

THE VIEW FROM



ABOVE

AMIT KAPOOR LOOKS AT THE WORLD'S MOST CELEBRATED CITYSCAPES AND FINDS NEW COMPOSITIONS.

By Ani Kodjabasheva

Amit Kapoor hails from the megacity of New Delhi, India, but it wasn't until he started traveling the world that city views became the galvanizing subject of his art. When we spoke, it was summer, and Kapoor described the season's complex itinerary. He had just returned from teaching a workshop near the town of Darjeeling, in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, in the Himalayas. In the next month, he and his wife, Megha Kapoor—also a watercolor artist—would be traveling to Europe to teach workshops in Zurich, Switzerland, and Munich, Germany. This winter, the couple will travel to Perth, to teach workshops with the Watercolour Society of Western Australia. “It's like that,” Kapoor says. “I'm just traveling and enjoying my life.”

His statement isn't the whole story, however. As principal of an art college, in New Delhi, and the president of the Watercolor Society of India, Kapoor's responsibilities include educating the next generation of Indian artists, organizing events, building international networks and promoting his city as a potential destination for the world's watercolorists. Kapoor is one of the biggest champions of watercolor in India, the second most populous country on Earth. For him, art is a profession in every sense of the word.

LEFT

View of Venice (watercolor on paper, 11x15)

BELOW

Streets of Paris (watercolor on paper, 10½x15½)



"I'm painting more and more now, because I believe it's my responsibility to do so."

—AMIT KAPOOR

Asked how he makes time for painting with such a full schedule, Kapoor says, "I have to paint every day, because otherwise, I can't sleep," adding, "One painting a day keeps the doctor away." He raises a finger to emphasize his point, the way he might with students, and laughs.

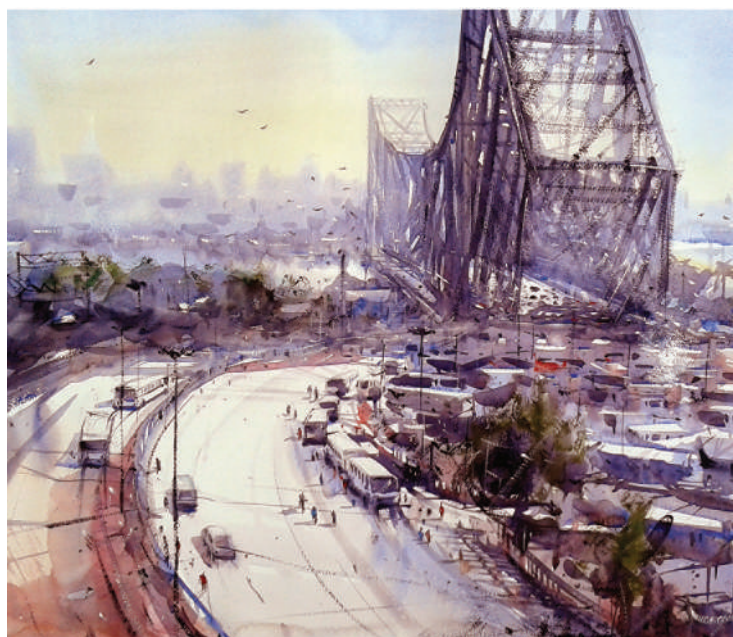
When he's home in New Delhi, Kapoor typically steps away from his daily responsibilities at the college some time after lunch. He grabs a few hours between 3:00 and 5:30 p.m. to complete at least one painting, which he credits for sustaining his energy and good humor.

BUILDING NETWORKS

It was an attentive high school teacher who first introduced Kapoor to art, and Kapoor says he'd skip other classes to sit and practice in that teacher's classroom. Later, after majoring in applied arts in college, he worked in an advertising agency and an animation studio, where he produced more than 1,000 drawings per day. This left little time for his own artwork, which left him feeling frustrated and unfulfilled. Kapoor found his stride again, however, when he began teaching and spending more time painting along with his students. "I don't know anything except painting," he says. In his



ABOVE
Boats in the Afternoon
(watercolor on paper, 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 16 $\frac{1}{2}$)



RIGHT
Hawrah Bridge
(watercolor on paper, 21 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 29 $\frac{1}{2}$)

OPPOSITE
Boat Harbor
(watercolor on paper, 11 x 11 $\frac{1}{4}$)



work, he has continued to create spaces and communities for that.

