The Italian Village Restaurant

Comune di Venezia mural

by John Rivera-Resto

History

The Community of Venice Mural -Comune di Venezia- was commissioned by Mr. Mike Santo, proprietor of The Italian Village Restaurant & Catering, in Strongsville, Ohio, U.S.A., on March 13, 2002.

Master-muralist John Rivera-Resto completed the commission in thirty six working days spread between April to June of that year. A working day consisted of six to twelve hours of painting at any time during a twenty-four hour period on any day of the week.

The final brushstroke was on June 22, 2002.

Dimensions

The painting surface consisted of two walls 8 ft. in height (2.42 meters), the larger one extending 22 ft. (6.70 meters) across the main viewing area, and connecting it in a 90-degree angle on the left side, a smaller wall extending an additional 9 feet (2.74 meters).

Thus, the final dimension for the murals was 31 ft. x 8 ft. –or, 248 square ft. (9.44 x 2.42 meters –or, 22.85 square meters)

The Preliminaries

Site Visit

The first thing I do when offered a mural commission is visit the site and learn all I can about the business, the clientele, and the locale.

This marketing information makes a difference in the overall design. For example, a business that caters mostly to a young urban clientele requires a different approach than one who caters to a suburban family crowd.

Demographics, education, history and location matters greatly since these factors influence collective taste.

Meeting the clients

Always ask the clients the reason for wanting a mural. Is their "main focus" simply to decorate (pretty-color walls, motifs, modern vs. traditional style, etcetera), or to create a particular perception (romantic, upscale, casual, and so on); or to relate a "history" or singular event. Listen carefully and try to see things for their point of view as business owner.   Then, enter the premises and try to see things from the point of view of the clientele. What would please them both?

Establishing a theme

When "Americans" from the United States think "Italy", Venice immediately comes to mind. Thanks to a continued diet of movies, advertisements and television shows, the city of Venice is instantly recognizable. Images of romance, old-world sophistication, high art, good food, and stylishly dressed Italians –"the beautiful people", become notes for comparisons. Therefore Venice became the theme for the mural in an American Italian-food restaurant that pride itself on authentic Italian recipes.

Deciding what to show

This romanticized views of Venice (which takes no account of the decaying and common "Fellini-view" of Italy and Italians) has been etched in people's minds thanks to the artistry of cinema auteurs like Orson Welles and Kenneth Branagh, who used Venice's most outstanding landmarks as the canvas for their Hollywood tales. So this is what the average American viewers expect to see represented in a mural of Venice.

This "general familiarity" presents a dilemma for the muralist. And that is, how do you pick and choose the right landmark images for your mural? The problem is that every individual has a favourite "postcard" image of Venice according to their own experience and recollection, and, the landmarks are scattered all over the city. One can not see them all from a single vintage point. You have to take a walking tour –and a boat ride, to get a view of all the sites.
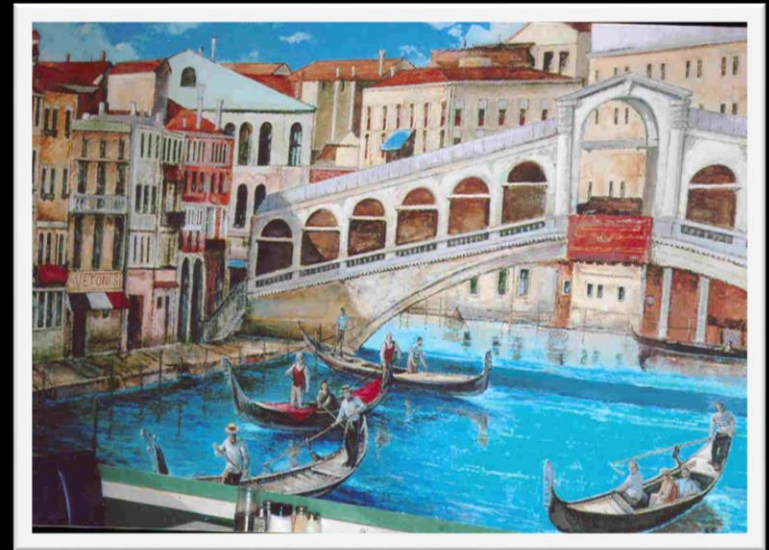
See what others have done

A good starting point is to see how other mural artists have approached the problem. The size and quality of these works varies tremendously but they seem to have one thing in common: they were mural renderings of postcards.   For the most part, the murals concentrated on a single landmark or "vista" of Venice.

The murals were decorative and cheerful for the most part. And they made their point: this is an "Italian" theme mural for an Italian theme locale. But as murals go, they were no different than easel paintings because they did not take into account the architecture of the real space or the viewer's point(s) of view.

Notice how the "photo-murals" fit well in these two examples. It is what you might expect to see if you were to cut out a window space on a background wall to reveal a Venice view. And if you were to add window shutters at each end, the illusion would be reinforced. While photo-murals are not traditional painted murals, they do provide fast and inexpensive solutions to some decorative schemes. But their uses are limited. Painted murals, while time consuming and expensive, have endless potential. The key is to plan them right.
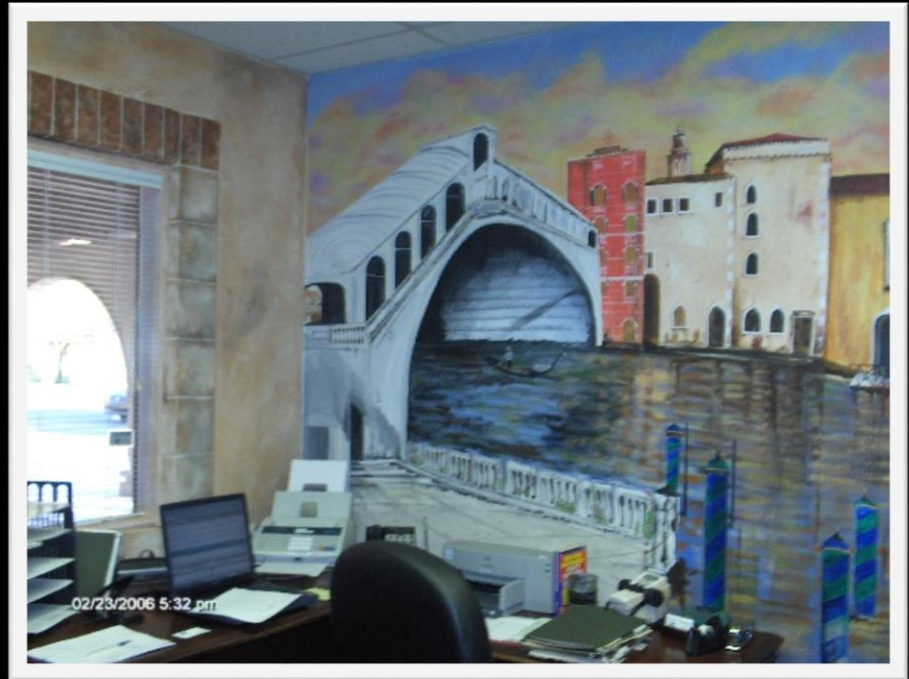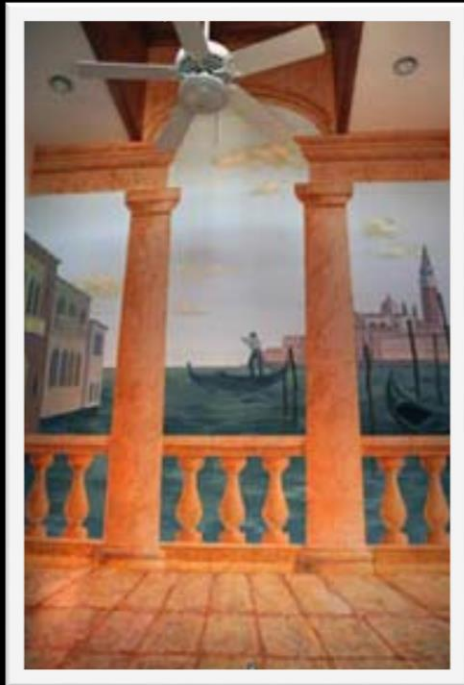
A well planned mural should "fit" well within a real setting and look like it belongs there. In a restaurant setting, it should not create an unsettling "billboard" effect on the viewer. Instead, it should provide comfort through a sense of balance, harmony and serenity.
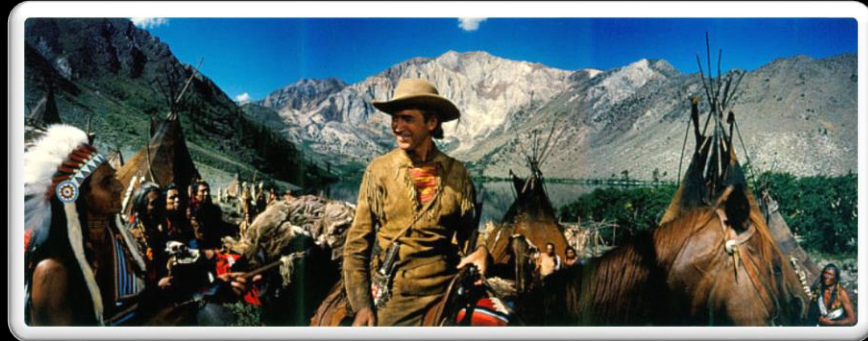
For my own Venice mural design I decided to include many of the city's landmarks in a "cinematic" view. This meant that I would have to "reconstruct" my own version of Venice and make it look like an "establishing long-shot" in a movie.

I took into account that the wall dimensions approximated a panoramic "CinemaScope" picture frame. The viewers, who readily accept a vision of artificial reality as seen through the camera lenses, would "see" nothing wrong with this picture and thus accept it as their new reality.

Painting style

Once I had selected the theme for the mural, and had a good idea of what the final design would be, I had to decide on a suitable painting style. Will the brushstrokes be visible and impressionistic or will objects be modeled in soft gradations of values with "invisible strokes"? What about the coloring? Will I go for a dramatic or for a serene look? What will this add or take away from my intended goals.

Naturally, many of these arguments are determined by the real factors encountered on each job. How close will the viewer be from the wall? Is the wall surface rough or smooth? Will the wall be exposed to the elements or the public or both? And most importantly, in what kind of lighting will the mural be seen?

The final consideration is time and budget. Generally, the more time I have, the more details I can include, and consequently, the more expensive the job is. With time I like to use oil paints which will in turn dictate my brushstroke and finish. Oils are ideal for rendering beautiful gradations of color and tone.

For fast painting and boldness in stroke and color, I use acrylic paints. But sometimes, even if you have the time, the environment dictates the type of paint you will use. In a working restaurant it is important to avoid strong smells such as mineral spirits (and curious hands) so I decided to use acrylics. Artist's acrylics dry fast, are water-base (which is good for easy cleanup), and are almost odorless.

It's a good idea to have a painting master to emulate (since they did a lot of the thinking for you) and there are no better models than European traditional painters from the 16th to the 19th century.

The work of Venetian painter Giovanni Antonio Canal (1697 –1768), better known as "Canaletto", became the model for the mural's painting style. Known for his exacting landscape painting of Venice, Canaletto elevated Venice's fame to new heights. Copies of his paintings were seen in etchings all over Europe.

Learning from the best

Having a model to emulate does not mean you will end up copying their work. No two artists paint alike. One can imitate a great master but never equal him or her. But if you study closely how they dealt with composition, color and execution, you might learn something useful that you can apply to your own original work. This is how I learned.

For the Italian Restaurant mural I wanted to do a very detailed work because it was going to be appreciated up-close. But since the mural was to be initially seen from a distance, I wanted to capture the viewer with a bold use of color and lighting.

And, since many of the restaurant patrons had traveled abroad with their families, I also made sure that my Venetian landmarks were as precisely executed as the real thing and that the entire painting had a polished look like traditional works seen in museums. My intention was to make a mural that was both elegant and interesting, but as fresh and current as a still from a movie.

The Research

Research

I did all of my research at the library. This was before 'Google Images' and 'Wikipedia' became household words. I borrowed several books about Venice and made photo copies of the images I found most useful.

Now a days I simply scan the images into my computer and file appropriately into categories for easy referencing. When I need to print copies, I do so at a local fast copy service.

I also made sure I had good reference images of architectural details and objects that would be rendered prominently in the mural. I also paid special attention to detail, such as color and texture. Finally, after I had all the references I needed, I make a drawing of the composition –the cartoon, which I then projected in sections onto the wall.

A cartoon example

This is the cartoon from one of my recent murals –The Anguish of Rama. Sometimes my cartoon is nothing more than a simple line drawing done with pencil on white board or a paste up of drawings and images. Others, like this one, are more polished ink and pencil drawings which I then scan and manipulate in Photoshop. In this case I needed to show the design for approval so I made sure it left little to explain. However, more often than not, I stick to a simple renderings since I have the finished picture in my head.

Transferring the drawing

Transferring the drawing

There are several methods for transferring a design to a wall surface –and all the them will get the job done. You can draw the design "freehand", or "trace" a projection of the design, or "square" the wall (by drawing a grid) for an accurate transfer. I have used all of the above. However, each one of these techniques has advantages and limitations. The trick is to know how to combine them to bring the best result. Usually the needs for the job will dictate your working method. This skill you learn through practice and experience after working on several jobs. Later on I will show you how I did it for this job.

Traditional mural painting relied on the squaring technique, especially for large scale murals. This is also known as "the grid" method. It consists in dividing the original scaled design into squares (thus creating a grid), then dividing the wall into the exact same number of squares as the design, and them proceeding to carefully reproduce the markings contained in each square in the design to its corresponding square on the wall. Eventually, square by square, the drawing is transferred with a high degree of accuracy.

For this particular job, which required a great deal of precise architectural detail on a smaller scale, I used my old opaque projector (shown here while in use on another job). It has its own stand with a telescopic rod that can be adjusted to any desired height. It also has a homemade lens extension (made from a piece of PVC pipe and connector) that allows me go get really close to the wall for detailed work. I should also point out that I was perfectly capable of doing the job without the projector. But I have it and using it saves time. Why miss an opportunity to make your life easier?

Projectors come in a many styles with a variety of names. They work just like the bulky old-fashion opaque projectors still used in many classrooms around the world. Regardless of price and size, they have the same components: a light source, a reflective mirror, a cooling fan, and a lens. Some artists now use a combination of laptop with an LCD projector. I have both but for sheer simplicity I still prefer my old opaque projector. It is the best drawing aid I have ever owned.

How to use a projector

Working with a projector is easy. Simply place the original art (drawing, picture, or diagram) face down on the plate glass, dim or turn off the room lights, and then adjust the projection lens until the image on the wall suits your specifications. Pull the projector away from the wall to increase the size of the projected image or get closer for a tighter size. Trace the image working fast to avoid overheating the projector and damaging the original art (which will either shrink or enlarge from the heat thus distorting the projection).

