

The Artists for Conservation "Flag Expedition #2" ~ David Rankin's Watercolor Expedition into the Ganges Himalayas

The Sacred Source

A Portrait of the Ganges 2007



Painting India's Elephants



Elephant Forests & Terrai

May/June 2007

In my efforts to *paint a portrait* of the Ganges Himalayas, I am focusing on 3 major features of this remarkable region...

- The Elephant Forests & Terrai along the outer regions
- The Ancient River Culture, Customs, & Heritage
- The Physical Features of the major Ganges Tributaries
- The Flora & Fauna of the entire region
- The High Altitude Glacial Regions of in the Garhwal

In all of these areas of focus, I am studying the region with the eyes of an artist rather than that of a scientist, naturalist, botanist, conservationist, environmentalist, hydrologist, geologist, or glaciologist. And although I do possess highly trained observation skills, I do not profess to be an expert in these other professional areas. I mention this because I do have many friends who are in fact the top scientists and experts in these areas of endeavor.

That said, I am however making a concerted effort to study & paint this region as it is in the beginning decade of the 21st century

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Developing ideas...

Every artist, and especially landscape painters & wildlife artists, has to develop and refine a working process that works for them effectively. Sometimes this can be a frustrating and complex effort that takes years to evolve, as it has in my own case.



As I have detailed in my Fast Sketching book, when I first came to India back in 1970, I brought the wrong tools & skills. All of my creative skills were established in my studio and refined in art school. I was simply unable to be effective working in what I call DfN (Directly from Nature).

It took me many years to develop my sketching skills and then more years to develop a method for painting DfN. And in fact, today I am undergoing yet another steep learning curve as I evolve newer and better ways to incorporate all of these new digital technologies into my working method.

So part of my efforts on this "Flag Expedition" have been devoted to demonstrating precisely how I work as I travel about the world in this 21st century.

Beginning in 1970, and for nearly 15 years thereafter, I switched to using my 35 mm cameras to capturing my visual reference for paintings that I'd do back in the comfort of my studio in Cleveland.

But those days are long gone, as I now have evolved a very effective working method that allows me to work anywhere in the world with full creative freedom and productivity. And my painting method begins with a comprehensive visual process that I call my "Observation & Evaluation Recipe".

And this then leads directly to my sketching procedures and photographic efforts. This painting evolved directly from my recent Ganges Himalayas project and the sketch above was the germinal idea I sketched quickly showing a mother elephant leading her baby across morning mudflats in north India.

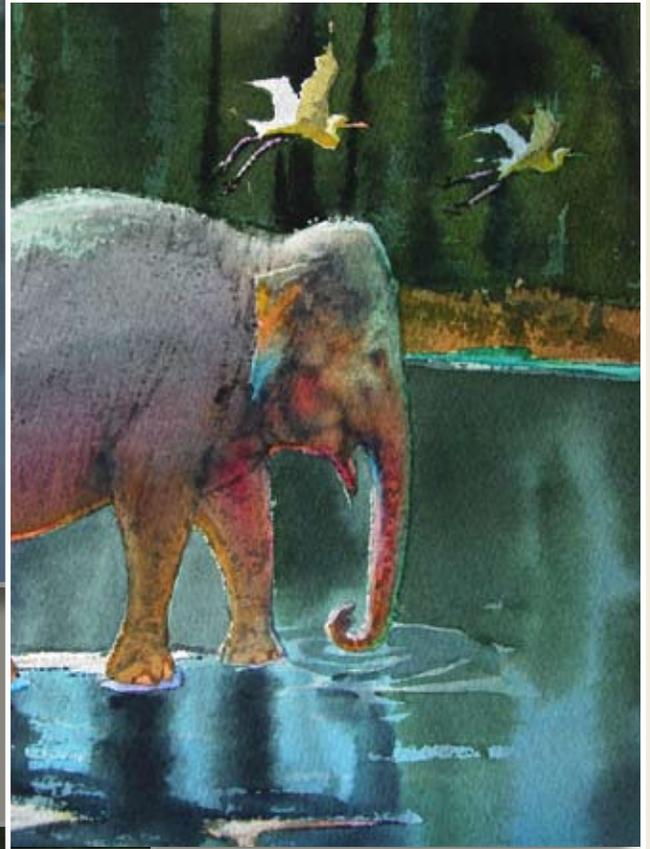
This is how the idea started but I soon decided I wanted to add some birds in flight across the background of the image.



