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The Big Xingshan Temple

2004, watercolor, 7 x 9. Collection the artist.

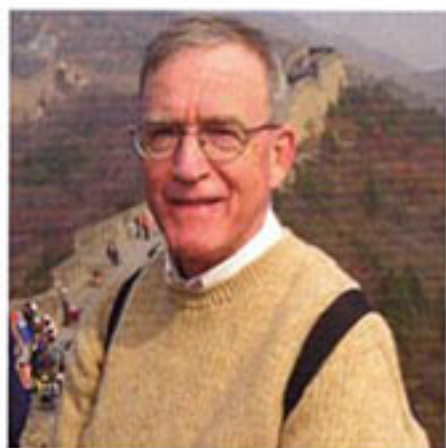


Through a series of exquisite watercolors, New York artist Michael Killelea explores the fascinating juxtaposition between tradition and modernity in today's China.

China

FROM THE TIP OF A BRUSH

by Meredith E. Lewis



On a busy sidewalk in Guilin, China, an American artist energetically applies brush to paper. He has only 45 minutes to complete his painting, so the work is a sprint. A small crowd of curious children has gathered where he is sitting; and when he finishes the work, he holds it up for them to see. "Cool!" says a smiling 12-year-old boy, as he gives the artist a thumbs-up. Startled by the child's American slang, the artist laughs and thanks the boy in Chinese.

Michael Killelea of Northport, New York, is an artist-ambassador. He has painted his way around the globe, capturing—en plein air—red sampans rocking on the Mae Ping River, in Chiang Mai, Thailand; a rowdy game of dominos in Frederiksted, St. Croix; and, most recently, a shy, green-coated fruit vendor in Xian, China. "I love to be

in places that are not my places—places where I'm the foreigner," Killelea asserts, "because people respond to someone who thinks that they're special enough to paint them."

A native of Brooklyn, New York, Killelea served in the U.S. Navy before turning his attention to newspapers. He worked as a photo editor at *Newsday*, on Long Island, for 10 years, and as an art director at *Newsday*, the *New York Daily News*, and the *Boston Herald-American*. "I've always had this sort of visual approach to things," Killelea says, commenting on his career path. "But when you look back at what

you've done, it's easy to see where you went. It's a lot easier than deciding where you're going."

Killelea has gone to all sorts of places, and almost always with a brush in hand. In addition to Thailand and St. Croix, the artist has recorded his impressions of Santa Fe; Florence; Jim Thorpe, Pennsylvania; Bar Harbor, Maine; Mexico City; Lake Winnepesaukee, in New Hampshire; Tuscany; Cape Cod, Massachusetts; Old San Juan, Puerto Rico; and Ocean City, Maryland. "It's easier to travel long distances before you start getting achy," Killelea remarks

with a laugh. "But I take my paints every place. *Every place*," he emphasizes.

The artist's most recent venture was to China, where he spent several weeks on a guided tour in the fall of 2004. From Beijing's vast Tiananmen Square to the whimsical architecture of Shanghai and the arresting twists of the Great Wall, Killelea found China to be, in his words, "simply amazing." "Given how thoroughly the government is developing and hyping the nation's tourist potential, the whole country may be the eighth wonder of the world," he writes in "Meeting the Dragon," an unpublished