Projection works better when used on small jobs. It is specially ideal for projecting lettering and aligning text properly in a composition. But lens distortion is a big problem when projecting large scale images since lines "curve" the farther you move from the wall (look at horizontal and vertical lines). To avoid this "fish-eye" lens effect, divide the design image into a grid and project it in smaller sections. I can always tell a professional muralist from an amateur because the professionals correct the distortions after projection. Amateurs ignore them, move one, and their work ends up looking second rate.
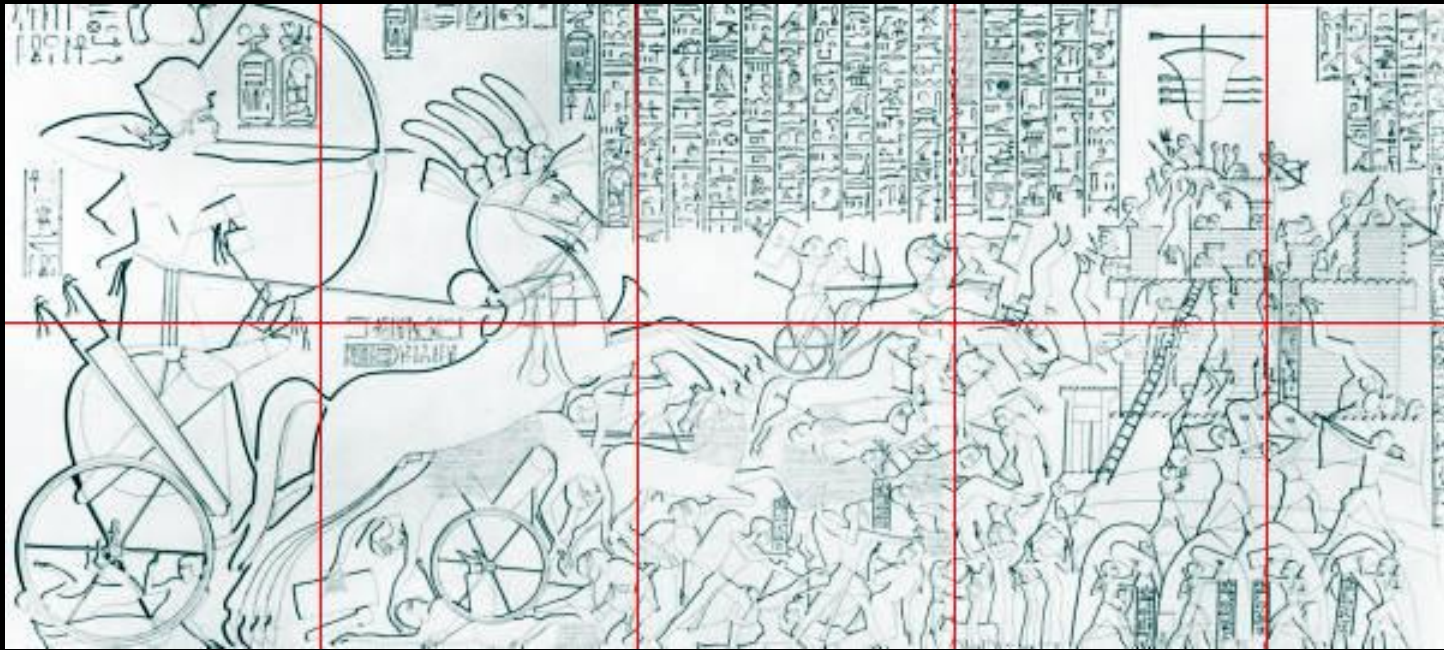
This shows an example of a cartoon for a mural design. "Grid" your image or working drawing and then align the projected grid to the wall's guidelines or markings. Project each section in turn. For ease of viewing clarity, it is best to ink line drawings or photo copy the original and render a printed copy in sharp contrast. You can also do a tracing of your image and then project the tracing.
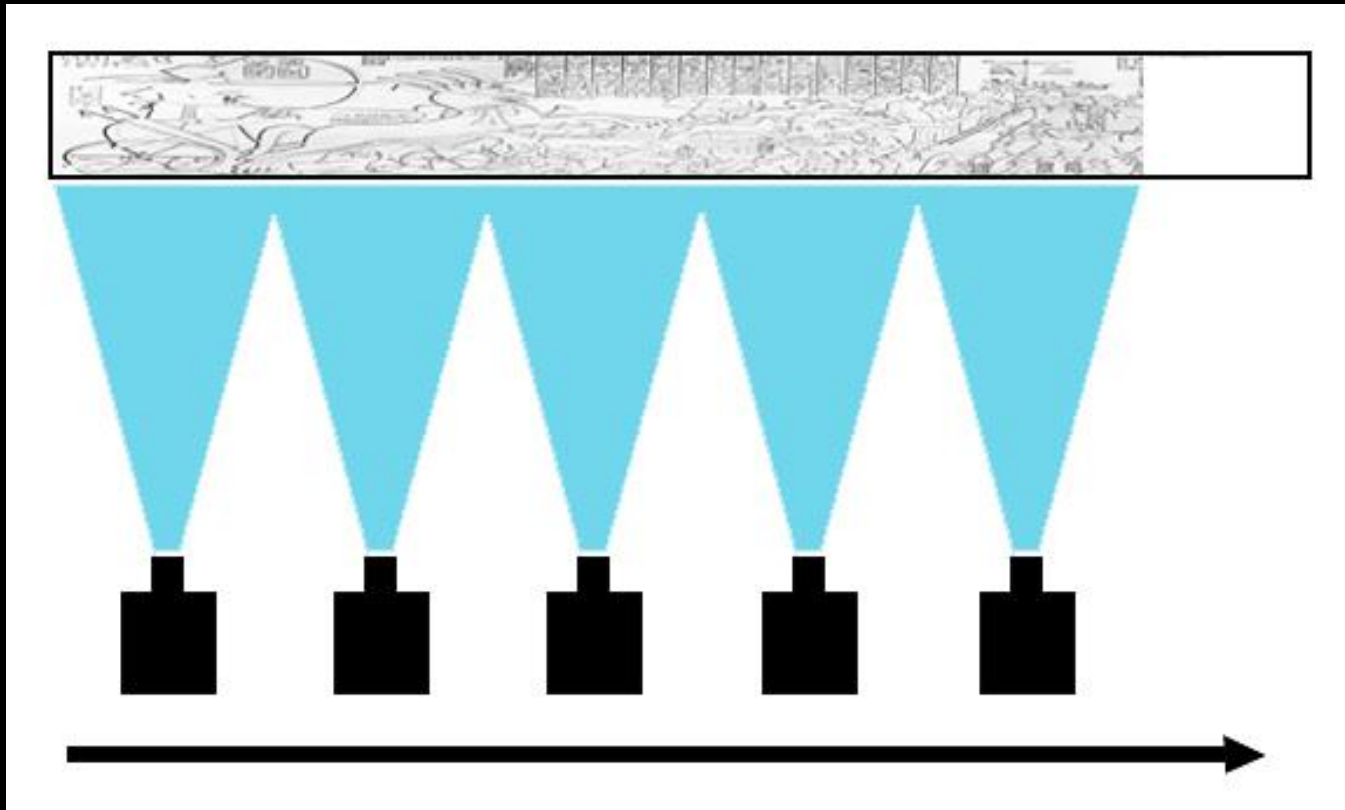
To avoid distortion, project in sections (one or two squares at a time). Move the projector parallel to the wall making sure that grid lines align from one section to the next. Make floor markings to insure correct placement of the projector during each move. I have my own apprentices practice this skill at the shop. Trace mostly with pencils or charcoal sticks. This way corrections are easily made erasing and redrawing lines and contours.

The Job Site

The Italian Village Restaurant and Catering is located in a small shopping strip a few miles from the township of Strongsville, in the State of Ohio, USA. The space was originally constructed to house an arts & crafts warehouse. There is ample parking at the front, which is always a convenience.

You enter into a small glass enclosed vestibule, which considering the frigid winter winds in the area, provides a nice air lock into the place. The name of the restaurant is leaded onto the glass.
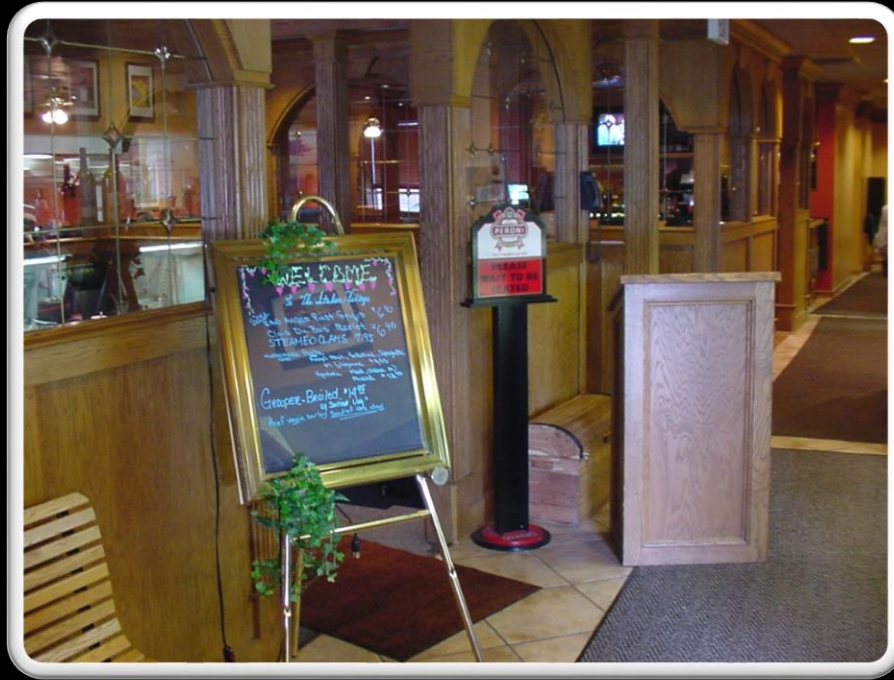
Coming in from the vestibule is a Hostess Station to receive guests and assign seating. To the left is the entryway into the main dining area, separated by a wood-paneled partition with glass arched windows. Just before the entrance is an easel with the day's specials. A wooden bench is placed against the wall for patrons waiting for carry-out orders. The restaurant also has a thriving pizza service. Passed the Hostess Station is a hallway that leads to the bar, restrooms, the kitchen, and a second dining area.

To the right of the Hostess Station one can see the kitchen. A dessert display case separates the space. A cash register for carry-out orders sits on a small countertop. A series of colorful food-theme prints decorated the walls.
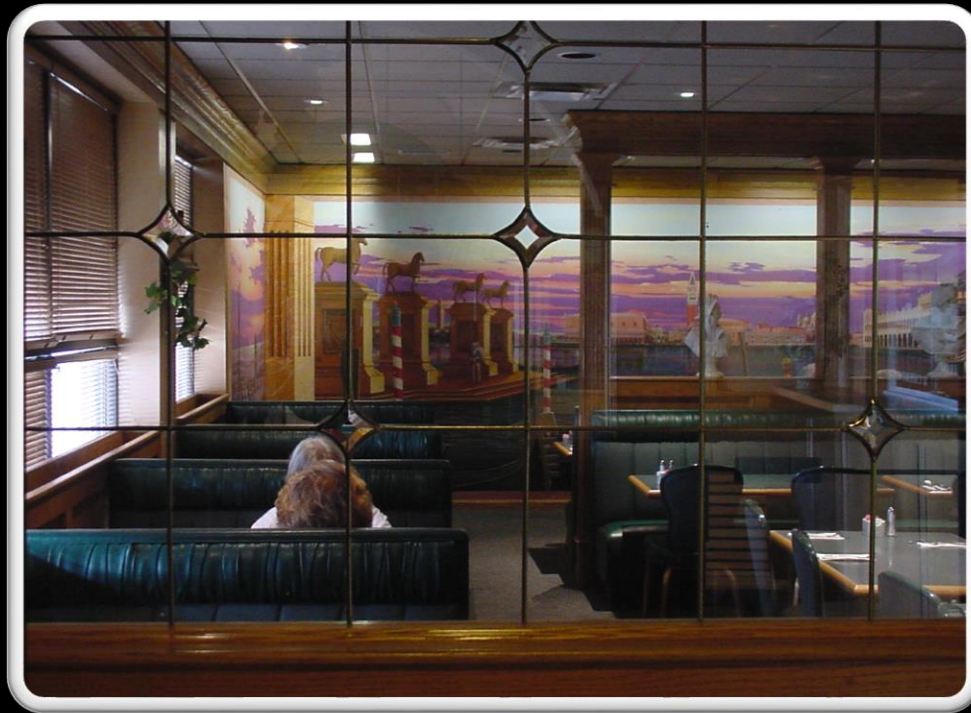
Turning around one can see the main dinning area through glass windows. The mural is on the far wall. I opens up the space making the eye recede far into the horizon. The sky seem to illuminate the space in soft filtered light while the pattern of clouds tinged by dusk extend across the vista giving it breadth and depth. The receding line of monuments toped by statues gives the space a dimension of grandeur and draws the eye to a bell tower rising in the distance.

This is how the place looked when I first saw it in April 8, 2002. The walls had been recently painted in a generic terracotta-color sponge-applied texture-treatment. The color was too intense and it made the low-ceiling space look cramped and contrite. It needed something to soften things up —like a mural!

Preparing the wall

Work began by clearing the area and preparing it for "prep-work".   Dust and the strong odor of primer made it necessary to work at night while the restaurant was close. I used a water-base primer but it still gives out an ammonia-like smell as it dries.

The carpet flooring was protected with heavy-mill plastic which was taped neatly to the surrounding baseboard.   This covering remained in place until the mural was completed. Any tear was immediately patched with a piece of masking tape. Spills "will occur" regardless of how careful you are.

Next the walls were patched, sanded smooth with a sanding sponge, and washed with soap and water (use a non-wax detergent) and rinse well. If the wall is not properly cleaned, the paint may not adhere properly and the peel off.

In murals that extend over intersecting walls, corners are problematic because they make visual transitions difficult.
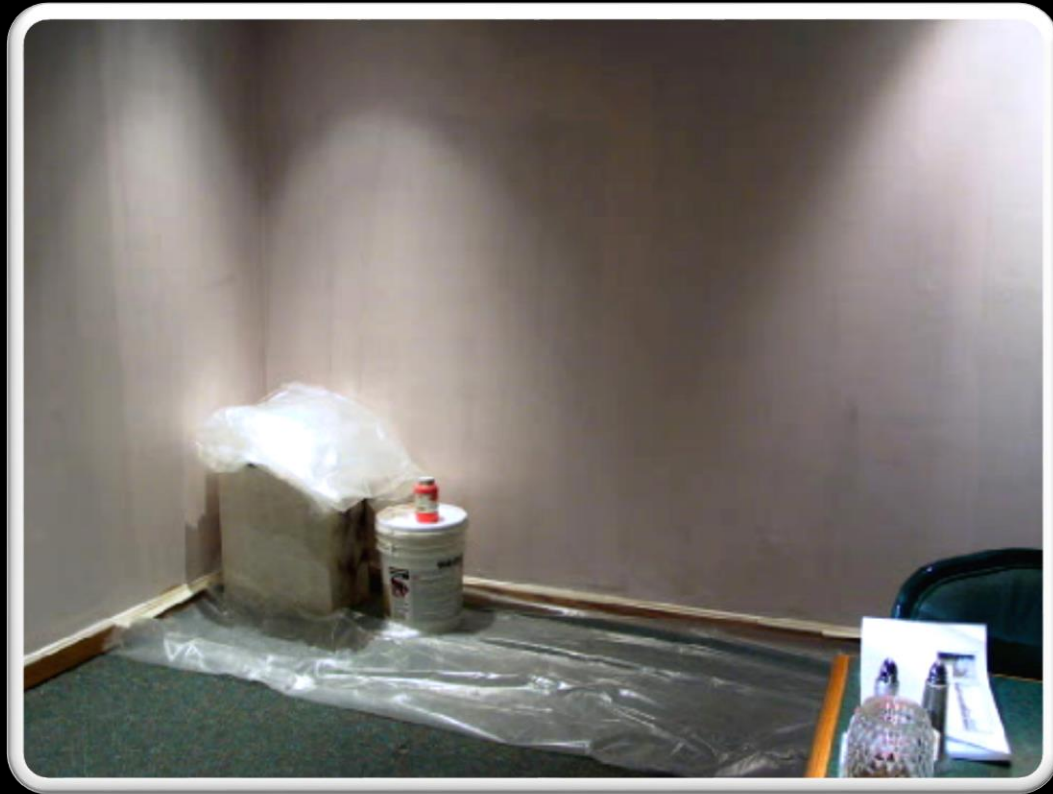
The walls were then covered with a coat of water-base 'primer' containing a fungicide additive to protect against mold growth on the paint film. I tinted the primer with red acrylic paint before applying it with a roller. Tinting primer is a personal practice to make it easier on the eyes since white surfaces are very reflective, especially in sunlight.

A primer or undercoat is a preparatory coating put on surfaces before painting. Priming ensures better adhesion of paint, increases paint durability, and provides additional protection for the material being painted.   Primers are sold under many brand names and in a variety of size containers at paint stores and home centers.

I consider priming to be the essential step to promote a mural's longevity. Priming seals porous surfaces making them less absorbent. A non-absorbent surface is ideal for painting techniques. In addition to sealing, priming also provides a "tooth" that ensures better adhesion of paint to any surface, increases paint durability, and, depending on various additives, provides additional protections to a job.

Primed walls ready for painting. In restaurants, by their very nature, walls collect grease. No matter how clean the space my be, cooking grease travels in the air, is blown around by air-conditioning and heating systems, and slowly over time accumulates on walls. Consequently, walls then become dust magnets. This is why it's so imperative that before priming and painting, they are properly cleaned.

Note: -Some artists prefer to prime walls with 'Gesso'. Gesso is an art product that dries hard and makes a surface, such as canvas, stiff and less absorbent. It is used as a primer for painting, gilding, and sculpting. Traditional Gesso is a mixture of chalk or gypsum filler, white pigment (either from the chalk or another mineral such as zinc), and animal-skin glue. However, this gesso is brittle when dry and therefore susceptible to cracking.

In 1955, an acrylic paint manufacturer called Liquitex developed the first water-based acrylic gesso. Modern gesso is a mixture of calcium carbonate with a pigment and an acrylic polymer medium. The pigment is usually titanium dioxide or titanium white. It is also an expensive product. Therefore my practice is to use regular primer for murals and Gesso for small paintings on canvas, canvas boards or wood panels.

Transferring the drawing

Before you continue...

When I was painting this mural I took a few photographs so I could record my work progress —and show my girlfriend back home. It never occur to me that one day I was going to share these photos with anyone else. So... be warned, the images you will see ahead are not the best. Most of them were taken under very bad lighting conditions without the aid of a flash. However, I adjusted the exposure in Photoshop to make them easier for you to see. And while they will not win me any awards in photography, they should give you a clear idea of my work progress, method, and painting techniques.

My first digital camera: the Canon PowerShot G1. Release into the market in 2000, it was a large investment at the time. But it was worth every penny and has paid itself hundreds of times over. A muralist takes tons of images for reference, research, recording or study. It is an indispensable tool. In 2017 I retired my G1 and replaced it with a Canon EOS Rebel T5i.

