

Splendor

Exotic

DAVID NAPP'S PASTELS ARE ADVENTURES IN RESPLENDENT COLOR and bravura mark-making. We travel along on some of his real-world adventures as he transports us to the bazaars of Marrakesh, the thronged cities of India, the warmth of the Italian countryside, and the cosmopolitan splendors of London and Rome. Whether it's Waterloo Bridge at night or an Italian hill town under snow, Napp brings a sense of relish, a feeling of raw pleasure at being in a particular place at a particular moment. His views and motifs are carefully chosen and simplified to a compelling clarity. Detail is stripped away, forms are massed and color is built to achieve a transformative vibrancy.

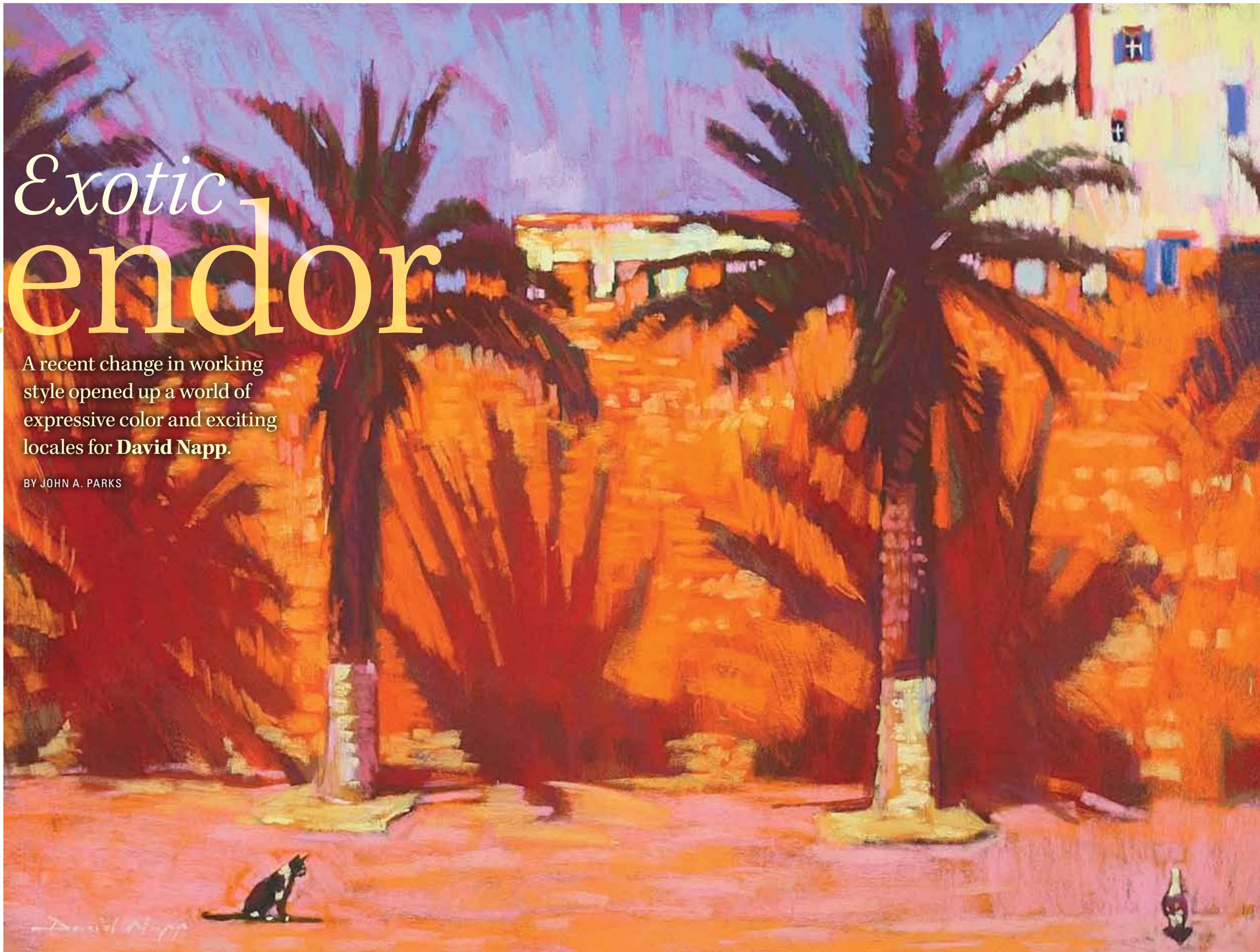
Pushing the Limits

More than merely descriptive, Napp's color choices push the outer limits of naturalism. In *Grand Designs* (at right), a mud brick wall in Morocco becomes a glowing, saturated orange on which palm trees cast brilliant red shadows. The sky behind the vast Battersea Power Station in London becomes a heavy green overlaid with

Grand Designs (23½x31½)

A recent change in working style opened up a world of expressive color and exciting locales for **David Napp**.

