

Peter Taylor Quidley: Colorful Life, Luminous Art

By CHARLES RASKOB ROBINSON



The holy cities of Mecca and Medina have always been closed to non-Muslims, yet through the centuries a few outsiders have slipped inside, among them an English prisoner of war, a Spanish spy, an Italian deserter, and Sir Richard Burton, the dashing translator of *The Arabian Nights*.¹

Add to this short list the American painter Peter Taylor Quidley (b. 1945), who once trekked through the harsh Saudi desert and into Mecca, only to be apprehended and jailed. The art supplies found in his luggage intensified the authorities' suspicions: His palette lacked the pigments customarily used in marine scenes, for

which Quidley was best known at the time. It consisted instead of burnt sienna (red), raw umber (yellow), indigo (blue), and white — colors ideally suited for desert paintings, the prisoner explained. Eventually, Quidley was released and headed home to Cape Cod, where he has not opted to follow in Burton's footsteps by publishing an account of his Arabian adventure.

PEONIES

2005, OIL ON PANEL, 24 x 32 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION





NANTUCKET SUMMER
2007, OIL ON PANEL, 28 x 22 IN.
PRIVATE COLLECTION

with a series of setbacks, including an auto accident during their honeymoon and a deadly explosion in the landmine factory where Quidley worked while attending art school at night. That explosion resulted in the factory's closure and thus the termination of his draft exemption from the Vietnam war. Quidley enlisted in hopes of improving his assignment, but, as fate would have it, he was dispatched to the 101st Airborne Division, where he served as a photographer in the thick of combat.

Afterward, Quidley became a cinematographer and art director for advertising agencies and television stations, first in Florida and later in Massachusetts. Having landed a high-paying television news job in Saudi Arabia, he moved his wife and two children to Jeddah, the Red Sea port where millions of pilgrims disembark during their Hajj to Mecca.

When Quidley resumed painting after Vietnam, his work was — in his words — “severe and abstract.” Gradually it became looser and more figurative, however, and soon he switched from acrylics to oils. He continued to paint while in Saudi Arabia, developing the desert palette mentioned above, though he also made some marine paintings of vessels on the Red Sea. In Jeddah, Quidley participated in several international exhibitions, which opened important doors to the Saudi royal family, several members of which commissioned portraits from him.

A TORTUOUS PATH

Quidley can trace his family lineage back to America's earliest English settlers, who produced a range of maritime men including a whaling captain in New England, a lighthouse keeper on Cape Hatteras, and an engineer in the Coast Guard (his own father). His creative gene descended from Quidley's maternal grandmother, an artist who recognized talent in the youngster as he grew up 20 miles south of Boston. At her urging, his parents enrolled Peter in an art course for adults, exposing him to the basics of the academic tradition — drawing from plaster casts, values, composition, etc. “From the beginning,” he says, “I was interested in marine art. I have in my attic some marine paintings I did then that I sold to a relative for 25 cents, which he returned to me when he entered a nursing home. I took that adult course for only a year or so, but it was a good formal start for me.”

Although he attended scientific and technological institutes before enrolling in art departments, Quidley never actually earned a degree in any field, nor took lessons in painting. He did, however, marry a fellow art student, Pamela Ziontz, who proved a steadying influence in his life before she died in 2008. Her stability helped the couple deal

NANTUCKET SUNSHINE
2007, OIL ON PANEL, 24 x 30 IN.
PRIVATE COLLECTION



BACK IN THE USA

Quidley planned to use the money he had earned over three years in Saudi Arabia to commission a new home on Cape Cod, where he would launch himself as a full-time artist. Alas, he returned to find the house at South Chatham far from completion and spent much of his



WINDSHIFT

2000, OIL ON CANVAS, 40 x 60 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

over time, but it has always focused on luminosity: His hallmarks now are highly burnished grounds on panel, transparent oils, glazes applied exactly over hand-ground pigments, and gold-leaf, water-gilded frames that enhance the painting's overall glow. This fascination with transparency goes back to Quidley's childhood; he vividly recalls studying how light moved through translucent materials such as plastic toys and colored glass. (Not surprisingly, he has installed magnificent stained-glass windows throughout his home.)

In 1983, when Quidley tried to penetrate the more lucrative art markets of the islands near Cape Cod (Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket), he found their galleries already had plenty of marine art. Thus he offered them his figurative work, particularly scenes of young women in historicized clothing posed near the sea — often modeled by his wife and daughter, and generally wearing white. “These scenes relate to my own experiences with my family on the beach, and the white came about because I did not want the color of the women’s clothing to interfere with the overall scene. White takes on the reflected color of what is around it — skin tones, beaches, surf, sky — making the composition more harmonious.” This highly romantic body of work quickly made Quidley’s name in the region, and soon enough he was invited to exhibit his still lifes and marines as well.

Five years ago, the artist’s son Christopher co-founded with Rob Giacchetti the Nantucket gallery, Quidley & Company, in order to represent Quidley *père* and other artists. (They opened a Boston location in 2008.) This advantageous situation, coupled with the family’s ever-growing passion for sailing and Peter’s election as a Signature Member of the American Society of Marine Artists, have given the artist both greater latitude and a sense of excitement about the future: “I have many ideas about how to combine my interest in narrative with my interests in figures and the sea, and I am looking forward to translating them into paintings. The sea offers so many circumstances that elicit emotions: a ship on its own or a fleet weathering a storm, the excitement of a race, the peacefulness of a summer day, the first light of morning. I have so much to do and so little time!”

If Quidley’s extraordinary past is any indication, his future productions will be well worth watching. ■

CHARLES RASKOB ROBINSON is a charter member and Fellow of the American Society of Marine Artists, for which he organizes touring exhibitions of members’ works presented at museums around the U.S. See page ___ for a brief account of Robinson’s latest solo exhibition.

Endnotes

1 Paul Lunde, “The Lure of Mecca,” *Aramco World*, Nov/Dec 1974.

CANDLELIGHT

1993, OIL ON PANEL, 17 x 14 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

anticipated studio time finishing it. Nevertheless, he continued to paint every day, a practice that continues even now.

One advantage of never having studied painting — and of never having visited a museum until he was 40 — was Quidley’s development of a highly individual approach to art. Of course this has evolved