Transferring the drawing
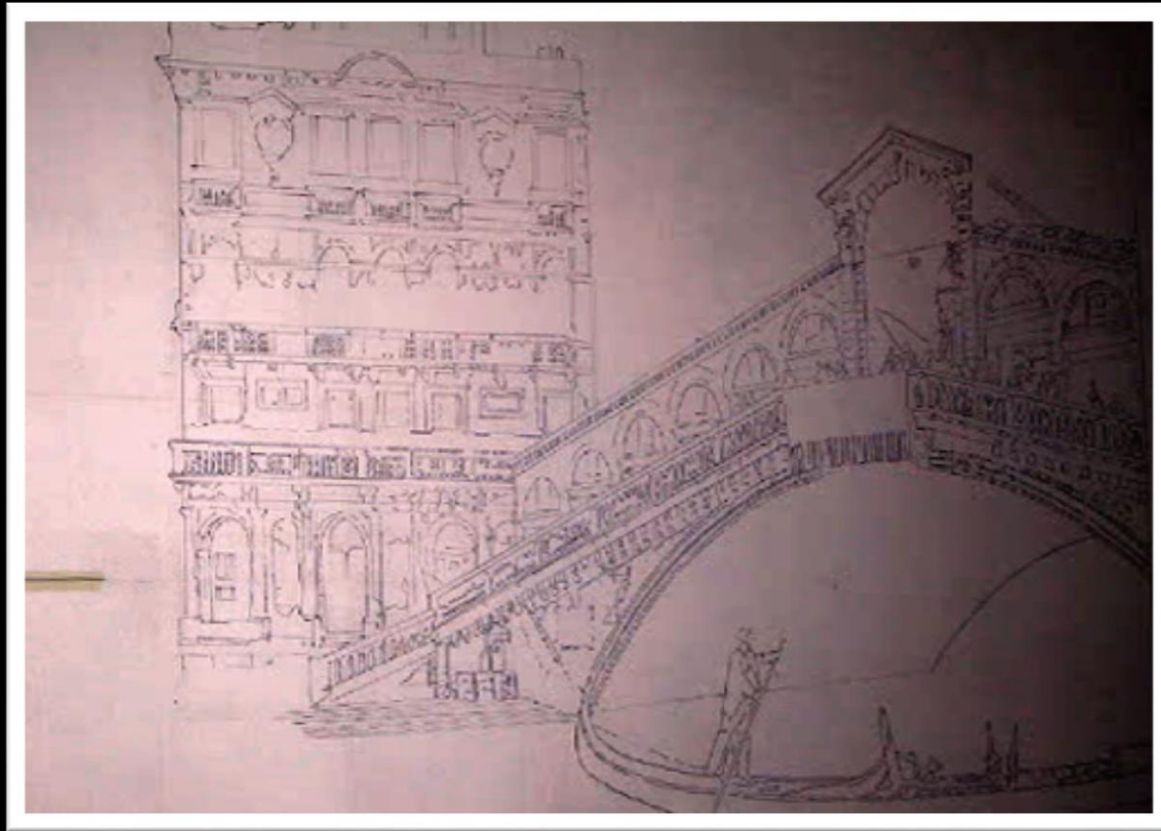
The design was projected and traced onto the wall. I do tracings with thin charcoal sticks or charcoal pencils. When the tracing is completed, corrections are easily made by wiping off charcoal lines with a cloth. After I'm completely satisfied with the drawing, I slightly dusted off the charcoal (without loosing the lines) and then "fixed" the drawing with ink or a permanent felt-tip marker. "Inking" the drawing can also be done with fluid paint and a paintbrush.
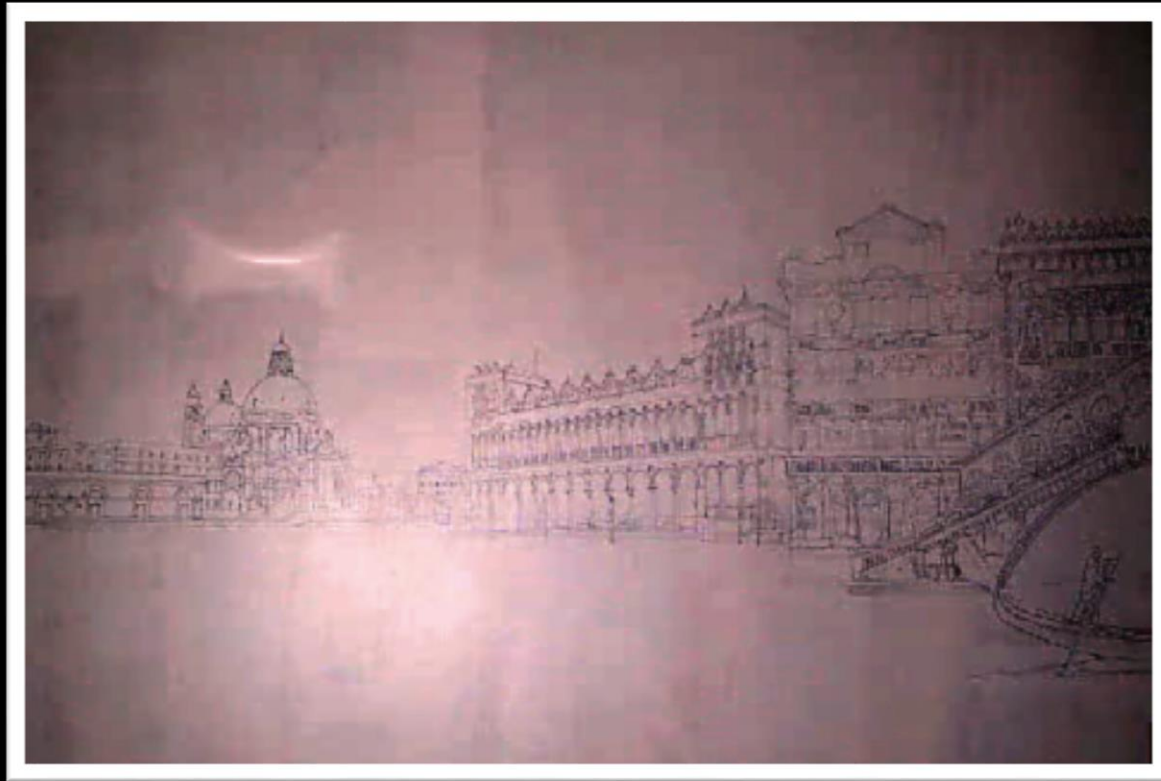
Rhythm is necessary in a good composition to lead the viewer's eye from one end of the mural to the other. If this is not accomplished during the drawing stage, no amount of painting can fix it. Rhythm means that a repetitious pattern of elements will occur – like the use of similar buildings, but the repetitions include subtle variations so the patters is not always the same –not all the buildings, though similar, are the same. Repetition of the same elements equals a boring composition.
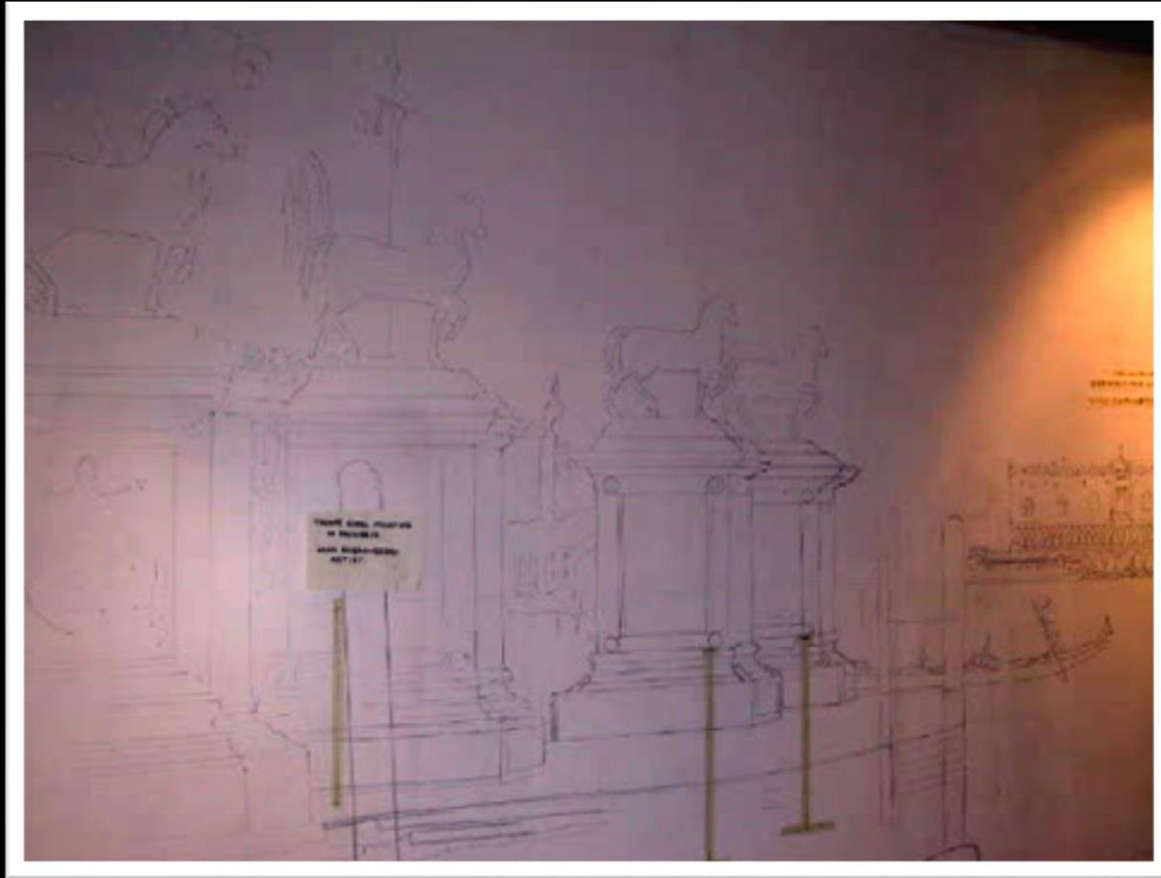
All perspective lines have to be corrected after projection. I place strips of masking tape on the wall and make markings on them. These markings correspond to a scale of measurements. I run a string from my vanishing point in the horizon through this markings to make sure everything fits in correct proportion. If I were to loose these markers I would be screwed for several days.
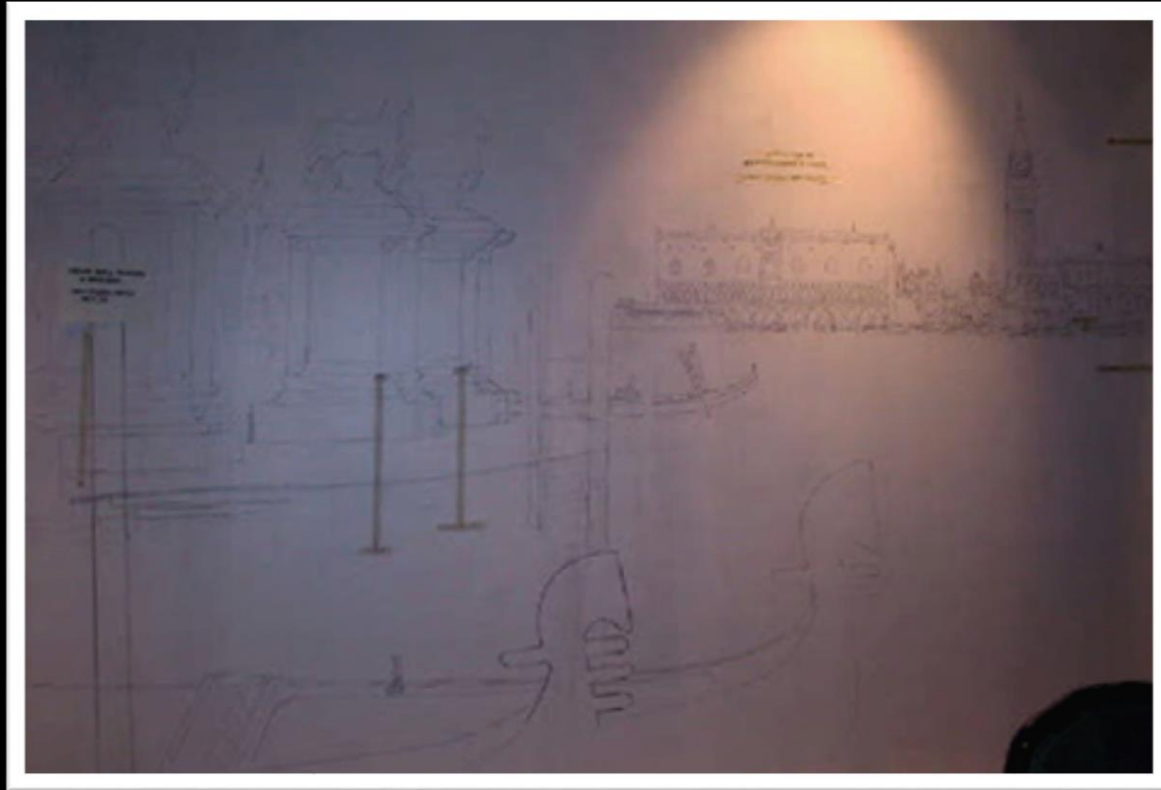
Lastly, I write down notes and paste them on the wall, such as writing my color scheme for each section on a piece of masking tape (so I don't forget). I also add a title to the mural. It helps the curious when you are not around to explain things.
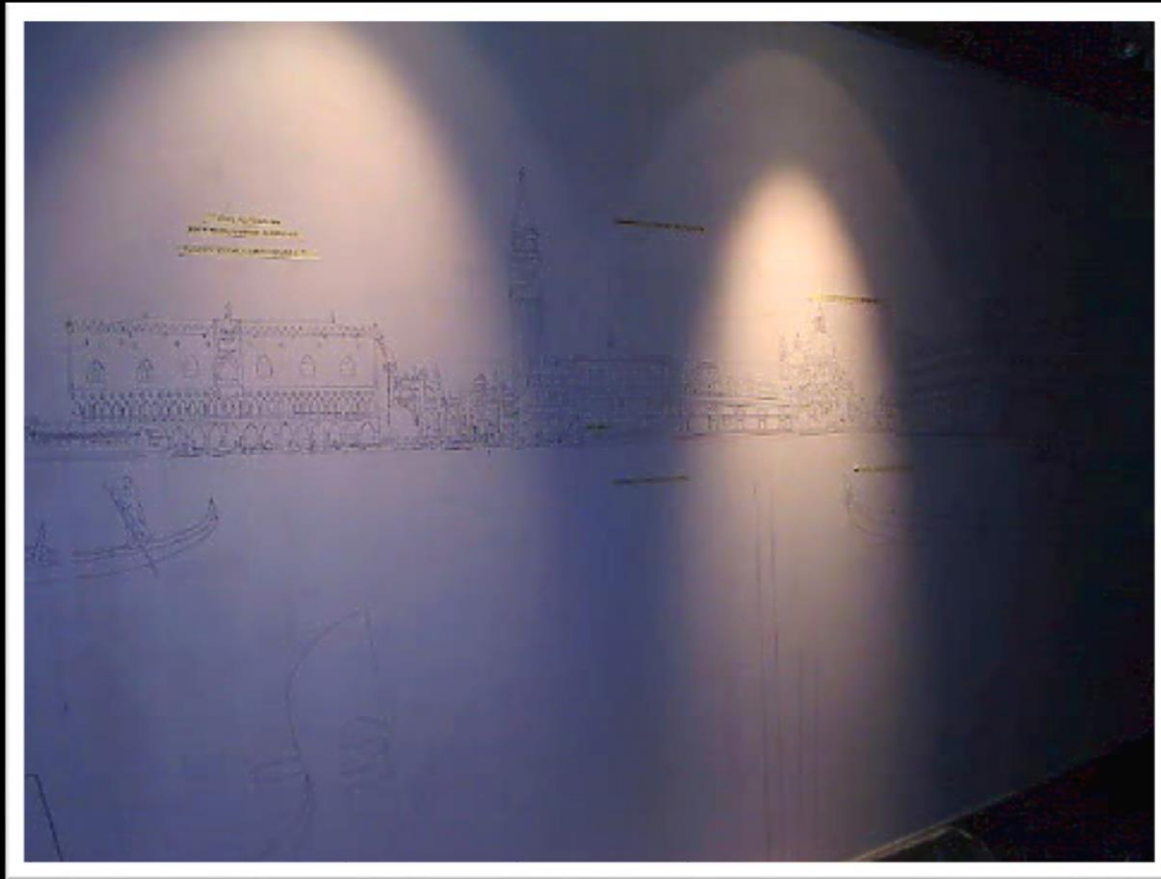
Drawing stage completed. I never begin the painting stage until I'm 100 percent satisfied with the final drawing. If not, I erase it and begin again. This type of mural is not possible without doing the research. Photographic and architectural references are a must. The rendering of architectural elements is very detailed and necessary.

Things you should know about paint

To be a good painter one needs to understand the qualities of paint. "Opacity" and "transparency" are two important qualities not fully understood —or exploited by many modern-day painters (who treat paint as if it was plaster).

Experienced muralists understand that no paint is 100% opaque because all paints consist simply of color pigments suspended in a transparent or semi-transparent substance like fruit in a Jell-O mold.

Opaque Paint | TRANSPARENT

Opaque Paint | TRANSLUCENT

Op[ ]nt | OPAQUE
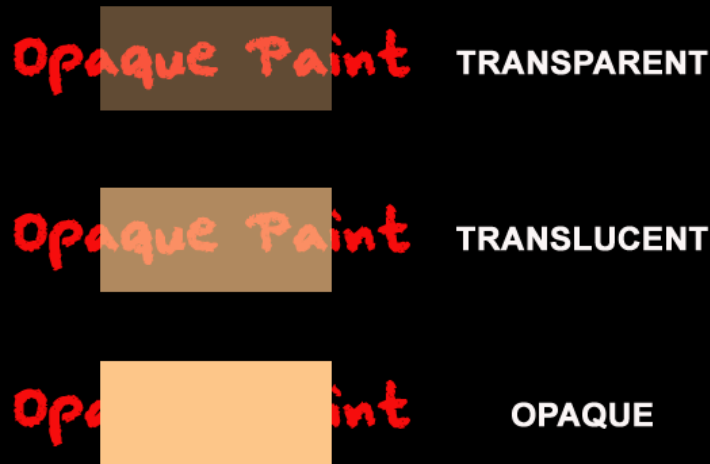
A few paint manufacturers indicate if a color is opaque, transparent, or semi-transparent on the container. But most painters learn this from working experience, not from reading labels. They also learned that a "one-coat only" application never really achieves total opaqueness. It is necessary to apply more than one coat to "build-up" layers of pigment and thus achieve full color saturation. Therefore, a painter never paints a mural once; a painter repaints a mural many times over.