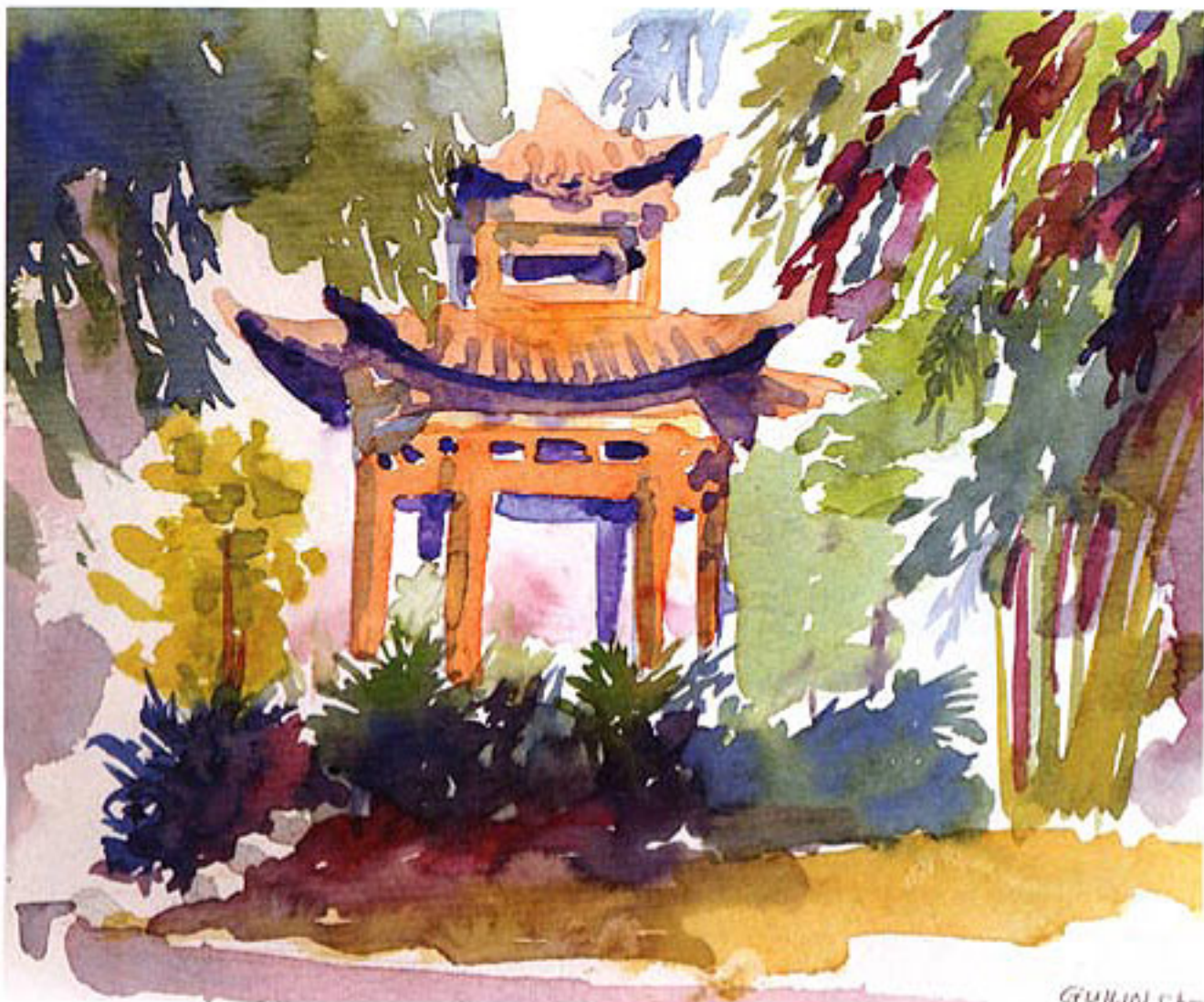
essay that chronicles the artist's impressions of modern China. Unfortunately for Killelea, the tour's schedule did not allow him extensive time to paint.

Nevertheless, he managed to accomplish 10 paintings in two weeks, an impressive feat for any artist. "I steal time from wherever I can steal it," he says.

"Stealing time" in China mandated that Killelea fit his painting around the tour schedule. Despite his best intentions, however, he would occasionally lose himself in a painting, only to realize that he was late and holding up the tour.

"We were with a group on a





GULLIN, C. Lee

ABOVE
Pagoda, Elephant
Hill Park, Gullin
2004, watercolor, 7 x 9.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Jing An Temple
2004, watercolor, 7 x 9.
Private collection.

bus, and the tour guide was pretty adamant about people being back on time," he recalls. "If you didn't get back on time, you were forced to sing a song to the rest of the people on the bus, so I had to sing a couple of times. But, after a while, they realized what I was doing and people were much more

understanding."

Although he has used other media in his artwork, Killelea prefers painting in watercolor because it allows for a certain spontaneity, while, at the same time, demanding a precise, exacting, or deliberate approach. Watercolor, he says, also encourages an open, direct sort of honesty, particularly when the scene is worked out on location. Furthermore, although precision is important in manipulating the paints—as opposed to the more flexible, slow-drying oils—watercolor painting requires less of a time commitment. "I always feel

that there are so many things to see, so many things to do, so many places to go, and so many things to learn about," Killelea explains, "and I'm always learning about painting and I want to do it faster, because I'm trying to cram too many things in."

The artist works almost entirely en plein air and rarely makes use of reference photographs. "I always take pictures, but I don't use the pictures to paint from because I have found that there is just a tremendous intensity that I enjoy," says Killelea on working en plein air. "I just get a real

"I love to be in places that are not my places—places where I'm the foreigner, because people respond to someone who thinks that they're special enough to paint them."



charge out of it—I love color. I love the shadows and the play of light and reflected light, and you absolutely don't get those things when you're looking at a photograph."