An even bigger break came when Kapoor attended an art event in Thailand and found himself in the company of globally renowned watercolorists—Ong Kim Seng, of Singapore and Liu Yi, of China; Turkish-Canadian artist Atanur Dogan; Igor Sava, of Italy; and the U.S. artist Stan Miller. Receiving welcome and recognition from people he admired was heartening.

His introduction to Dogan was especially fruitful, as it connected Kapoor to the International Watercolor Society and inspired him to head up a new branch in India. This larger community of artists was invigorating, and Kapoor started traveling more often. As an instructor, he hopes to share his



knowledge and to reach passionate and dedicated students, including young artists with limited means, like he once was. “I’m painting more and more now,” he says, “because I believe it’s my responsibility to do so.”

Kapoor’s welcome into an international community of artists not only provided him with a sense of direction professionally, but also artistically, as he became increasingly inspired by the cityscapes he encountered during his travels.

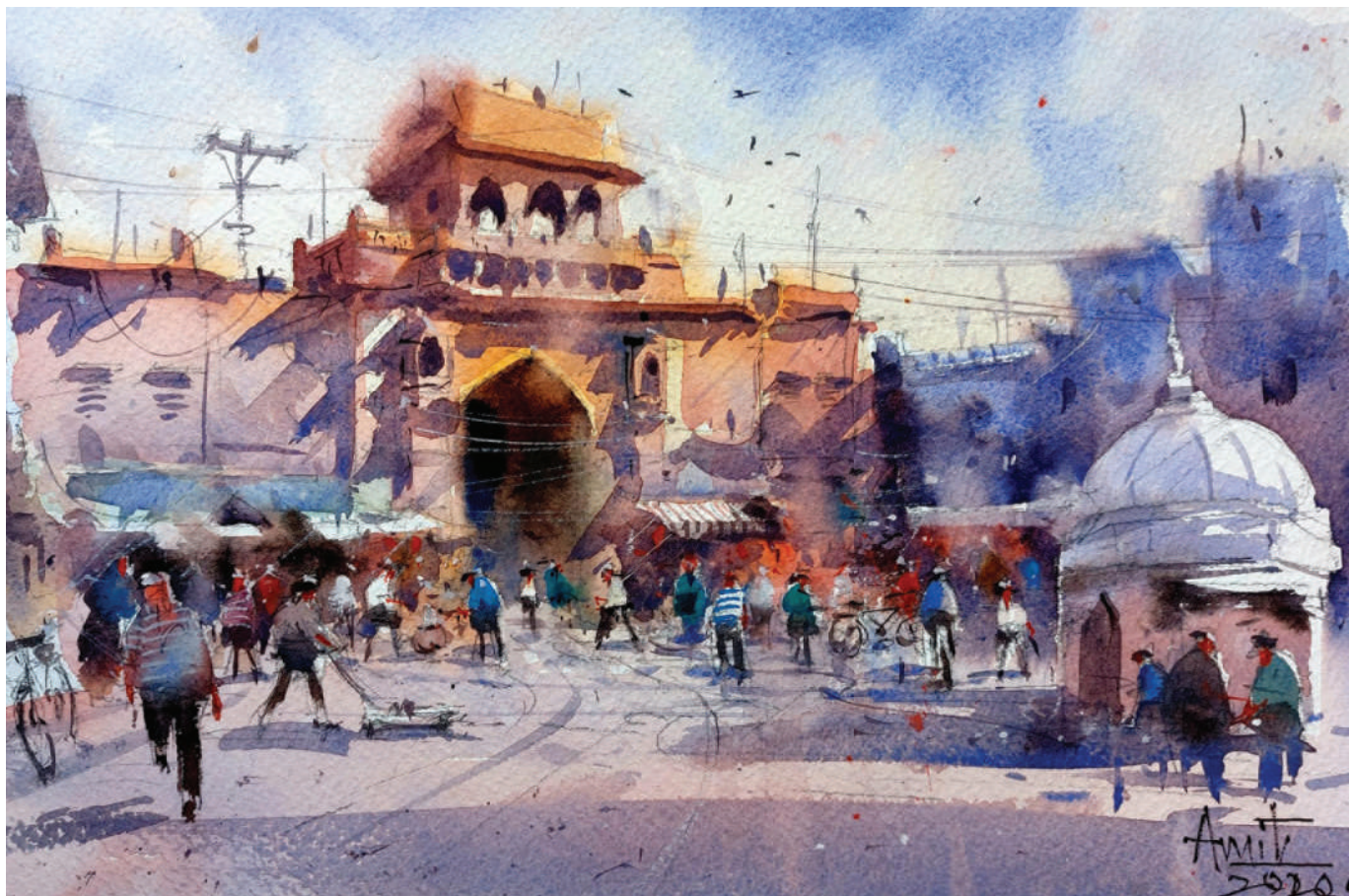
THE SPECIFIC WITHIN THE FAMILIAR

Before his visit to Thailand, Kapoor was known as “Engine Man” due to his fascination with old train engines as a subject for paintings. He liked the dynamic design, the way that various components created patterns of light and shadow, and the steam defining the surrounding space. As the old locomotives gave way to modern diesel and electrical engines, however, his interest waned. “These new engines are very flat,” Kapoor says, which has no appeal for an artist looking to paint volume and depth.

Later, as he began to travel more extensively, Kapoor would come across new subjects to inspire his work. In 2014, for instance, the artist was in Costa Brava, Spain—a place not far from the one-time home of Salvador Dali (Spanish, 1904-89). He became captivated by the low-angle light over the harbor there, the play of reflections on the water and the bold decorative bands on the boats.