Whether a color is opaque (covers up what's beneath it) or transparent is of great importance to the painter who works with glazes to build up color and tonality. Understanding how to apply this knowledge is what makes some painters rise above the rest.
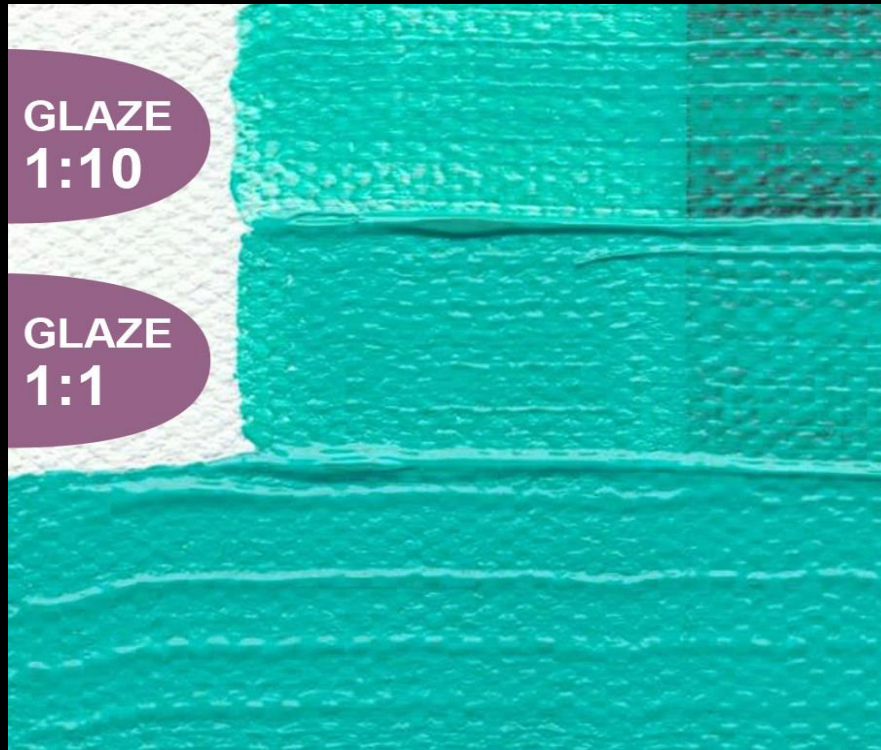
GLAZE
1:10

GLAZE
1:1

Glazing, the practice of adding paint in thin, transparent layers of paint, is an oil painting technique also applicable to painting with Acrylic paints. Glazes used on top of one another build up intensity and modify colors in a painting by adding luminosity, richness, and depth you cannot get by mixing colors on a palette.

A glaze must be completely dry before another is applied so, in oil painting, the practice takes time. Painters who like to work fast and expect "instant" results paint with Acrylics. Acrylic paint is fast-drying product containing pigment suspended in an acrylic polymer emulsion. Acrylic paints can be diluted with water (up to a point), but become water-resistant when dry. In essence Acrylic paint is basically colored liquid plastic.

What paint manufacturers have accomplished with acrylic paints is truly remarkable. In addition to many other good characteristics such as durability and range, acrylics have the ability to bond to many different surfaces. These qualities (and others not mentioned) have made acrylics an ideal choice for muralists, myself included, since the Mexican muralists of the 1950's.

A glaze must be completely dry before another is applied. So, in oil painting, the technique takes time. Painters who like to work fast and expect "instant" results paint with acrylics. Acrylic paint is a fast-drying product containing pigment suspended in an acrylic polymer emulsion (a synthetic resin similar to white glue). Acrylic paints can be diluted with water (up to a point), but become water-resistant when dry. In essence acrylic paint is basically colored liquid plastic.
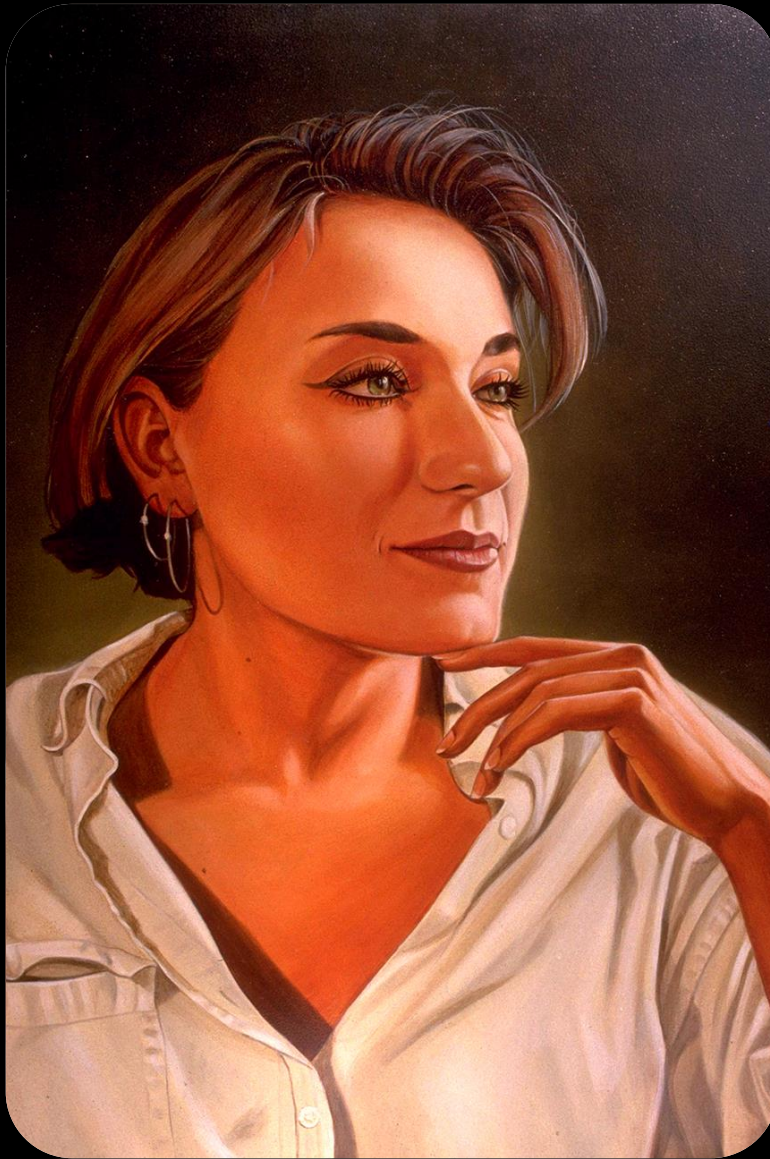
This is an advantage when delicate blending and manipulation of paint is desired to produce remarkable results. It is a skill that I greatly enjoy and never fails to delight viewers who appreciate good painting ability and expertise. Many art critics overlook the fact that technical dexterity is also part of the pleasure of painting and admiring art. This is so because many "artists" today simply cannot paint in a traditional manner at all.

"The Thought" -Oil glazed painting
by John Rivera-Resto

"The Panorama Mural", detail —acrylic glazed painting by John Rivera-Resto

The artistic capacity to effectively control the quality of opacity and transparency has an effect on a painting and on the viewer. Applying oil glazing techniques to Acrylics is possible but not easy to do. Paint manufactures add either fillers or white pigments which make acrylic paint more opaque, with is ideal if opaqueness is what is desired, but attempting glazing techniques with such mediums (which require transparency) can certainly be a frustrating task, if not impossible at times.

Nevertheless, glazing with acrylics can be accomplished and I have done so successfully for a long time. You do need to plan well and work fast, especially when covering large surface areas. But the results are well worth the extra effort. At times I even apply oil glazes over murals painted in Acrylics to heighten the intensity of some colors. Renaissance painters did the same to frescoes. It works great.

Sandro Botticelli - Venus and Mars, 1485 (Detailed)

In today's fast-moving world, where speed of execution tend to be valued over quality of craftsmanship, doing large works in oils is seen as counter productive. After all, the motto of this current age is: "Time is money —let's not waste it!". So combining techniques of Oils and Acrylics in mural painting is a way to take advantage from the best of both worlds.

"Midnight Flower" -Oil glazed on acrylic painting by John Rivera-Resto

The sky, clouds and under-paint
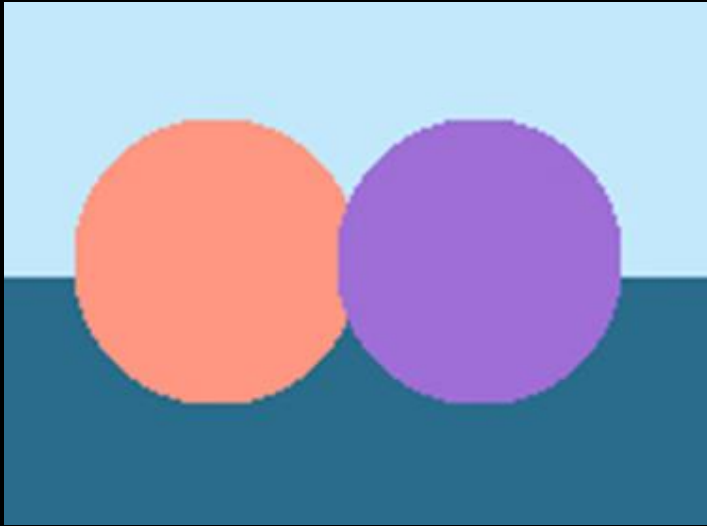
The first thing I consider before applying the first brushstroke is my color scheme. Colors often have different meanings in various cultures but one thing is certain in all, and that is that color affects mood. Colors also have unique "personalities". A color will change its behavior when placed next to another color. These changes in behavior makes us react.

There is an entire science dedicated to "color psychology". Since one of my specialties is propaganda art, I know how to use color to influence others without them knowing they are being manipulated. Color helps push internal buttons and a muralist knows this better than anyone.

For these murals I wanted a combination of colors that was vibrant and dramatic but without raising alarms. Therefore I stayed away from strong primary colors and opted instead for using secondary colors in my color scheme. Taking a page from Michelangelo, orange and violet took prominent stage over a base of neutral blues (which will end up on the shade of green).

Selected images from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, painted between 1508 and 1512 .

Secondary colors (violets, oranges and greens) -Michelangelo's palette, are created when two primary colors are mixed. My intention was to attract people with the coloring, not repulse them with overpowering primaries. Secondary colors tone things down. But they appear more vibrant than they really are when placed next to each other. This unique behavior allowed me to maintain a softer, more luminous but less saturated palette that would attract the eye for afar but not hurt them when they came up-close.
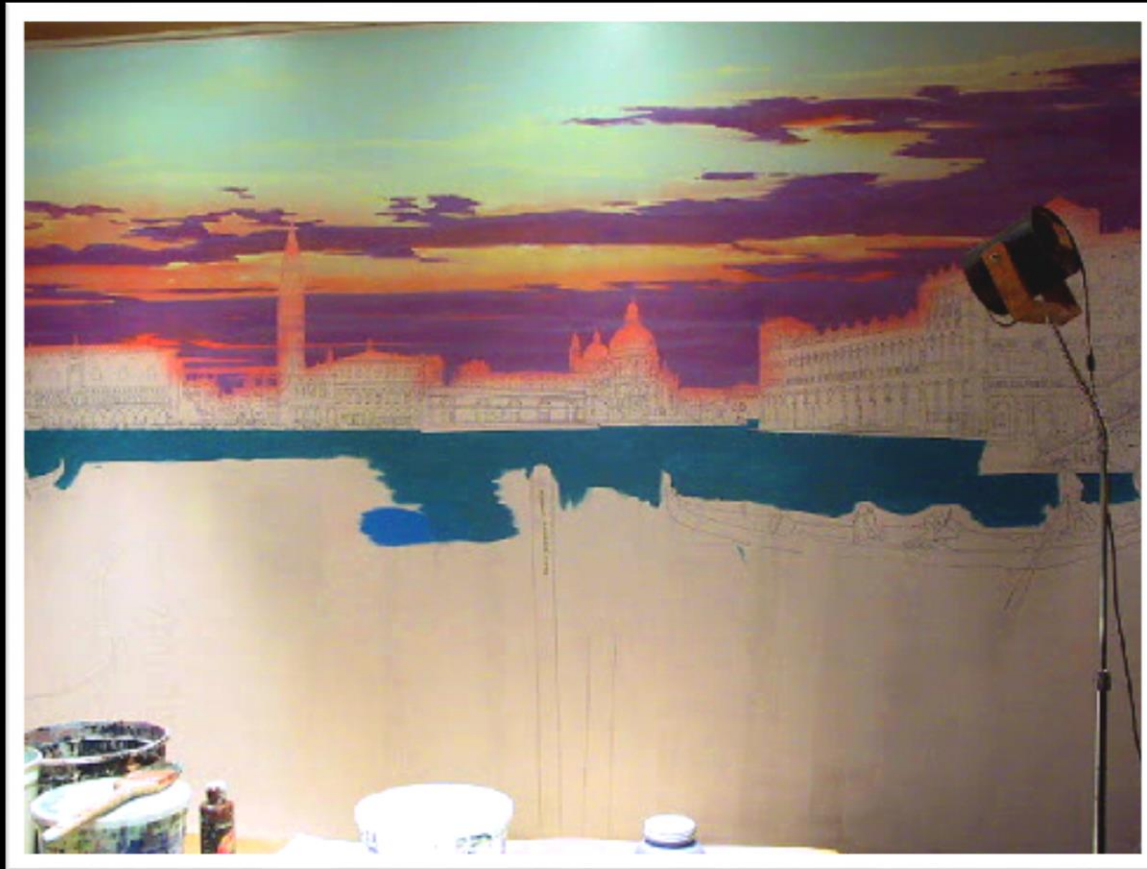
I always paint in overlapping layers, beginning with the farthest background –the sky. After applying a coat of light blue under-paint to the sky area (that is everything above the horizon line), I spayed a layer of semi-transparent orange tint. Then I brushed in the cloud formations and light accents.
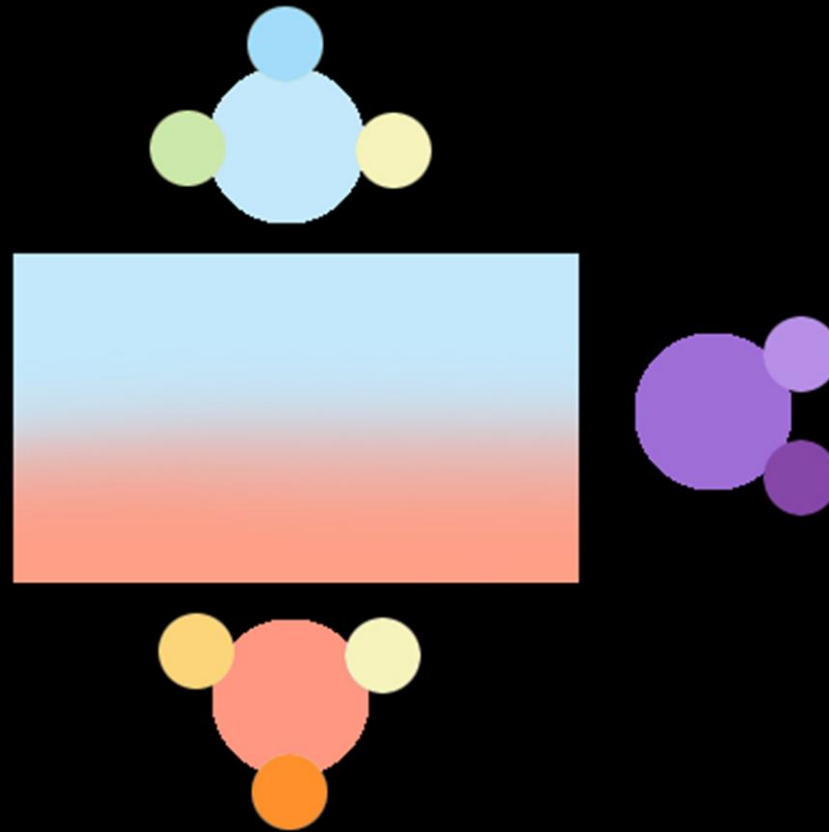
This was my color palette for the upper half of the painting. The rectangle illustrates the orange tint applied over the light blue base. The large circles represent base colors of opaque under-paint (which I initially pre-mixed and stored in containers). The smaller circles represent derivative semi-transparent mixes (made by adding another color to that specific under-paint) used for glazing and toning and opaque colors for adding light "accents".

I used a "touch-up gun" (left) to spray the orange tint.   The gun has a one-pint canister that holds a good amount of paint without weighing down its handling. It has a spray pattern wider than an airbrush which allows for even coverage of a large area and a soft blending of color.   But it also produces more "overspray".   You can use heavier paints with this gun. However, for tinting I prepared a mix with the consistency of orange juice.
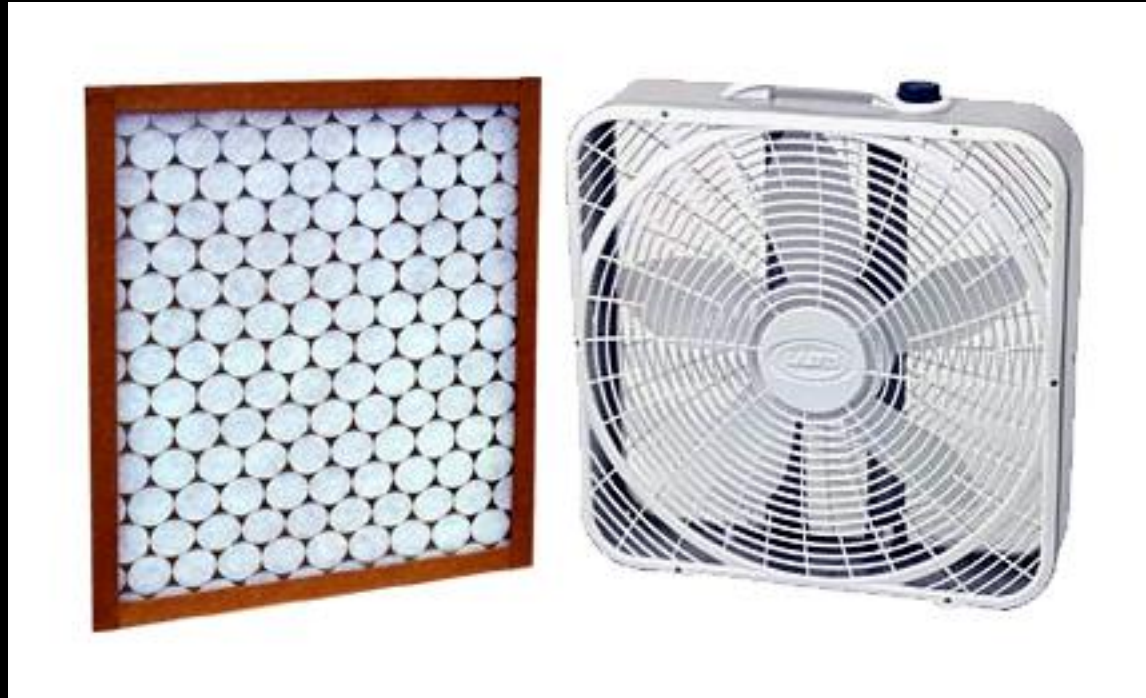
The problem with using a spray gun in an enclosed space is that, as the overspray dries in the air, it creates a color dust that falls on everything. You have to cover and mask all around before you spray. I use a 'box-fan' with a furnace disposable air filter on its air suction side to collect the dust. It is not perfect but it helps clear the air. Since this was the only part of the mural where I intended to use the spray gun, I was able to keep the mess to a minimum.