As they visited sites around the country, Killelea would paint choice scenes—composing, as the trip progressed, a sort of pictorial travel diary. The artist's preference for capturing scenes on location proved problematic at one point during the trip, however, when the tour group's coach was stuck in traffic en route to the Great Wall. Fearing that between lunch and a walk on the famous landmark he would not have time to paint, Killelea exchanged seats with a man

at the rear of the bus and painted through the window.

Taken together, Killelea's China paintings expose the intense—and always fascinating—juxtaposition between ancient tradition and sophisticated modernity in present-day China. In *Jing An Temple*, for example, vibrant urban growth towers above a brilliant, red house of worship, while the artist's painting of the Shanghai Museum portrays the glittering new structure

in a promising, futuristic cityscape. "Shanghai, with 16 million residents, has been the primary funnel for Western influence in China for most of modern times," Killelea writes in "Meeting the Dragon." "Through the last decade it has been the centerpiece of the Chinese economic boom. ... A flood of new buildings spreads out in the center of this city with the intensity of venting magma and the look of architects on hallucinogens. The playful, even whimsical

ABOVE
Shanghai Museum
2004, watercolor, 7 x 9.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE, ABOVE
Afternoon Bicyclist, Guilin
2004, watercolor, 7 x 9.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW
City Park, Yichang
2004, watercolor, 7 x 9.
Collection the artist.

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effect of these high rises creates the sense of a Disney-esque futureland, in an area that used to be the Victorian center of colonial interests in China. It grows today, steel visions and scaffolding soaring above ancient temples. And yet this is also a land tied very tightly to its past and the earth."

The confluence of, and at times, clash between, modernity and tradition is visible throughout China's provinces. "The Yangtze River bisects the country, snaking downhill from west to east for more than 3,900 miles," Killelea writes. "Much of that distance trav-

erses rocks and gorges, exposing a core sample of life in the country today. Small boats tuck in crevices along the river, sheltered from the wake of coal carriers going downstream and car carriers heading up. Vertical trails through the fabled Three Gorges area, which are more suited to mountain goats than the people who use them, climb

steeply from the waters' edge and are sometimes lost in the mists and vegetation above." In Killelea's corresponding watercolor *Yangtze Coalier*, a barge plows through this almost feudalistic landscape, quite literally crossing a physically ancient world with a vessel of contemporary commerce.

Killelea's remaining

ABOVE
Fruit Vendor, Xian
2004, watercolor, 7 x 9.
Collection: the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Chongqing Stir-Fry
2004, watercolor, 7 x 9.
Collection: the artist.

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watercolors—which often maintain the viewpoint of a stranger's respectful distance—depict a variety of scenes from city, town, and rural life. *City Park*, *Yichang* portrays inflatable red columns and balloons—all gaudy advertisements—suggesting the transitory, pervasive, and even invasive nature of advertising; while *The Big Xingshan Temple* captures a quiet refuge in busy Xian in a tone that is, itself, meditative. “If the life in the cities teems, there are alternatives,” Killelea observes. “Passing through a gate into a garden or temple grounds is a little like turning the TV off on a New Year’s Eve show. Light, noise, and activity are suddenly suspended—and, in the hush, the sound of

birds or chanting may be audible.”

Several of Killelea’s paintings prompted intense interest from observant bystanders. “People initially look and then they try not to pay any attention,” the artist says. “But after a while, it becomes a very communal sort of event.” *Fruit Vendor*, Xian pictures a green-coated woman who was so embarrassed at being painted that she ran off, only to return a short time later to see the painting, slip back into position by the stand, and assume a modest pose. A portable lunch counter in a park in Chongqing provided the inspiration for *Chongqing Stir-Fry*, as well as an eager, hungry, curious set of spectators. “I remember this guy who was standing about a foot away from

me chomping on noodles in my ear as I was painting,” the artist recalls. “But when I was finished, I showed everybody and they applauded. And I gave a little bow and a big smile. It’s amazing how far a smile goes. It’s just so universal.”

A graduate of SUNY Farmingdale, in New York, where he studied advertising art, the artist continued his education at the Pratt Institute and the School of the Visual Arts, in New York City. “The function of any education is to expose you, to open your mind to other ideas and other concepts so that you can learn things,” says the artist. “And I certainly have done that.” Killelea is a great advocate of workshops, which he says present artists with the opportunity to step outside

of themselves and view their work with fresh eyes. “The biggest advantage of workshops is that you are forced to paint in a group,” he states, “and when the group constructively comments afterward, you learn things about what you’ve done. I think you can learn an awful lot from other people.”