As a subject, a harbor offered Kapoor defined depth, with boats in the middle distance set against buildings in the background, which made for dynamic yet balanced compositions. The artist developed an idiosyncratic interest in the sailing vessels themselves, noting the difference between boats in Spain, those in France and Italy, and the vessels in Vietnam and Thailand, which, he says, are “totally different.”

Whether the setting is India, Italy, Greece or the United Kingdom, boats—framed by the edge of the water and set



ABOVE
Streets of India
 (watercolor on
 paper, 11x15)

RIGHT
Cinque Terre
 (watercolor on
 paper, 11x15)





Boats of U.K.
(watercolor on
paper, 11x15)

against beautiful scenery—are now a recurring theme in Kapoor’s work, as seen in *Boat Harbor* (page 45) and *Boats in the Afternoon* (pages 44–5), for example. He paints the subject with careful attention to the details of situation that make each place distinct.

CAMERA, COMPOSITION, ACTION

Back when he was working in frame-by-frame animation, Kapoor learned a lot about composition. Animators would view each shot as occurring on a stage on which characters and objects are positioned. They’d borrow theories of stage design from the theater, along with strategies from cinematography. Each shot had a “camera angle,” meaning the drawings came with a distinct point of view.

Today, Kapoor’s painting process still begins with setting up the scene. He doesn’t think of the arrangement of the cityscape before him as a given but as visual material ready to be framed and composed as he would like. To begin, he tries out simple, storyboard-type pencil sketches that note the main masses and lines of perspective. He then looks at the sketches with a critical eye in order to determine whether they’ll make an engaging composition.

