



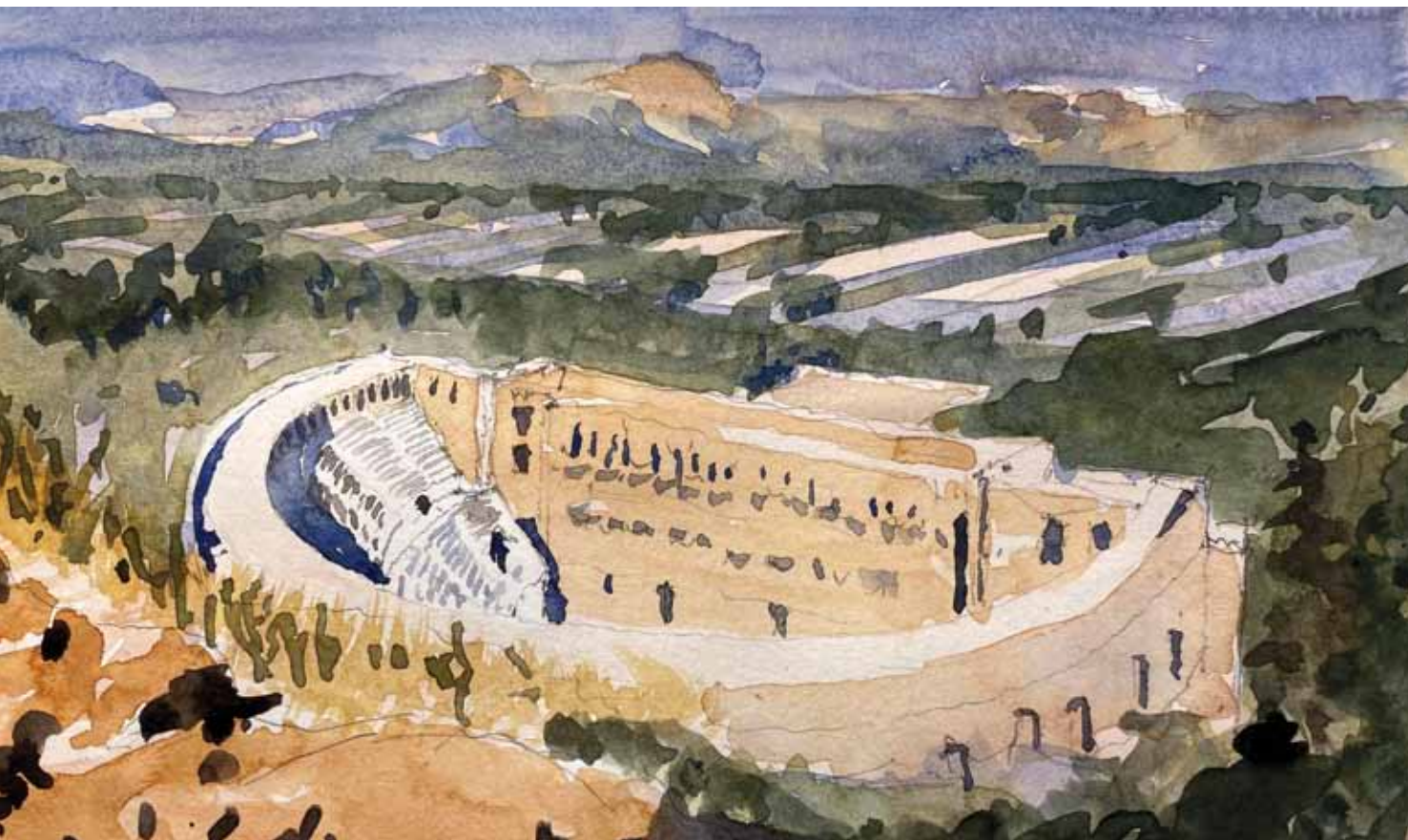
Open-Air Drama

The Muses still thrive in ancient Greek and Roman theaters.

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY Stephen Harby



Theater at Pergamon, Turkey (graphite and watercolor, 4½x7½) is a sketchbook study of a third-century B.C. Hellenistic (Greek) structure. It's one of the steepest of ancient theaters and seats approximately 10,000 people.



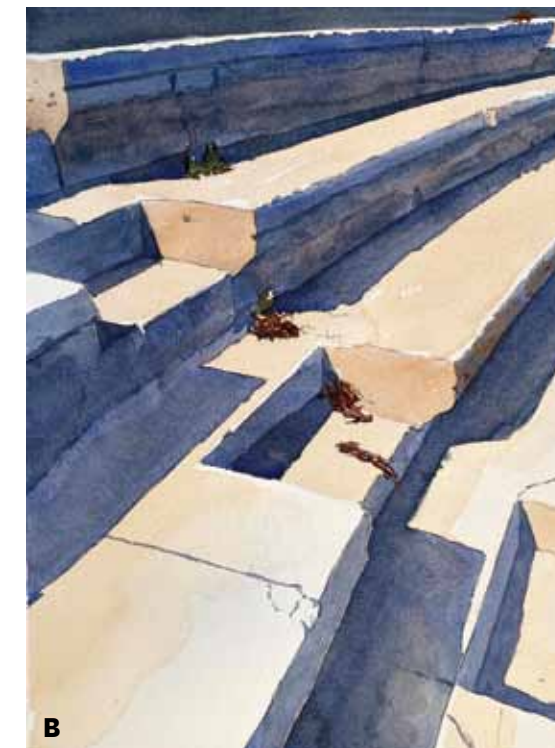
actors wore masks to identify which characters they were representing—so they would have easily adjusted to pandemic recommendations.