Acrylic paints are sold in various size containers. For mural work I usually buy pint-size plastic jars and a few small tubes of rarely used colors just in case I need them. Once I decide on a color scheme for a job, I mix my key colors on a disposable paper palette using two painting knives and then store them in small plastic containers with airtight lids. For a day's work I extract the needed amount of paint from these containers, do derivative mixes by adding additional colors, and then pour the paint into disposable 8-ounce drinking cups which I keep in a cup-holding tray. For detail work I use "fluid Acrylics", designed for the airbrush, but also ideal for fine brushwork. You can also make fluid paint by mixing Acrylics and a 50:50 mixture of water and a glazing medium.

After spraying the orange tint I paint the cloud formation. From here on its all brushwork. I could have done the tinting with a large soft-bristle brush (at least 6-inches wide). But spraying was faster and the blending is perfect. To insure good opaque coverage I used heavy mixes for the under-paint. Then I used lighter semi-transparent mixes to rework the areas. This slow buildup of thin glazes adds more depth and value to the final result.

I extended the horizon line from the main wall across to the side wall in order to create a sense of visual continuity. I also kept it high enough so that the panoramic vista could be seen from across the room. After completing the sky I then began to "block" the water area with blue-green under-paint. I take great care not to paint over drawings. If I go over a line, I wipe off the paint immediately.

Abstract cloud patterns are a great way to add drama and continuity to a painting. By extended the clouds horizontally in a sweeping pattern across the length of the mural, a dramatic "panoramic" effect was achieved. This also helped to balance and unify overlapping foreground elements into a harmonious composition.

Cloud patterns are also a great tool for creating a feeling of vastness. To draw the eye toward the infinite horizon and thus increase the sensation of distance and atmospheric depth, I added weight and gravity to the lower clouds and then made then lighter and sparser at the top.

Lastly, a feeling of movement was achieved by giving the cloud pattern a slight diagonal rise from right to left. This added a sense of atmospheric instability that intensified the sensation of dynamic change "brought about by the wind".

I purposely set the design at dusk to primarily excuse the use of purple, violets and orange. Violet is the color associated with royalty, purple connotes luxury, wealth, and sophistication. It is also thought as feminine and romantic. It is the perfect symbolic color for Venice.

It's companion color, Orange, evokes excitement, enthusiasm and an energy. It demands attention without screaming. Orange is also known to stimulate emotions, lively conversation and even the appetite. What could be better for a restaurant? In its softer form of peach, which I carried into the distant skyline, orange becomes softer and soothing.

Notice also how the Orange filters through the violet glaze making the cloud look more radiant. Accents of "sunlight" highlights were added in opaque.
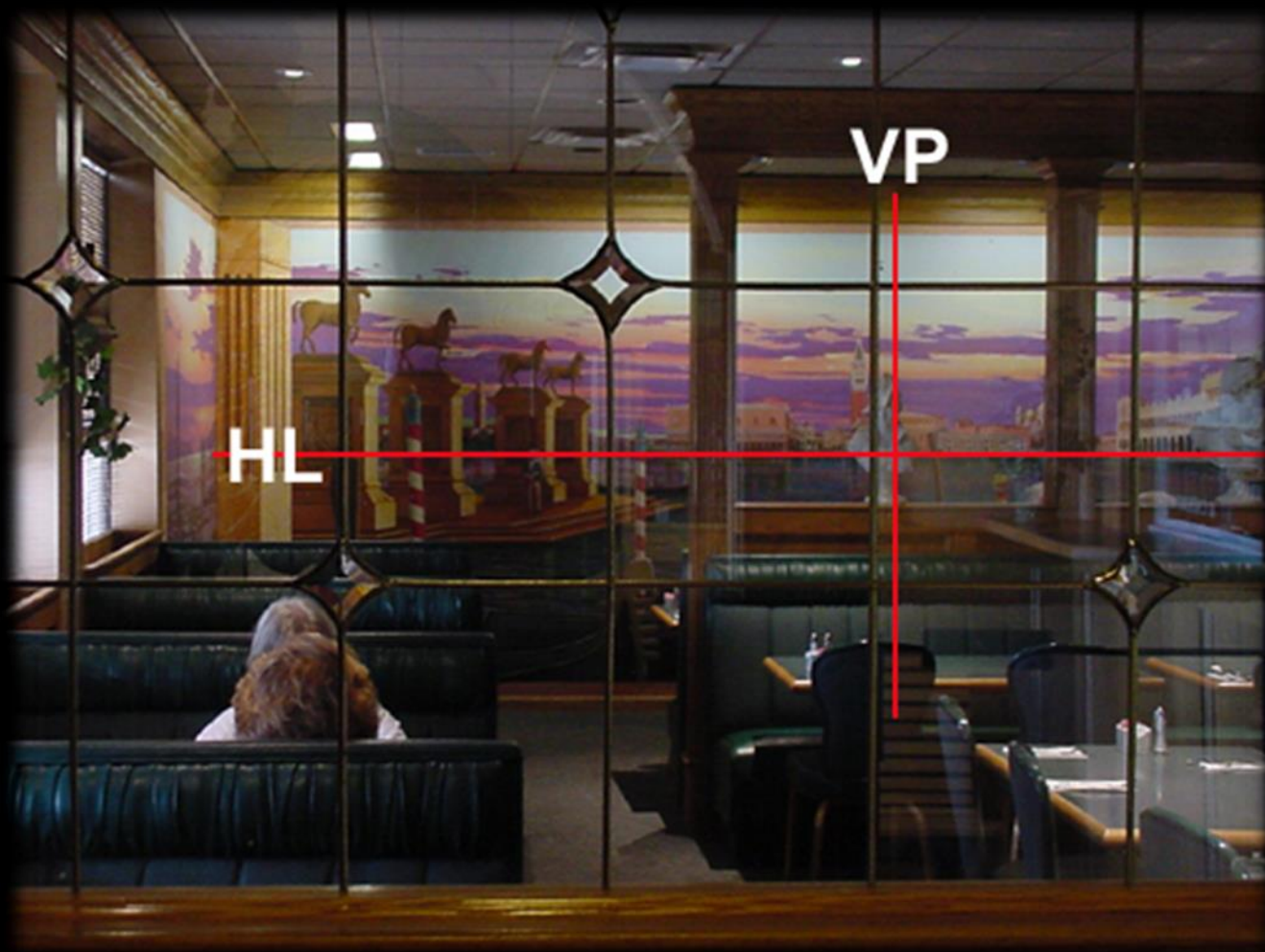
Note: The mural was designed on a one-point perspective scheme. I set the Horizon Line and the Vanishing Point (where the sun sets) after establishing the View Point at the entrance were patrons see the mural for the first time.

Acrylic under-paint dries within one hour. I maintained a horizontal brushstroke as I work the water under-paint across the wall. Remember, no paint is 100-percent opaque. As you paint there will be variations in tone due to brushstroke overlap. Some areas will end up with more paint pigment buildup and other areas with less. This is good. The uneven look of the brushstroke will add to the water's wave effect later on. That is why you maintain a horizontal "wave-like" brushstroke.

Certain foreground objects are draw over the under-paint since it is easier to add them in at this later stage than having to paint around them.

Covering sections with under-paint, also called the "blocking stage", is a great way to coat a lot of wall surface fast. When we block an area using a more fluid and transparent mix, we call this a "wash". Selecting the color of the under-paint is important since the successive layers of semi-transparent paint will modify but not cover it. Each layer will alter the final appearance much like changes made when stacking glass sheets of various colors one on top of the other.

A "positive image" effect is created as objects stand out from the surrounding background. This is the perfect time to re-evaluate compositional balance. Ask yourself, -"Does it look right or does it look odd?" A good composition always looks balanced. If not, you have a final chance to make adjustments.

Publicity

FOX News in the Morning with Kenny Crompton

Murals are not shy. They attract attention –which is good for business. Some become "signature" pieces, giving a space unique personality. A local morning television show did a segment on the mural painting. The show's host, Kenny Crompton, is a very popular and recognizable celebrity figure in Cleveland. He is well known for his sense of humor and lively banter during tapings.

I'm not camera shy either and Kenny and I had a good time while taping the live segments for 'FOX 8 News in the Morning'. I would have wished to do the taping at a later stage in the project (and not so early in the morning) when there would be more to see. But I must admit that the televised segment created a lot of publicity for the restaurant and many viewers came to see me paint. Several regulars came daily! By this time I had switched my working schedule to daylight.
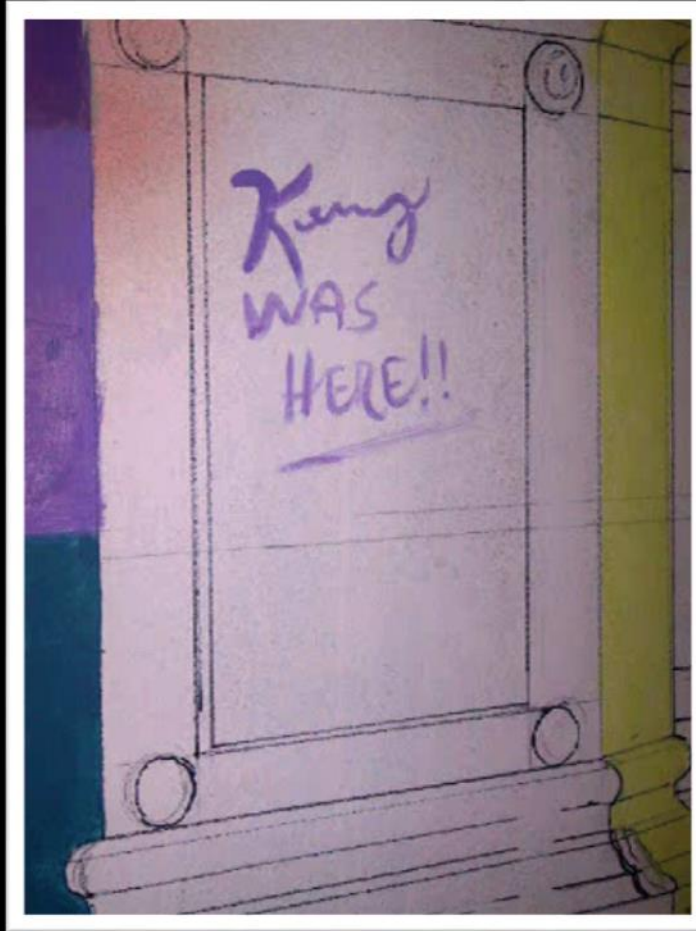
During a break, I sold Kenny on the idea of painting graffiti on the mural. He jumped on it pretty quick and then I pretended shock and dismay which resulted in a lively segment. Just about everyone who saw the show remembered this part. I left the "graffiti" untouched for the longest time for the benefit of curious patrons.

TV producers love to do segments at restaurants because they get to sample the food. It is one of the perks of the job. It is a win-win situation for everyone. The restaurant gets publicity, the muralist gets recognition, the public is informed and entertained, and the TV crew gets fed! All you have to do is have someone call the local station. They are always in need of content and anything interesting and visual will be welcomed.

Painting the Waters

To "break the ice", I decided to first paint the choppy waters on the side mural. I treated both walls as two independent murals, though I made the smaller wall derivative of the first and dependent on the lighting scheme set on the main wall. Again, I emphasize horizontal lines in my wave pattern.

I used an impressionistic style of rapid dabbing brushstrokes to simulate waves. Notice how the under-paint works in my favor. My color palette is exactly the same one I used for the sky area. The difference is that instead of working in thin glazes, I kept the paint thick and opaque to add "velaturas".

A velatura (Italian term meaning "veiled") is a thin layer of opaque paint (over a darker color), spread out so it creates a milky or foggy haze that obscures some of what's beneath it, but not all. It's like a glaze, but created using an opaque or semi-opaque pigment rather than a transparent one. With glazes you tint on a light background and work from light to dark. For a dark background you work in velaturas and build up to lighter detail.
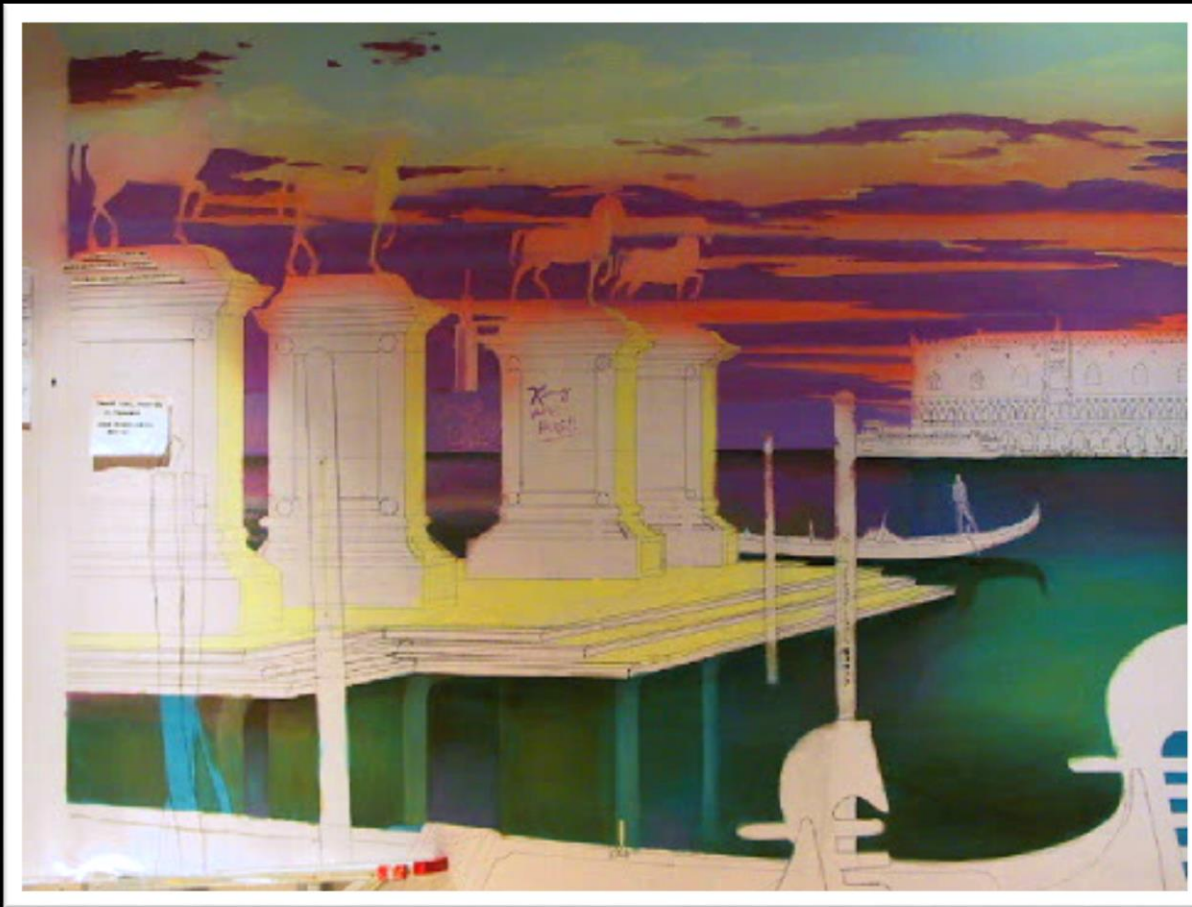
Dark areas that gave the impression of deep waters were painted next. The semi-transparent paint combined with the color of the under-paint to create a harmony of contrasting hues. My soupy palette was made up of green-tinted black, raw sienna, and violet. I applied the wash roughly and rapidly with an inexpensive 2-inch Chinese bristle brush. Notice how I worked reflections of architectural elements.

Water shadows are completed. The building reflections are kept simple. At this stage the intention is to define their basic shapes. The laws of physics have "left the building" at this point; artistic license has taken over. It's "a painting", not a photograph.

With the completion of water shadows from buildings and gondolas I could better gauge the color value of the entire piece. So I strengthen the yellow "sunlight" accent above the horizon to their proper intensity and glazed a more filtered light into the area. Note: I treat yellow with care. It is the brightest color in my palette.