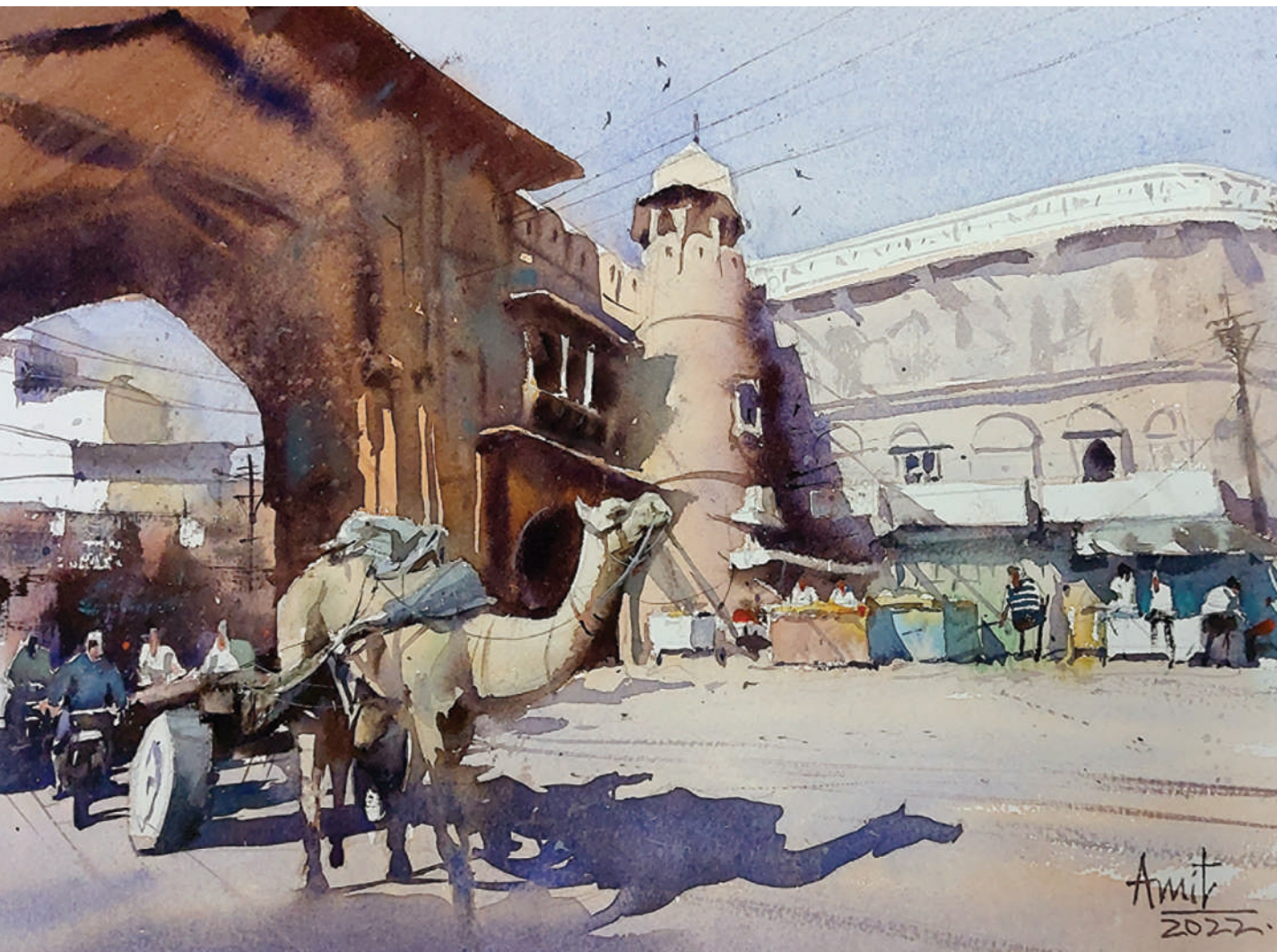
“I’m very choosy,” Kapoor says. “If it’s not working, then I won’t paint that composition.” If, however, the



Beauty of Istanbul
(watercolor on
paper, 21½x29½)

preliminary sketch has potential, he’ll usually proceed to painting a thumbnail in one of his “many, many, many” travel sketchbooks. At that point, the general viewpoint is set, but the thumbnail still allows for revision within the space of the painting. “You can see your layout; you can see where you’re going wrong and where you can add more things,” the artist says. He may develop the composition in the thumbnail in an effort to achieve more balance and dynamism—by adding figures, for example, or by giving the figures a distinct line of action.