The earliest Greek theaters took advantage of the local mountainous landscape; wooden benches followed the contour of a hillside and often

faced a dramatic view. As time went on, the wooden benches gave way to tiers carved out of rock, and a modest single-story structure provided a backdrop for the actors. Every city of any stature had to have its own theater, and today, archaeologists often estimate the local populations based

on the capacity and number of theaters. The largest of these structures could accommodate up to 20,000 spectators. The fact that all of these people could hear and see the action is a marvel of design and engineering for which ancient theaters are justly famous. This model is used in theater

AUDITION AND FINAL PERFORMANCE



A quick 7½x4½ graphite and watercolor sketchbook study (A) of the second-century **Roman theater at Aspendos, Pamphylia, Turkey** (near Antalya), served as an audition for the subject of my 12x9 studio painting (B), also in graphite and watercolor on paper.

Having dealt with the closing of indoor restaurants and theaters this year, many of us are all the more appreciative of outdoor recreation. We've seen everything from dining to spinning classes move into the open. Even drive-in movie theaters have experienced a revival.

The ancient Greeks and Romans, however, were way ahead of us.

Nearly three thousand years ago, they regularly gathered for al fresco entertainment. This was partly because the building technology at the time precluded creating large enclosures of sufficient size, but also because the warm climatic conditions of the region made gathering in the open air far more comfortable than packing into a crowded interior. Interestingly, the

The second-century **Roman theater at Aspendos, Pamphylia, Turkey** (near Antalya), is fully self-supporting as opposed to being part of a hillside. As my graphite and watercolor sketchbook study (4½x7½) shows, however, the structure was built against a hill so as to maintain continuity with Greek traditions. Even so, the closed perimeter sets the theater apart from the world around it, giving the building quite a different feeling from Greek theaters, which were part of the landscape. As one of the best-preserved of ancient theaters, it's still in use today.

IN SITU AND IN STUDIO



A

I created my 5x8¼ *in situ* study (A) of the second-century Roman theater at Xanthos, Lycia, Turkey, in a sketchbook with relatively smooth paper. By using the side of a soft pencil lead, I could block out the picture quickly, focusing on overall shapes and tones rather than details. The two pillar tombs on the right may be as old as fourth century B.C. Traveling in a group, not to mention the hot sun, made creating a more finished work impossible. Back in the studio, however, I created a 10½x14 painting in graphite and watercolor (B). The rows of seats are made of large blocks of finely cut stones. The aisle steps, also stone, are half the height of the seats.



B

design even today. Except for VIPs, who had throne-like individual chairs in the front row, theatergoers sat on continuous benches that wrapped around the stage in a semicircular configuration. Tiered rows enhanced sight lines and proximity to the action. The resulting bowl-shaped structure produced exceptional acoustical properties. Seating was divided into

pie-shaped sections with steep steps providing access to the rows and with level cross aisles further separating the seats into vertical sections. These sectional divisions mirrored the socioeconomic stratification of society.

While Greek theaters were almost always built into the natural contours of the land, Roman theaters, although generally adopting the

same semicircular, tiered format, are more typically freestanding; a superstructure supports the seating and tall stage structures rise to the same height as the topmost row of seats. Since many ancient Greek cities were later colonized by the Romans, it's not unusual to find Greek theaters that have been modified by the Romans. These modifications consisted not



Located in a wonderfully wild and picturesque site where the remains of a second-century city include houses, a capitol building, baths and other well-preserved structures, the Roman theater at Dougga, Teboursook, Tunisia, accommodated 3,500 spectators. The colonnade on the left of my sketchbook study (ink and watercolor, 5¾x8) identifies the stage structure. The shadows tell the story in this work.

Splendid structures exist in Southern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa—from Spain to France to Italy and on to Greece, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco. They offer limitless inspiration, the challenge of rigorous geometry and striking compositions of structures within natural landscapes. My own continuing quest of capturing form as defined by light and shadow has been richly rewarded by the theaters I've visited and depicted. 🍷

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The dramatic site of the theater of Taormina, Sicily, Italy, was originally built by the Greeks in the third century B.C. The Romans added a brick stage, which would have largely obscured the view across the town of Taormina, out to the bay of Naxos and on to Mt. Etna (a still active volcano). After many visits to the site, I recently completed this painting (graphite and watercolor on paper, 13¾x18) in my studio. I based this work on a smaller watercolor I'd begun, but never finished, 20 years ago.

only of adding larger stage structures but also of adapting the theaters to forms of entertainment offering more mass appeal. While the Greeks went to the theater for highly sophisticated dramas based on mythology and philosophical concepts, by Roman times the fare was popularized with a greater emphasis on action, music and comedy. During the time of the

late Roman Empire, many theaters underwent conversions so they could be used for gladiatorial events with wild animals.

A sightseeing tour of these theaters, whether imagined or actual, could encompass any of the countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea and forming part of the former ancient Greek and Roman world.