I then proceeded with the most tedious part of the project: painting surface ripples on the water. I kept the illusion simple, painting large undulating ripples in the foreground and reducing them in size as I move toward the horizon. This added a lot of depth and distance to the scene. To paint them I used the same green-tinted black soupy mix I used to shade the water.
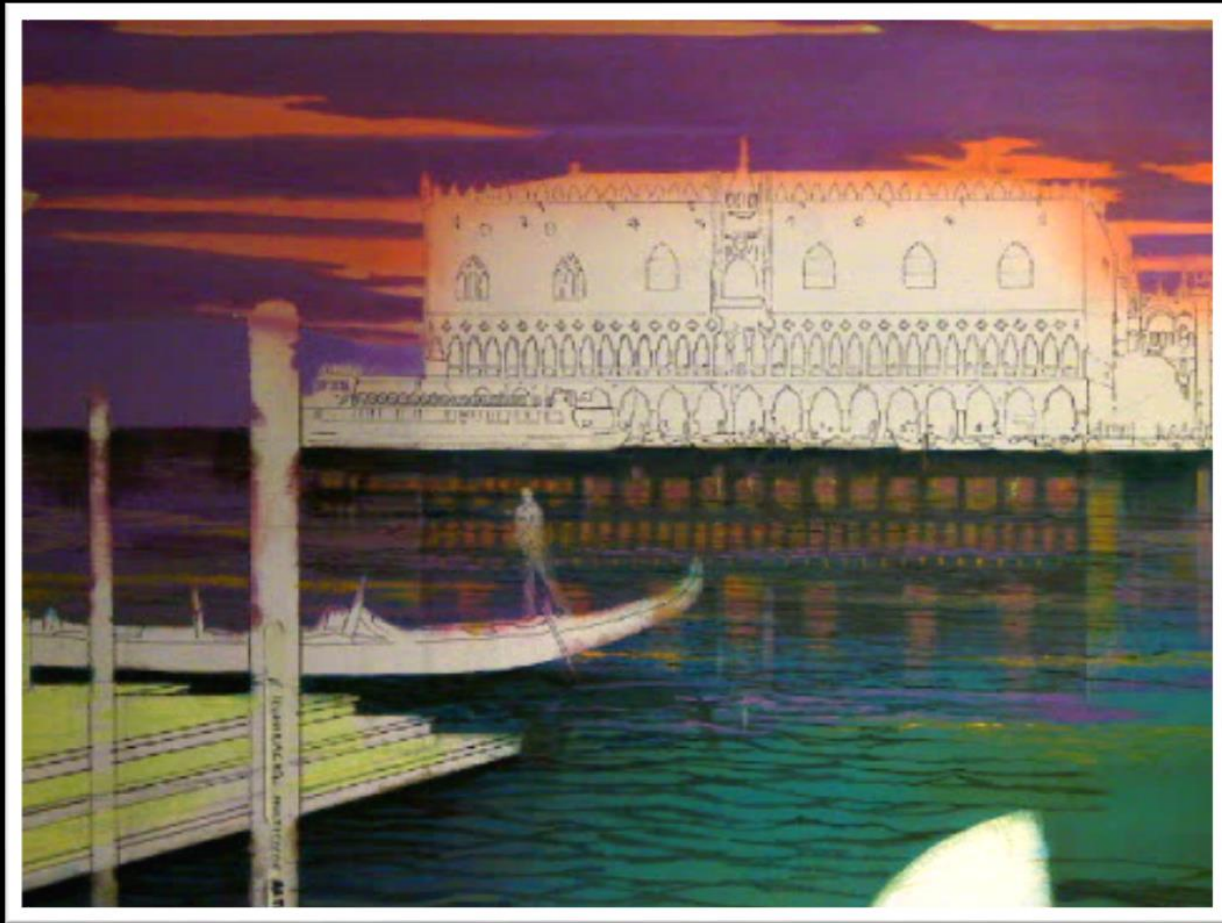
Since the scene is set at dusk, artificial lighting can be seen coming through building windows. At this stage I painted their reflections on the water in a very impressionistic manner. Then I completed the overlapping ripple effect. Note: I use the drawing of the buildings as reference to freehand a mirror image for the reflections. There is no need to draw them beforehand.
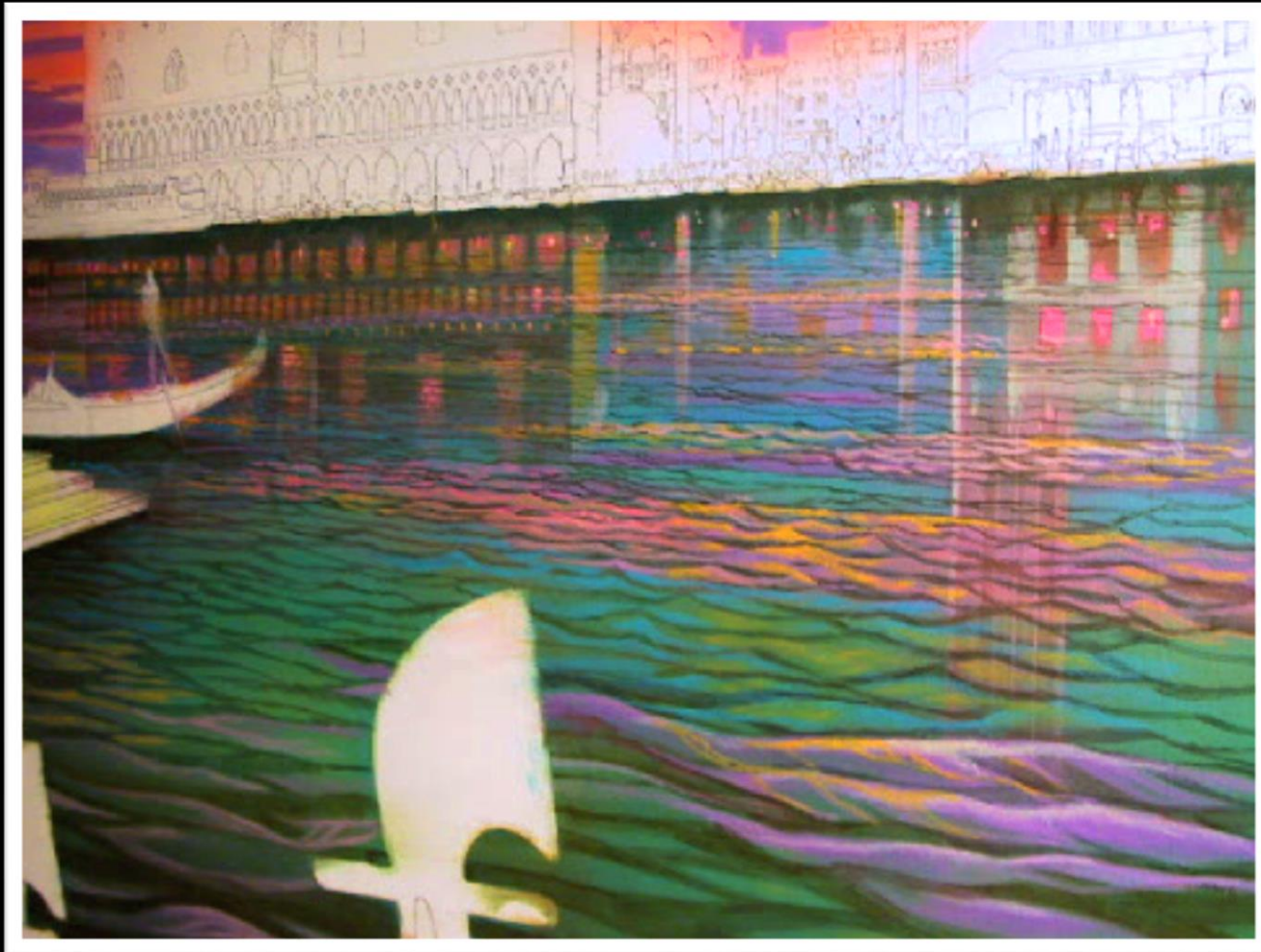
Building reflections became more precise with the addition of stronger accents. Next I introduce sky colors into the reflections. This is a very capricious process that goes more for effect. Cerulean blue accents are added to the mix.
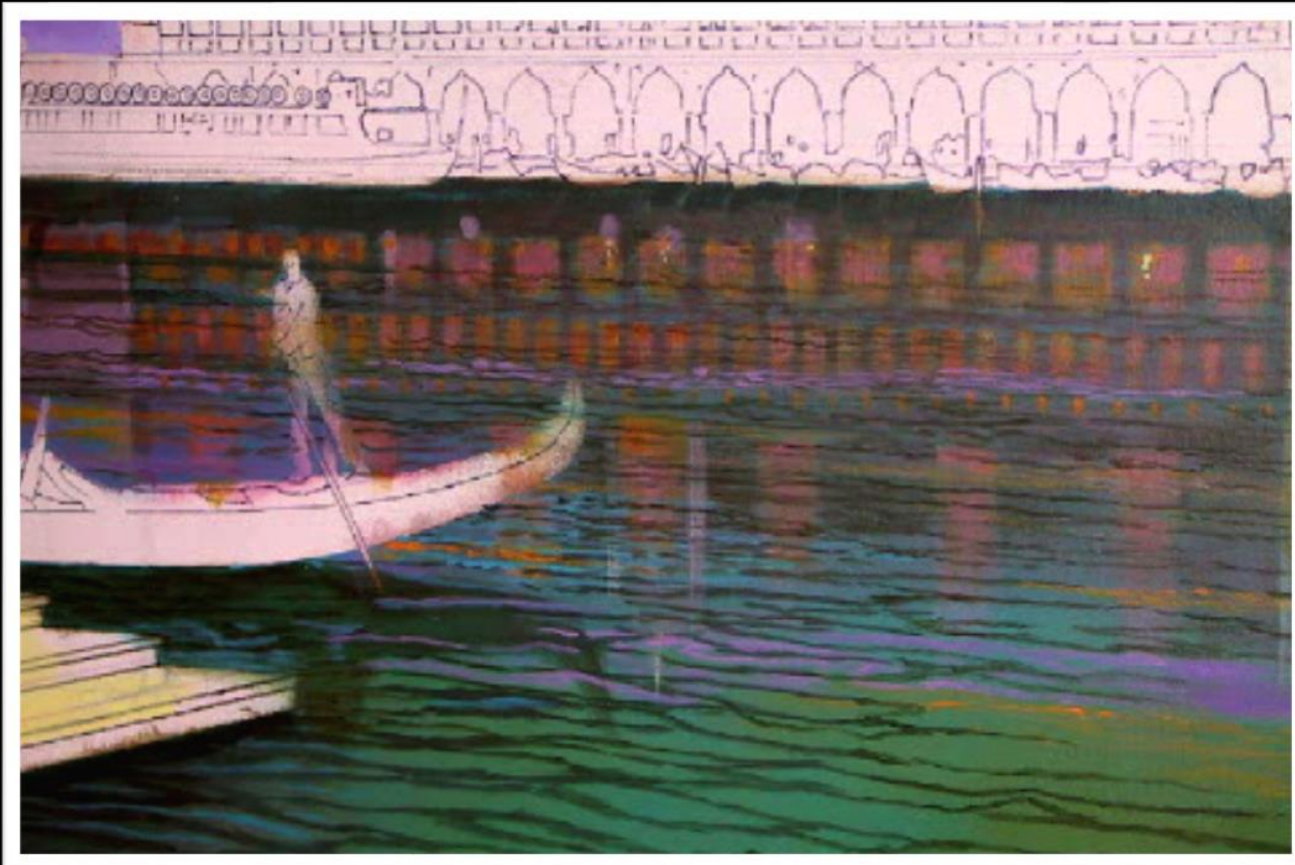
I continued the process across the mural. This trick of lines and impressionistic reflections creates an optical illusion in the viewers mind. The more you stare at it, the more the waters seem to shimmer and move. Note: Water needs to be as calm as glass to reflect anything. The minute the wind blow ripples on the water the reflections are gone. But a mural is an illusion and I needed to combine both the reflections and the ripples to make the optical illusion work.

The water effect and the reflections on distant buildings completed. The reflections from the buildings at the right will be done later in greater detail.

The Horses
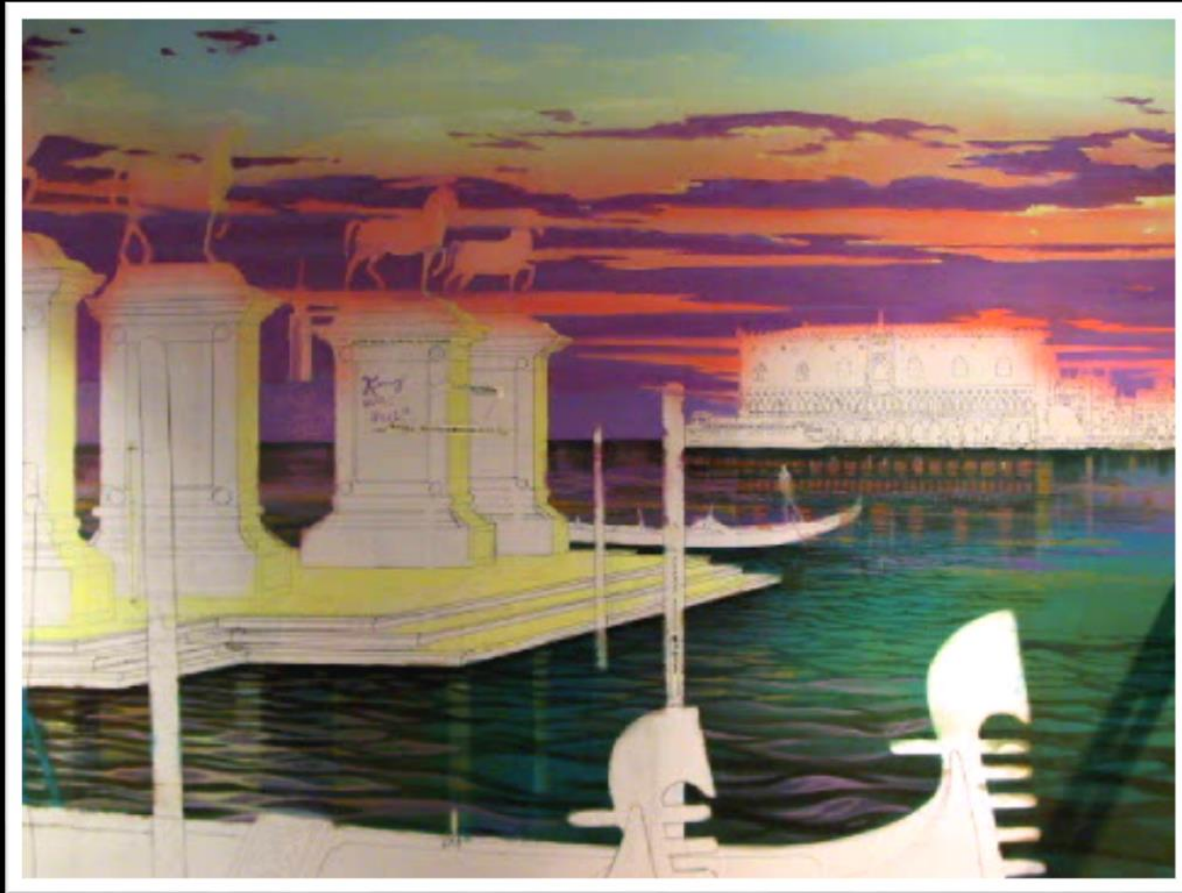
The horse monument in the middle ground is an important feature in the mural. It was designed to be a focal point. The viewer's attention always moves from left to right. It's a brain thing (people in most cultures read from left to right). They were aligned to direct to eye to the vanishing point in the horizon. Note: I moved the Venetian "Bronze Horses" from St. Mark's Basilica to this location on the water. They move a lot. Once, Napoleon had them moved to Paris!

Modeling solid objects with paint is what fun is all about. First I blocked each horse statue with a semi-transparent mix. This is called (remember?)... A wash.
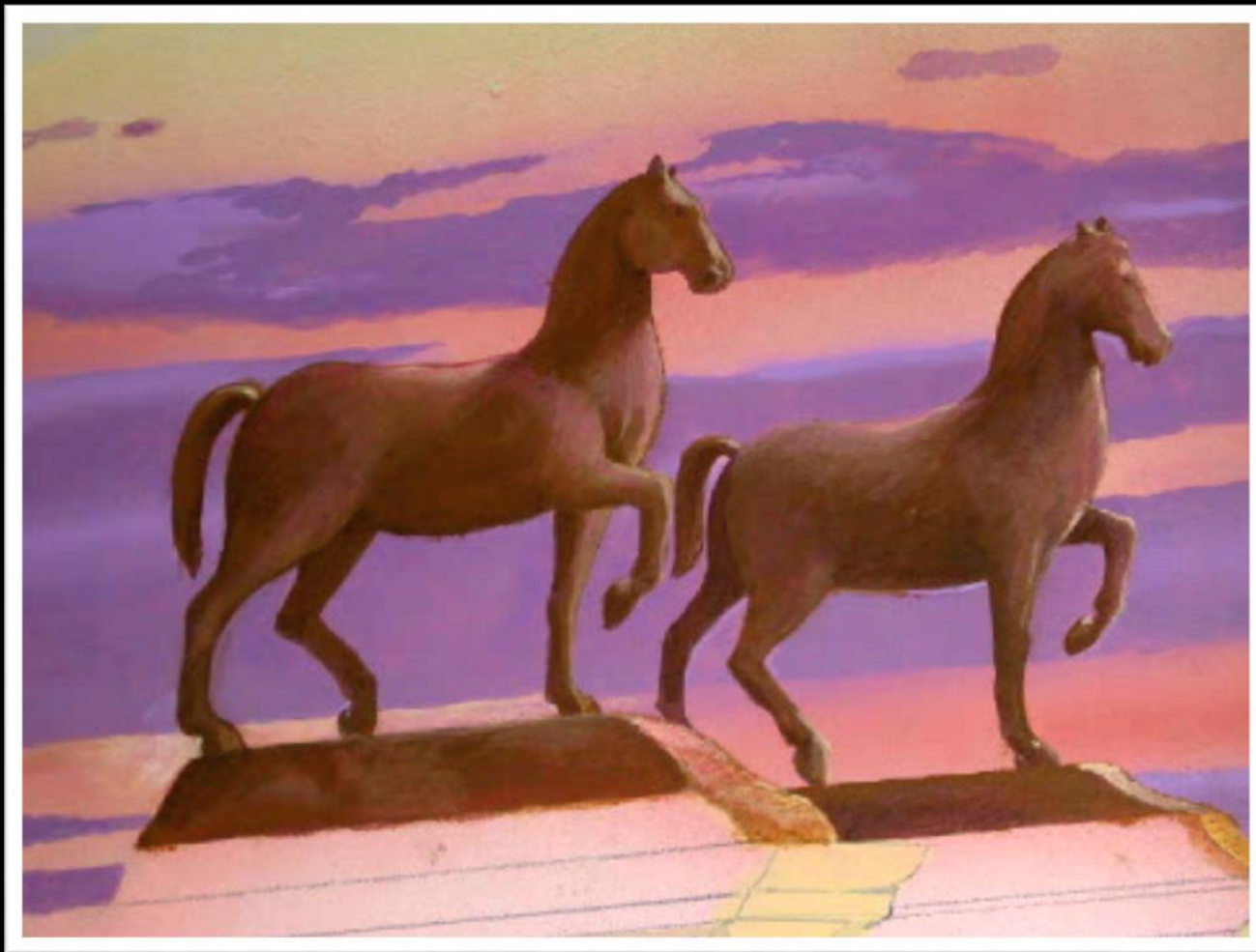
I continued modeling each horse with opaque highlights and shadows so that they appeared to have solid mass. Edges were kept soft (no sharp paint build up).

