting wildlife on safari. My wet-into-wet approach to watercolor was born and honed while painting on these trips.

I particularly like painting the Kalahari, because a lack of thick foliage means I can see, and therefore paint, the whole animal from top to toe. Herd animals are great to paint; when one animal moves on, another takes up the pose of the first.

— Hazel Soan