The artist cites John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) and Winslow Homer (1836–1910) as two of his greatest artistic influences. “I’m especially fond of Homer’s later watercolors,” he says. “They’re full of great color and a superb mastery of the medium. I love Sargent, certainly because of the travel, but mostly because of his color and draftsmanship and his almost impressionistic





approach. His ability to capture atmosphere is something I try hard to follow. I also often have his haunting Arab portraits in mind when I'm painting people in foreign places. Painting en plein air is very physical, because it's got to be captured quickly. People don't hang around a long time like objects do."

Although the artist likes Winsor & Newton watercolor paints, he does not adhere too strictly to any particular brand. When painting close to home, he uses a portable, briefcase-like kit that opens up and becomes a stand. The kit has a John Pike watercolor palette with it, which the artist finds very comfort-

able. When he travels, Killelea makes use of a small folding plastic palette that holds approximately 15 colors. "I know it's only going to last for a week or two," he says of his travel palette, "so I just load it up with as much paint as I can fit." He also takes along two or three brushes and a 7"-x-9" spiral-bound pad of 140-lb rough watercolor paper. "When I paint, I put down the barest sort of sketch, so that I have at least the elements in place that I want to use," he says of his process. "And then, I guess I just let the brush do the rest. Sometimes it's a little mysterious to me how it happens, but it just seems to come out."

"It's kind of a blind leap of faith, to just let go and not try so hard to control the painting," he says. "Just let it happen. That's the real secret, the big trick to watercolors. Just do it and don't worry about how it'll come out. If you keep at it, you will definitely see the difference."

Two years ago, the artist traveled to Thailand, a trip he describes as "an intensely sensual experience, because of the colors and the sounds and the tastes and the smells." One afternoon, he left his hotel with his paints, hoping to capture some local color. Turning down an alley near the river, he came upon a house on stilts. At the top of the stairs leading up to this

ABOVE
Yangtze Cooler
2004, watercolor, 7 x 9.
Collection the artist.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Great Wall
2004, watercolor, 7 x 9.
Collection the artist.

house sat several small children. Killelea was entranced by the scene and, through pantomime, obtained the mother's permission to paint it. Although the mother tried to keep her children occupied—with candy, small bottles of juice, and even a large block of Styrofoam, which the children happily broke into dozens of tiny pieces—Killelea found the work difficult and slow-going.



Capturing busy small children in watercolor is difficult under the best of circumstances, and Killelea was worried about the movement of the hot Thai sun. Soon it would be directly overhead, and the work would be impossible to complete. Sensing the artist's dilemma, the mother went into the house and emerged with another woman who was holding an umbrella. To Killelea's amazement, this woman proceeded to hold the umbrella over him until he had finished the painting. The next day, he had the painting color-copied and asked that the man in the shop write "thank you" in Thai at the bottom of the

work. After signing the painting himself, Killelea returned to the family and presented his gift. Needless to say, they were thrilled.

"I've used the word magic before," says Killelea of his experience painting abroad en plein air. "There's really a kind of magic that happens that's not me—that's outside of me, that's beyond me; it's a magic that happens when you do this sort of thing. People recognize that something really special is going on and they respond positively to that. I think you could go anywhere, and if you made some connection to people with your painting, it would be an entrée—it would be like a pass." ■

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Michael Killelea lives in Northport, on Long Island, New York. An avid outdoorsman, he is as passionate about capturing scenes close to home as he is about travel painting. Waterfront images feature prominently in his work, a selection of which was collected in the artist's self-published book, *Wandering the North Fork* (Woody Lane Books, Northport, New York). Killelea's work has been featured at the Marineart Gallery, in New York City; the BJ Spoke Gallery, in Huntington, New York; the Frye Art Museum, in Seattle; the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens, in Jacksonville, Florida; the American Merchant Marine Museum, in Kings Point, New York; the Vero Beach Museum of Art, in Vero Beach, Florida; and at many local shows on Long Island. In addition, two of the artist's paintings were included in an exhibition held at the U.S. Capitol, in Washington, DC, later becoming part of the U.S. Navy Museum collection, also in Washington, DC. An artist member of the American Society of Marine Artists, Killelea has also had his work reproduced on book covers and greeting cards. For more information about Michael Killelea and his watercolors, visit the artist's website: www.killeleart.com.