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So this led to my efforts to sketch birds in flight; which is easy in India since birds are everywhere. When doing sketches like this I am only looking for the simplest shapes. And many times I use a technique I evolved called "After-Image Sketching"; in which I study a subject that is moving in order to settle on a particular shape. Then I look away, down to my sketchbook. The "trick" is to



not look away from the sketch until you have captured something of the mental image from a few moments before. I employ this method whenever a subject is moving about, especially birds & animals.

Most artists make the mistake of "looking back" at their subject too quickly. And this simply overwrites new visual content & memory right over what you just previously saw. If you stick with your "after Image" from the 1st effort longer you'll do better!

Here I've included a couple stages and detail in this painting to show you its evolution from the initial stages to the final. Note how I incorporated the birds into the composition and controlled the brilliant and very dramatic morning sunlight.

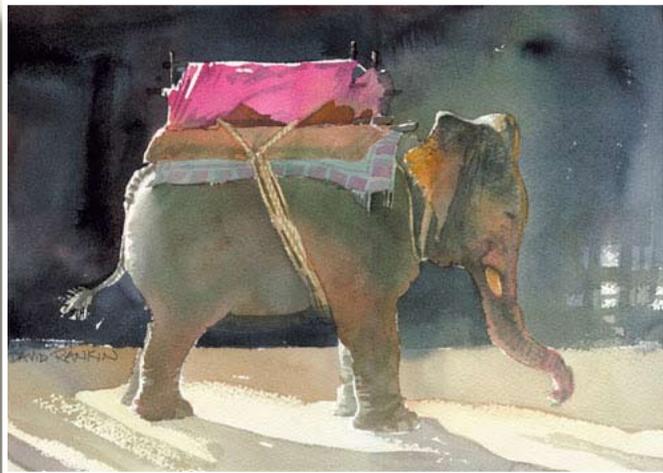
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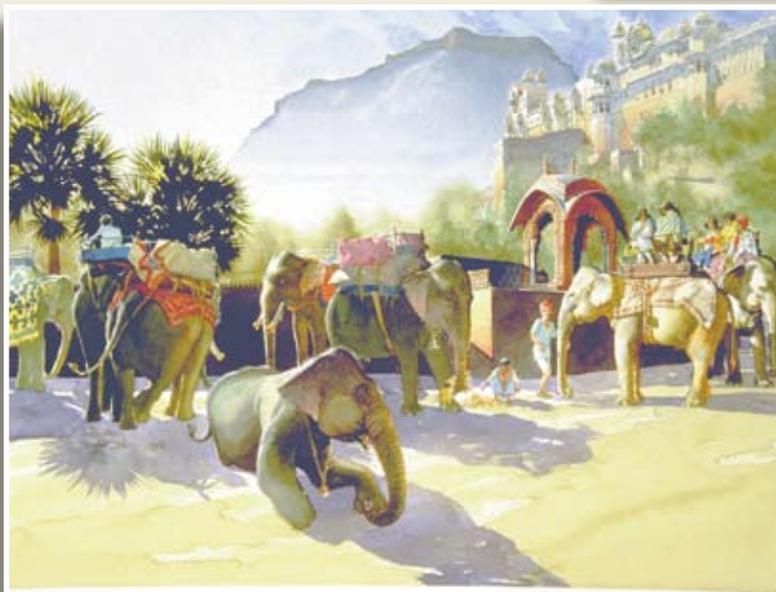
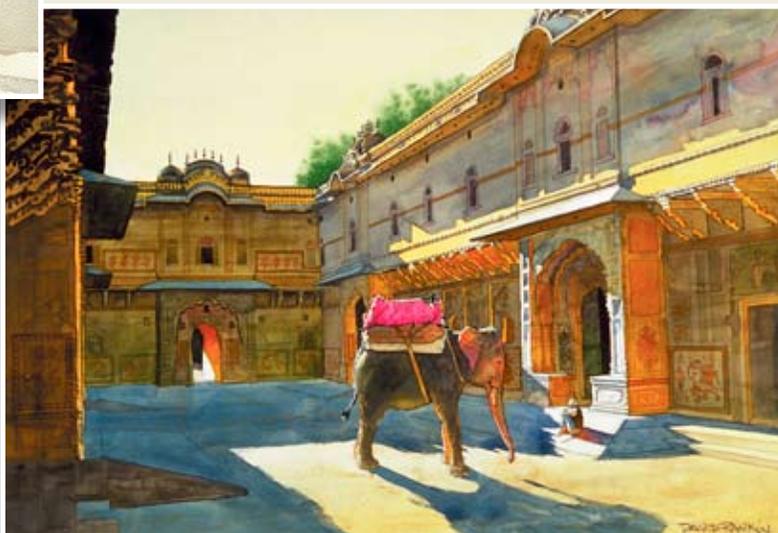
My interest in India's Elephants