“Composition is the most important part of your painting,” Kapoor says. “It’s a foundation on which the rest of the painting is built.” His paintings are, in fact, largely an outcome of this commitment to a vigorous drawing and thumbnail stage. “Drawing is supreme, and color is secondary,” he says. “If your drawing is no good, then color will never support your painting.”



Streets of Rajasthan
(watercolor on
paper, 11½x15)

After the lines are drawn, the painting proceeds more effortlessly. Kapoor chooses an area of focus where he adds lucid detail; the rest of the painting remains loose. Refinement isn't necessary; the painting only needs to express the design already captured in the underdrawing.

The artist's compositions are studied, deliberate and spacious, and sometimes, surprising. He believes in painting the best composition, not the obvious one—even when he's depicting some of the world's most famous places. "When I go out, I'm not thinking, 'Okay, everyone is sitting there, and I can also sit there and paint that.' That's not my thing. I always try to seek out additional options. If I'm convinced; then I paint."

In *Beauty of Istanbul* (page 47), for example, Kapoor doesn't choose to paint the Süleymaniye Mosque—one of Istanbul's most iconic buildings. Instead, he leaves the

architectural masterpiece blurred in the background, with only a hint of cascading domes and thin minarets, and focuses instead on the modern Galata Bridge. The painting's finest detail is reserved for the traffic barriers and the diminutive buses and cars driving alongside them. Rather than capturing a "postcard" view, the artist has created a composition that conveys scale and complexity—a metropolis extending far beyond the city center.

FROM THE TOP

In his cityscapes, Kapoor experiments with a variety of viewpoints. In *Streets of Rajasthan* (above), low, tilted angles place us on a street in India, looking up at a camel. In *Hawrah Bridge* (page 44–5), the viewpoint hovers above street level, with a view toward this bridge, in Kolkata, India. This compositional choice communicates the city's

A Fast Act

Kapoor paints quickly, particularly in the heat of New Delhi, where water can evaporate from an artist's palette and paper almost instantly. "You have to work very fast in my city," Kapoor says. It's a factor that has influenced his painting technique and style. The artist makes plans carefully and then executes swiftly. "Maximum, one or two layers, no more than that," he says.



View of Mumbai (watercolor on paper, 15x21½)



Meet the Artist

Watercolorist Amit Kapoor (amitkapoorwatercolor.com), of India, has been recognized with top international honors for his paintings. The artist is the co-founder and principal of Anitoons School of Art and Animation, and has been a frequent guest lecturer in many prestigious art colleges throughout India. In high demand as a workshop instructor, Kapoor travels the world to share his watercolor techniques. His work has been featured in numerous solo exhibitions and has been honored with a Silver Star Award from the National Watercolor Society, USA. Follow him on Instagram @amitkapoor_watercolors.

magnitude and complexity from a human point of view. As seen in *Streets of Paris* (page 43), the artist is especially fond of aerial views or any viewpoint that looks upon the scene from above.

When Kapoor was still working in animation, a supervisor once told him not to use aerial views because they make for a "rigid shot," so he stopped. Years later, during his travels, Kapoor got to observe the world from this perspective many times. "I was looking from my window in the plane once," he recalls, "and when I saw this view from above, I thought, 'I was told this point of view could look rigid, but to me, it looks very nice! I should try it.' Now I'm painting top views in almost all the cities that I visit."

The artist climbs to the top floor of taller buildings to sketch and take pictures. Whether it's a view of church domes in Venice (see *View of Venice*, pages 42–3) or a street

intersection in Mumbai (see *View of Mumbai*, above), Kapoor creates images that go beyond the ordinary, and he does it with great economy, with buildings often comprised of little more than a single stroke added over an initial wash to define a roof line. His approach is in direct response to the conditions in his home country (see *A Fast Act* above).

It's the unique points of view, the precisely constructed spaces and the sharp drawing skills that provide the character in the artist's work—creating paintings that don't simply identify a location, but also communicate the experience of being a part of the city. **WA**

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