BY JOHN A. PARKS





Clockwise:

Highlights
(23½x31½)

Winds of Change
(19¾x25½)

Tower Station
(19¾x25½)

powerful red strokes in *Tower Station* (opposite). The excitement of these electrified, transposed worlds is matched by the thrill of the pastel strokes, which Napp applies with an enormous vigor, a take-no-prisoners attack. A sense of movement takes over, which helps to sweep the eye around the image and confer a sense of joy and vitality. “I really assault the paper,” he says. But for all its energy, Napp’s work is underpinned by accomplished draftsmanship, and a sophisticated sense of design and composition.

To aid the composition process, he’ll use a cardboard square or simply make his fingers into a box shape to frame the subject in front of him. If he makes preparatory sketches, he may grid them to ensure that the composition is transferred accurately. The very orderliness of the composition enables the freedom of attack that’s so beguiling to the viewer.

Working Fast

When it comes to building his pastel surface, Napp says, “You have to build pastel like oil paint, starting with the darks and building up to the lights. Also, like oil, you have to work from thin layers underneath to heavier layers on top.”

After he has established his composition in outline, the artist relies on a big set of Rembrandt pastels to begin building active color layers without putting too much loose pastel on the surface. Darks are massed in and basic color areas are established. Napp frequently skews the color in the early layers of pastel, putting down red-oranges on areas that will eventually be green, or placing greens in areas that will be red. “For the final layers, I use a soft pastel, usually Sennelier or Schmincke,” says Napp. “The hues are much more vibrant with these brands, but a lot of the color work already has been done by the harder pastel layers underneath.”

Like many pastelists, Napp wrestles with the consequences of going back and reworking a pastel. “In the end,” he says, “my most successful pieces are the ones that are done the fastest, when everything comes together in a rush, and there’s no reworking.” After he has completed a piece, Napp has one final ritual. “Since I never fix anything, I have to tap the work quite sharply on the back to ensure that any loose pastel falls away. Otherwise, it will drive my poor framer crazy.”



Heading Down a New Path

For the first 30 years of his career, Napp worked directly from life, traveling the world with easels and pastels in tow. Then, on a 2010 trip to Marrakesh, he found that it was too difficult to paint the subjects he was interested in from life. “The bazaars, or souks, are designed with very narrow streets so that people are forced to look at the merchandise on the stalls,” he says, “and every so often a truck comes down collecting rubbish, or a taxi will push its way through. There just wasn’t any room to work. And then there were light effects—shafts of sunlight breaking into shadows—that were transitory. I decided to use photography. And of course, it was difficult because the locals don’t really like having their photos taken.”

Still, Napp discovered that photography allowed him to take on painting subjects in light conditions he’d never have been able to attempt otherwise. “I’d never done a night painting,” he says, “because you just can’t see color at night.” Once he was back in the studio, he found he could adjust the values in his digital photographs to make all kinds of nocturnal conditions accessible.



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THE PATH TO PASTEL

The adventurous spirit depicted in Napp's work springs from the adventurous trajectory of his own artistic life. "I didn't do very well in high school," recalls the artist. "I didn't like the discipline, being told to straighten my school tie and to behave properly, so I left school at 16. I was only interested in music and art, and I eventually found my way to art school."

Once in a more relaxed environment, and encouraged by enthusiastic tutors, Napp quickly caught the drawing bug. "Sometimes we had to be in the life room drawing the figure every day of the week," he says. In addition, some of Napp's teachers invited him to work with them in the Kent countryside on the weekends. "Standing in the cold for hours on end turns you into a human icicle, so these glacial weekend painting excursions were an exercise in pure masochism," he says. "Did it put me off? Not a bit. I was hooked."

It was at this stage that Napp embraced the pastel medium, delighting in its portability, immediacy and singing color. "Before I went to art school, my work mostly had been monochrome," he says. "Suddenly I was excited about color. Pastel was a wonderful choice."

His love of color also was reinforced by Claude Monet's paintings. "He was the consummate colorist," says Napp. "I particularly admire his series paintings—the renditions of haystacks or a line of poplars—under a variety of light conditions. It's an almost scientific approach."

Although photography allows him to take on subjects that would otherwise be beyond his reach, he's deeply aware of the pitfalls of relying too heavily on the camera. "A photograph is only a starting point for me," he says. "I'm quite prepared to make all kinds of alterations. If you looked at my reference photos, you'd see that they're very different from the final work. I don't think I'd have been able to do any of these pieces if I didn't have all of those years of working directly from life under my belt."

Exploring New Locales

While choosing to live in places that inspire him—Kent, England; Provence, France; and currently the foothills of Abruzzo, Italy—Napp also seeks out exotic regions to fuel his work. He has traveled to Morocco a number of times, and took a trip to India last year, visiting nine holy cities. "I knew I wouldn't be able to work on site," says the artist, "so I took my camera and sketchbook."

Aided by a friend who has lived in India for many years, Napp managed to arrange for a taxi driver to ferry them around nearly 2,000 miles of Indian roads to visit holy places, finishing at the city of Varanasi on the Ganges River. "The noise, the clamor, the almost-tangible sense of spirituality and the sheer concentration of people was an experience



Clockwise from opposite:

The Burning Ghat, Varanasi (23½x31½)

Crackerjacks (23½x31½)

Bottlebrush (25½x19¾)

I wouldn't have coped with it if I'd gone there first," says Napp. "This is considered the holiest place in India. It's also the place where devout Hindus prefer to die."