My fascination with India's elephants began within hours of arrival back in 1970! As we drove into New Delhi from the airport we hit a traffic jam in one of the various traffic circles that are all over Delhi. It was September, but at 6 am the temperature was already hovering around 100° and there looming in the shimmering humid heat of a typical dawn in New Delhi, was the cause of the traffic snarl. It seems an elephant had decided to snack on the flowers growing in the traffic circle and its mahout was having trouble getting him to move on until he had munched his fill.

And although this halted an enormous throng of traffic, it was an

amazing and captivating sight for this then, 25 year old artist, on his very first trip out of the United States. We simply don't have elephants wandering about the streets in Cleveland, Ohio. But here in India, especially in big cities like Delhi or frequented tourist destinations like Agra and Jaipur, elephants are still a commonplace occurrence most any day of the week. So I have been studying, sketching, photographing, and painting them for many years.

And although other Asian countries like Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia, also have long cultural traditions with both wild & domesticated elephants,



India's is the oldest. In fact, the historical, religious, and cultural relationship in all of these other South East Asian countries actually all came from, and originated in, India.

Back in 1970 when I was living in a small classic yoga ashram right on the banks of the Ganges north of Haridwar, the wild elephants from right across the river would sneak silently and stealthily into the ashram in the dead of night to steal the ripe squash off of our ashram garden vines. The only 2 things alerting us to their nightly visits was their gigantic footprints left in the soft sand and the absence of our ripening squash.

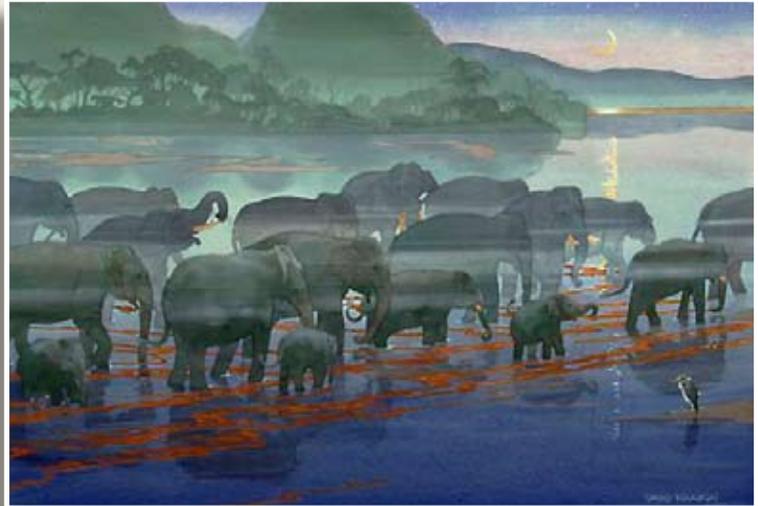
Little did I know then that this jungle right across the river, where wild tigers roared in the dead of night, would one day become Rajaji National Park. Nor did I realize that this would become a major artistic focus in my career years later!

But in fact, the wild Asian elephants of India is now one of the top priorities in my artistic quest in

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the Ganges Himalayas. And it will be for several years to come.

India's Elephant Forests & Terrai

The "terrai" is the wide flat grasslands that extend outward from the southern slopes of the Himalayas from Rajaji all the way eastward into Burma/Myanmar. And what I refer to as the Elephant Forests are these outer Himalayan regions up to about 10,000 feet. These heavily forested outer foothills of the Greater Himalayan range along with their terrai grasslands are the natural homeland of India's great elephant herds as well as 1000 other species of exotic birds and animals of all kinds. I call these "Elephant Forests"

because not all of India's forests have resident populations of elephants. 200 years ago they did. But those days are long gone. And today these extremely vital forest homes, for India's wild population of elephants, have come under tremendous pressures from all sides. And it remains to be seen whether or not India and Nepal can in fact manage to carve out a working 21st century relationship between man & beast. And that is why I am determined to make them a strategic central feature of my Ganges Himalayas efforts. Because... as the fate of India's elephants goes... so goes the forests & terrai they live in. And all of these regions are a vital part of the greater Ganges watershed as much as the glaciers are!

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