Overlapping objects further increase the sensation scale, depth, space, and distance. Note that the horses are facing toward the receding sun. Their forms are almost silhouetted by twilight.
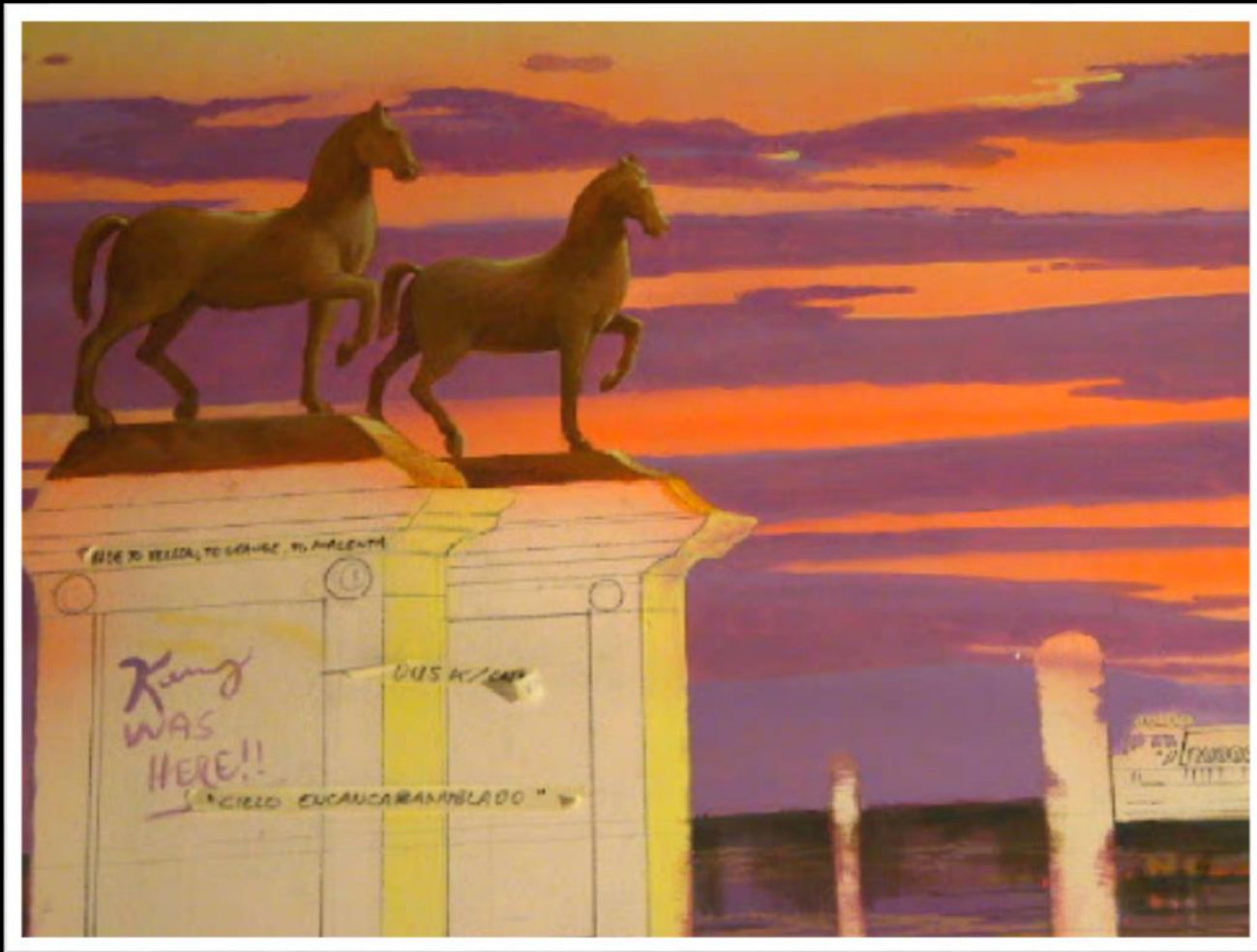
After modeling the horses, I added reflected highlights and glazed on cast shadows.

Blocking the bases with a wash of raw-sienna color mix.
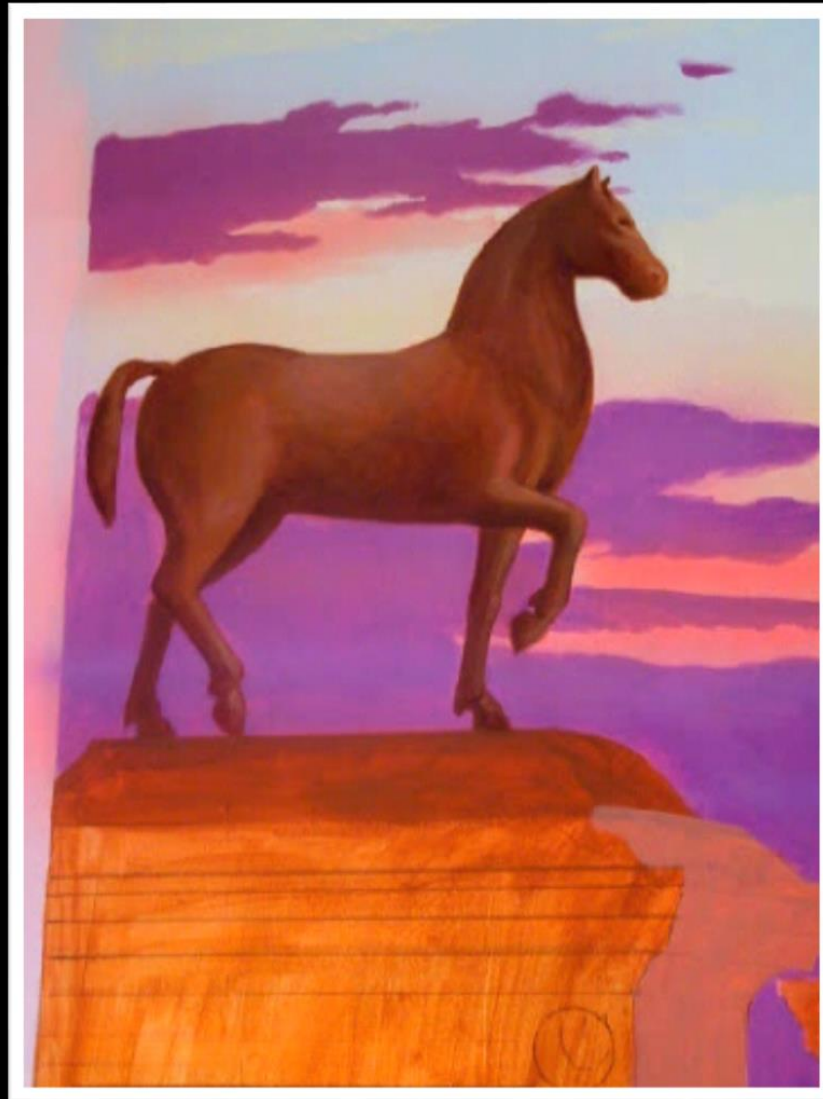
The statues are supposed to look like they were cast in bronze. I simply made sure they look weathered and without much detail.

Notice the reference picture taped to the wall. Since I could not find a photograph that showed the horses in their entirety, I used the horse on the statue of Marcus Aurelius at my model. The Venetian Horses originated as Roman sculptures in Constantinople.

The finished product with cast shadows and highlights.

The Gondolas

I washed the wooden poles -where the gondolas are tied, and painted each boat one at a time, beginning with their fabric covers. I can paint marble and folded cloth in my sleep, so I rather enjoyed doing this task.

Even though I treated this wall as an individual mural (I would be seen from a different point of view), I made sure that my main light source, perspective and color scheme derive from the main mural.

As I painted the gondolas and continued on with the poles, I also added some sharp highlights on the water to give more sparkle to the scene.

Next, I blocked the deck with a coat of opaque under-paint. Note: I do not waste paint.
I combine leftover paint into one container and use it as under-paint.

Planking, objects and cast shadows were added to complete the scene.

The contrast of light and shadow makes this scene a little jewel in its own right. This is what glazing and velaturas can do. I think this is my favorite piece of the mural.

Illumination is key in mural design. Before I design a mural, I like to determine if its lighting will be natural or artificial, warm or cool; if it will be exposed to direct sunlight or in shadow, and so on. These factors will determine my color scheme, style and tone. If I can not adjust the lighting, then I can always adjust the painting. This is how this scene looked under dimmed lights.

This is how the same scene would look under stronger lighting but with the light source at a wrong angle. The result is that parts of the surface are "washed" away. Most walls have not been designed with proper lighting in mind. When ever possible I advice the client on new lighting arrangements.
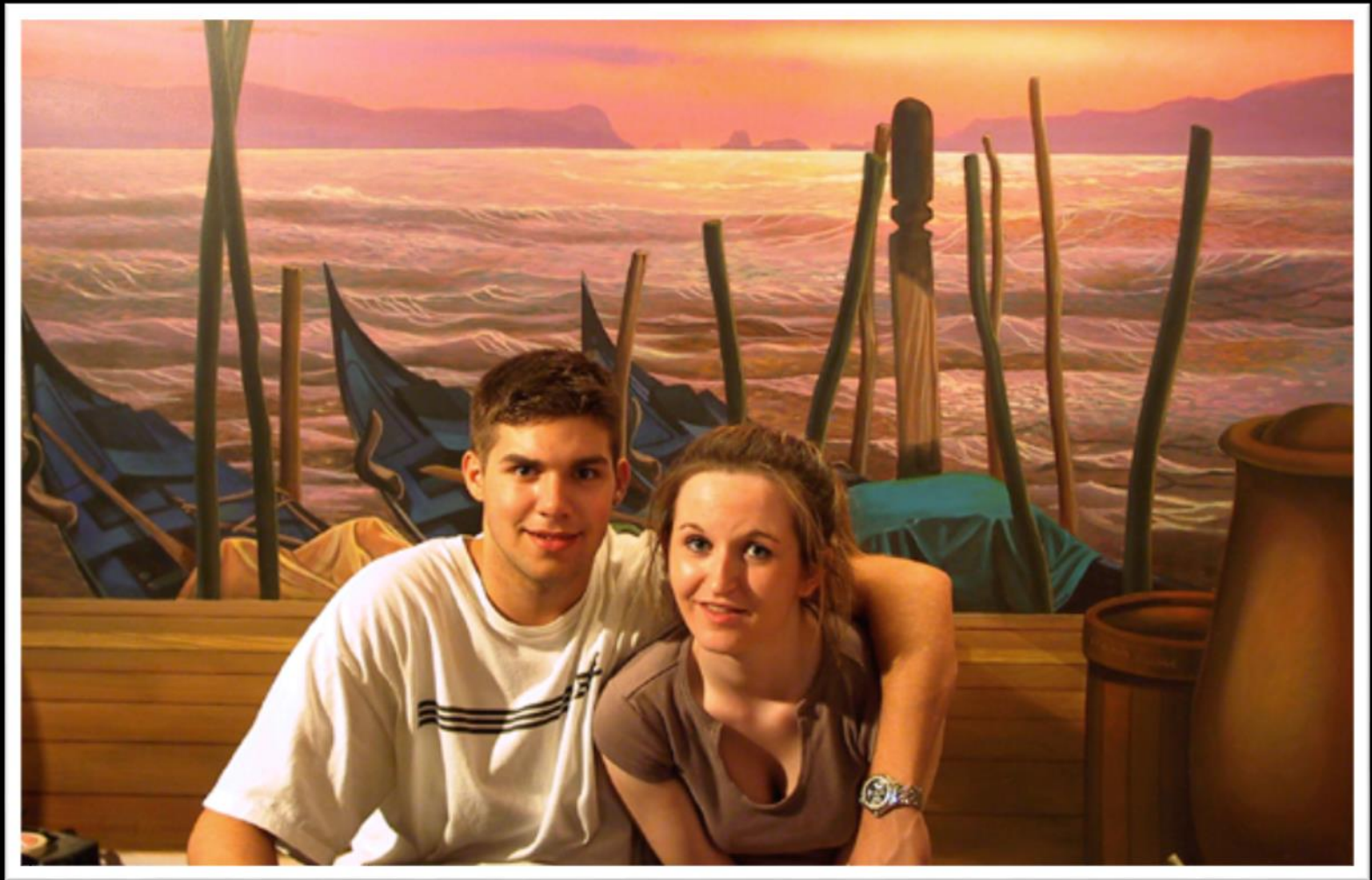
A young couple could not resist the view. In time your mural may become a favorite backdrop. Notice how nice the couple blend with the background colors. This is what keeping a tight and control palette is all about.

Okay, you tell me, is this the face of an artist? After ten hours
of work on a Saturday night, I'm ready to go home.

The Pylons

Next on my agenda was painting the posts and pylons around the foreground gondolas. Since the restaurant's wall was "torn down" to show a view of Venice, I assumed that the interior's illumination carried onto the objects closes to the foreground. This concept allowed for a believable second source of strong light.
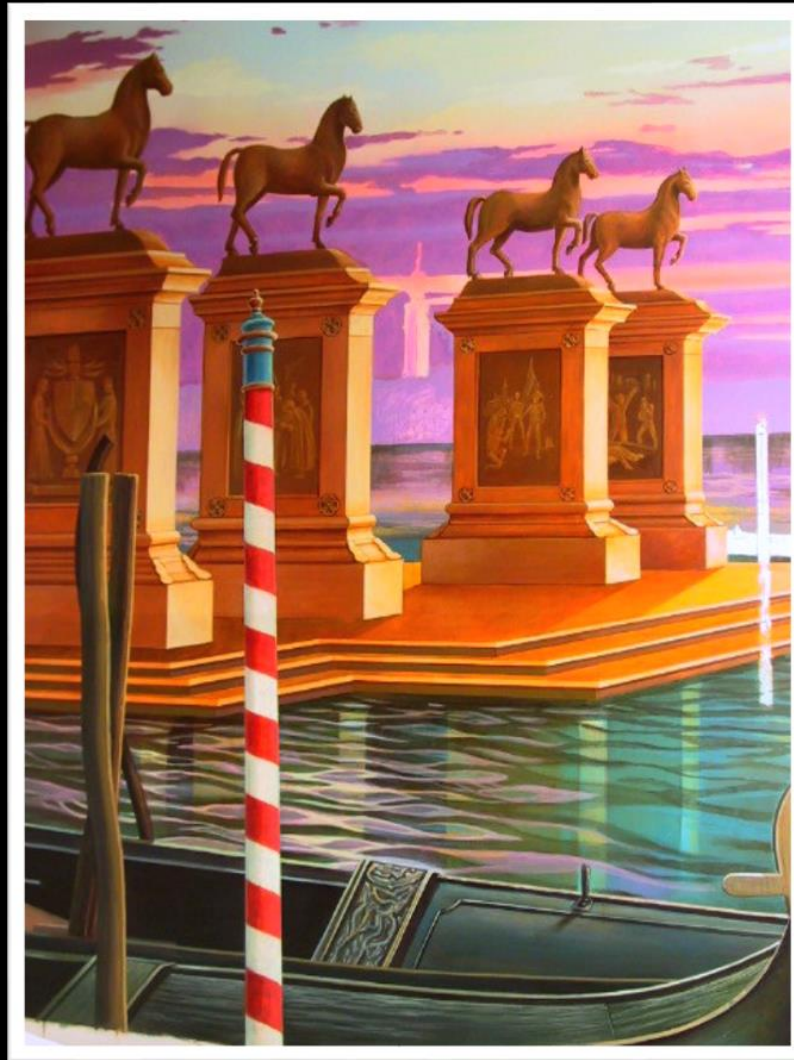
Foreground poles and pylons completed.

I always paint the what is farthest first. Before proceeding with the pylons in the middle ground, I needed to paint the gondolier in the background.
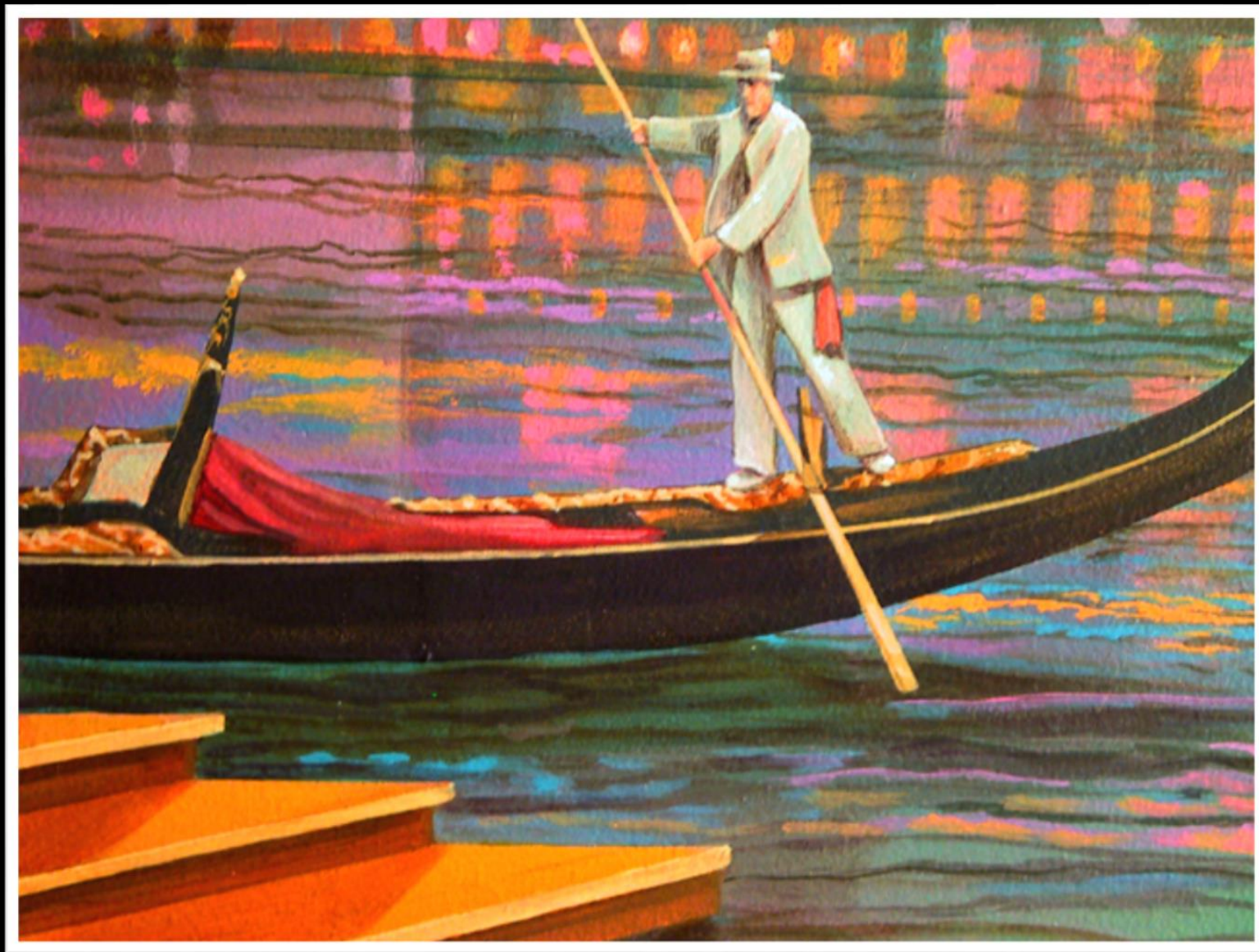
Gondola and gondolier completed. Notice the impressionistic brushstroke.