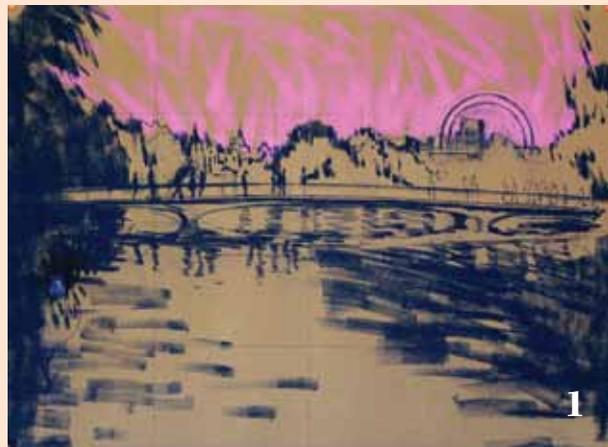
Funeral rites involve burning the bodies on the funeral ghats, concrete steps down by the river. "All the structures are covered with blackened smoke stains and charcoal," he says. "At night, it reminded me of those scenes in *Apocalypse Now*, where buildings are illuminated deep in the jungle." Photography isn't permitted at the funeral rites, but Napp found that a boatman would take people out on the river and turn a blind eye while passengers took photos. "I felt a bit guilty doing it," he says, "but after all, that was the reason I was there." *The Burning Ghat, Varanasi* (opposite) shows the view from the riverboat at twilight. The water has become a rich red-yellow, reflecting the flames on the shore, while the temples form dark silhouettes against the lilac skyline.

Napp was also in India at the time of the festival of Holi, when bonfires and firework displays on the first night are part of the tradition. In his pastels of the subject, such as



MAKE A COLORFUL START

A strong underlayer of pastels, often skewed in color, serve as the foundation for many of Napp's paintings. Here's how he achieves brilliant color.



STEP 1: Napp begins by using a grid to transfer the image from a sketch to a piece of toned pastel paper. The pencil grid is visible lightly here. The outline is drawn carefully in pencil, and the darks are massed in with a deep blue. The pink laid in the sky will provide considerable color action when blue is placed over it.

STEP 2: The broad masses of the subject are laid out with clean, sure strokes of pastel. The blue now sits over the pink in the sky, while the trees are established in an unlikely brilliant orange in preparation for a later layer of color.

STEP 3: Greens are laid over the orange of the trees to create active, vibrant color. The sky has been built further, and some of the complexity of the lights and shadows of the bridge are put into play. Napp includes a full account of the railings on the bridge, a meticulous counterpoint to the freer strokes elsewhere.



FINAL: The last strokes are added to the rippling water in the foreground and the buildup of the swan in the middle ground. The pastel exhibits extraordinary freshness and directness; there's no evidence of fussing or backtracking in *The Blue Bridge, St. James's Park, London* (23½x31½).

Crackerjacks (on page 39), brilliant sparks and flames explode on the surface of the paper, often silhouetting people in movement around them. Other paintings from the trip show ordinary moments in Indian life: a man riding a bicycle, an elephant striding across a roundabout and a group of women walking gracefully in their flowing saris. These works project the intensity and joy of life that captivates so many travelers to India. "You'll be driving along a road and see people who are living in cardboard tents by the roadside, and they'll be smiling and waving at you," says Napp. "They have almost nothing, and yet they're happy and full of life. They'll share anything they have with you."

Adventures at Home

In addition to his foreign travels, Napp finds adventure and transport in scenes of industrial structures. A line of wind generators in *Winds of Change* (on page 37) is poignantly dwarfed by a sky of yellow-orange clouds almost exploding with energy as they radiate from a setting sun. Here the power of nature is monstrously larger than anything we humans can dream up. A view over London in *Highlights* (on page 36) amplifies the glow of streetlights and ambient light bouncing off the clouds to create a sense that the entire city is radiating an improbable energy.

Some of Napp's recent work exploits more domestic excitements. "I've got this bottlebrush

plant growing in the garden," he says. "It's just a brilliant red, and it's running riot." Napp's pastel version, *Bottlebrush* (on page 39), incorporates his penchant for movement as the pastel strokes create a set of powerful overlaid flows and eddies. Elements have been abstracted to simple shapes, while the air seems to be moving with almost supernatural force. It's as though Napp has discovered all the exoticism and intensity that he seeks in far-off places at work in his own backyard. 🍷

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David Napp (davidnappfineart.com) was born in Kent, England, and studied at Canterbury College of Art. He has since lived in France and currently makes his home in Italy. He has won many awards, including the Elizabeth Greenshield Award for Young Artists (twice), and the Pollock Krasner Award. His work has been exhibited widely, including one-man shows in London and around the United Kingdom, 10 exhibitions in the United States,

and shows in Holland and France. He has participated in many mixed exhibitions, including The Pastel Society UK, the Royal Watercolour Society and the Royal Society of British Artists. Napp also teaches pastel workshops in France, Italy and England.