Middle ground pylons completed.
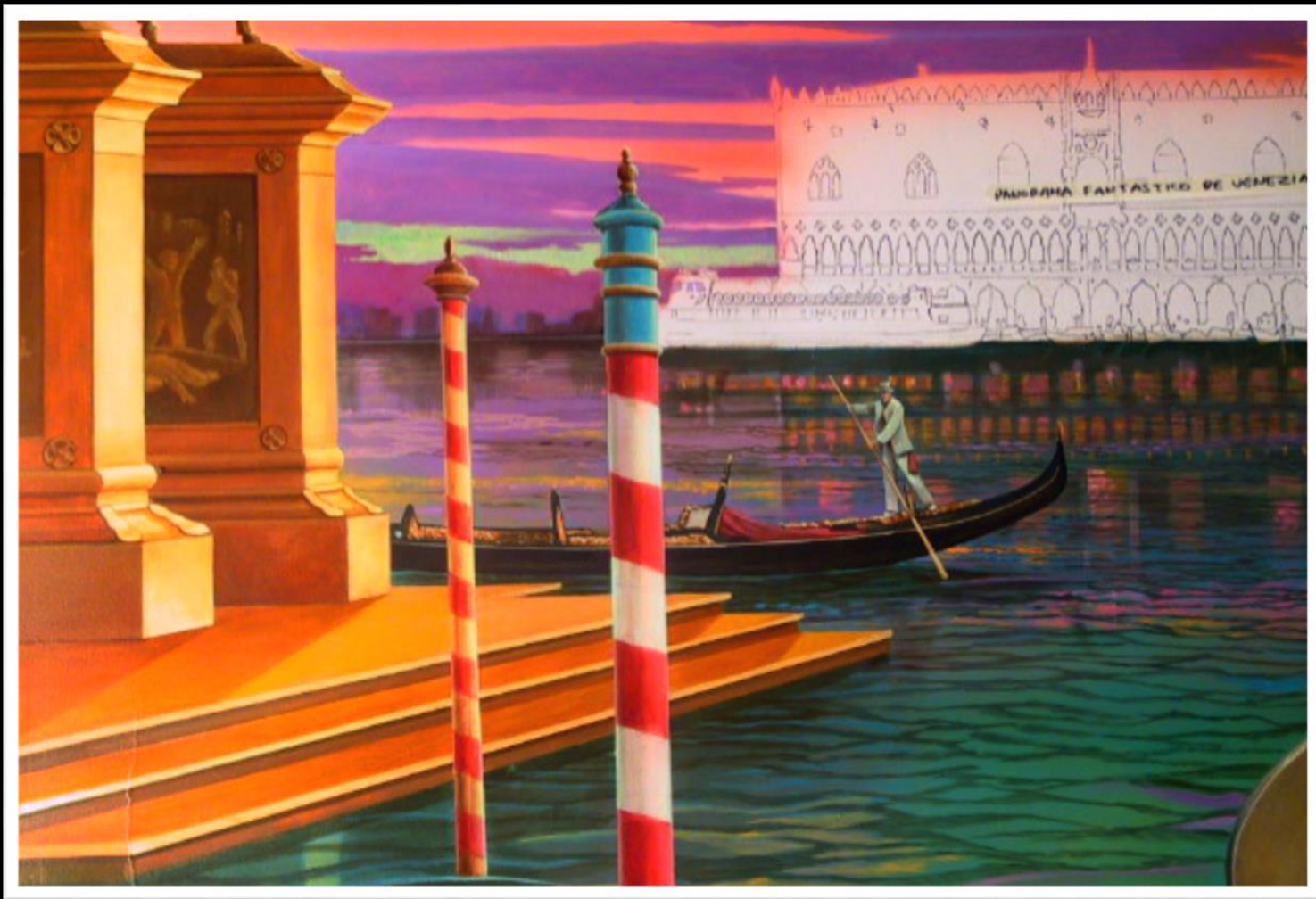
Tricks of the trade. I could not find a reference photo that showed the prow of the ferry boat in the background. So, I covered the problem with the pylon's head. I use this trick throughout my murals to cover up problematic elements.

Painting the Buildings
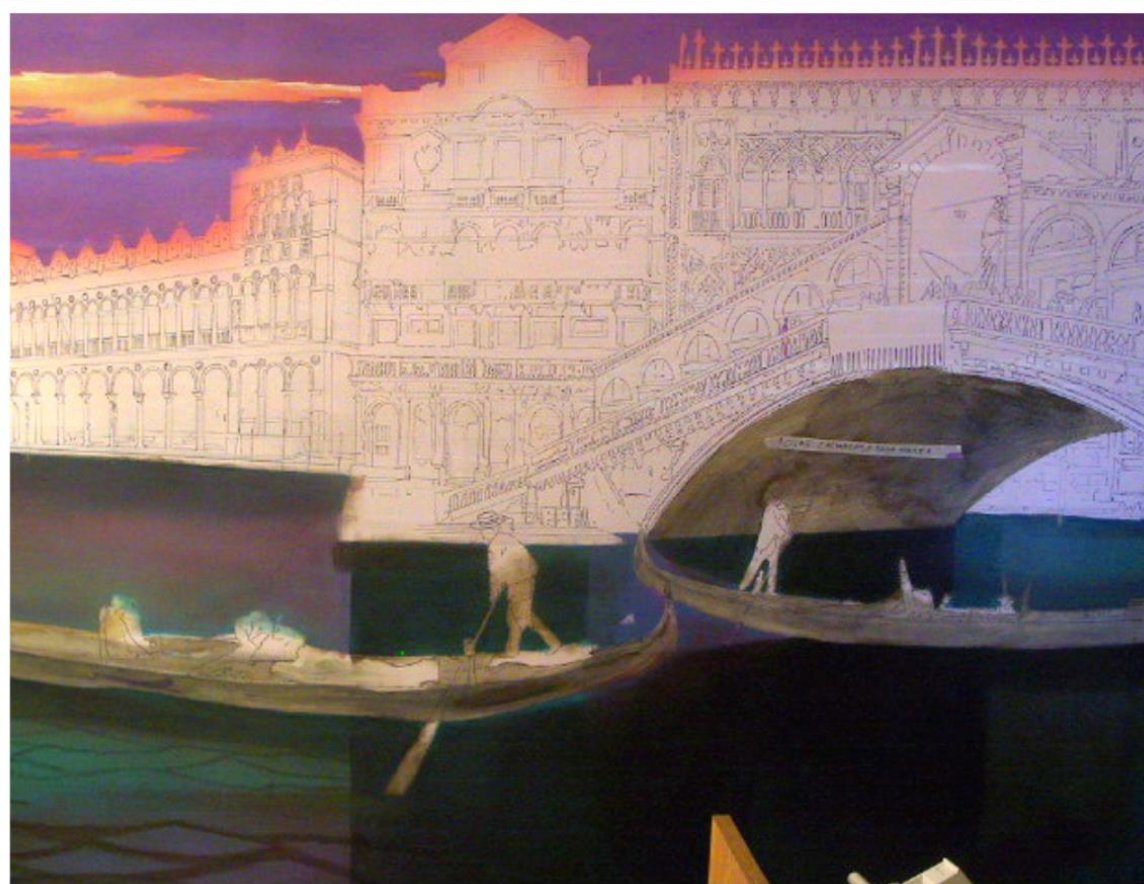
The middle ground composition on the right side of the mural was made up of famous Venetian landmarks, including the Rialto Bridge. Their architecture is as distinct as fingerprints. There was no way I could "fake" these. But I had been fortunate to have visited Venice the year before. I walked the sites, studied the architecture, practiced my Italian, and I bought photo-slides of Venice for my reference library. Now, this really paid off big.

This was the most important building in the composition. Since it still received sunlight, I used it as my gauge to judge the value and contrast of the surrounding structures. At this stage I worked from the top down, level by level. Washing, blocking, glazing, highlighting, detailing, and finally accenting with reflections.

Details are very important when doing architecture. Notice the stained glass window panes on the right and how they reflect back the fleeting rays of sunlight. Also, the building's bottom loggia has feint indications of structural elements and objects. The woman at the bottom right corner helps establish the scale of the setting.
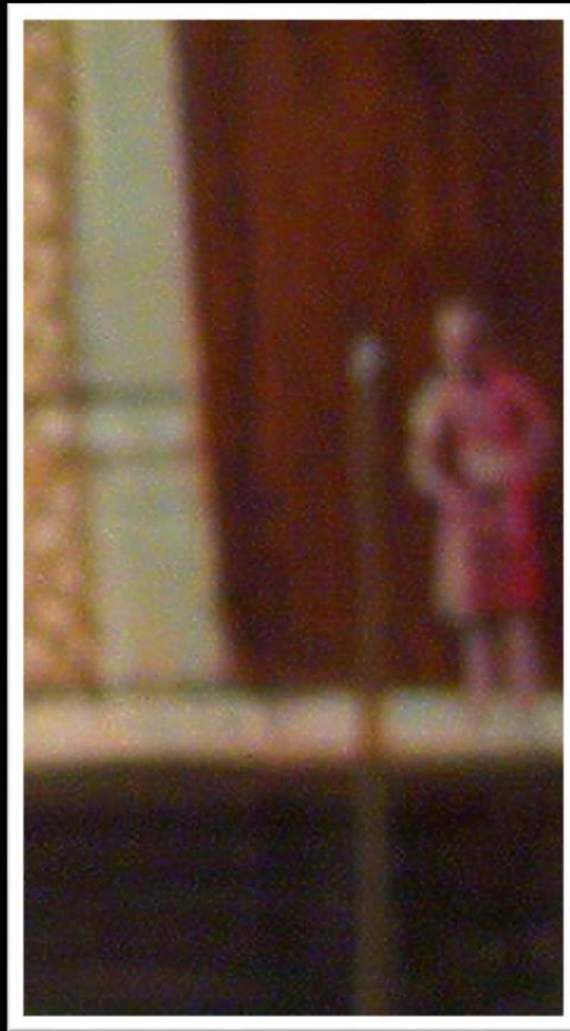
Detailing is kept to a minimum. Indications of light coming from the dark is all that is needed. The viewer's mind completes the rest.

The reflective panes of handmade glass were done with very little fuss. After washing darkness in the arch spaces, the individual glass panes were painted over in a reddish tone. Then some of the panes were highlighted at random with yellow, and a few in pink. To the eye, the variation in color make them "shimmer".

After completing the building, I decided to paint its reflection on the water. But first I proceeded to model the gondola below. After a couple of days of detailed work, doing the gondola seem like a welcomed break.

Next, I completed the building's reflection and moved on to the next building.
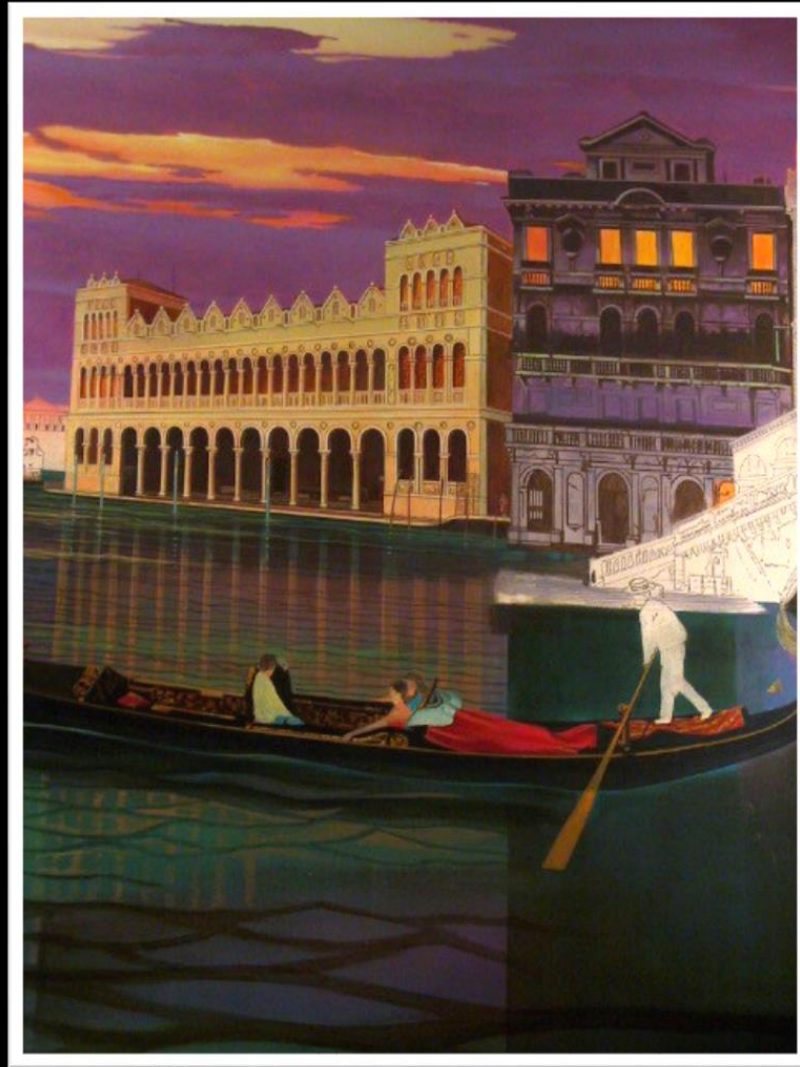
Wash and blocking of opaque color under progress. The building was in shadows since sunlight was no longer reaching the facade. This provided an excellent opportunity to add the illusion of interior illumination coming from the top windows.
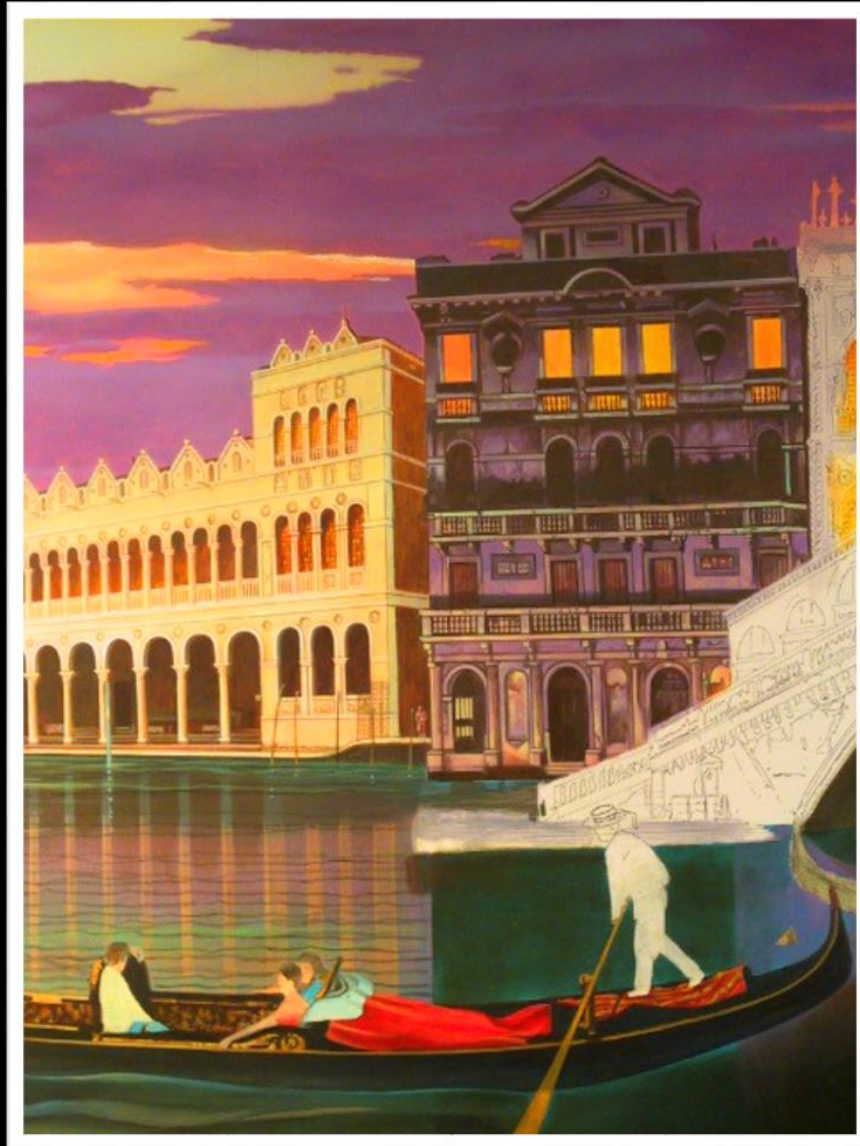
Second building completed.
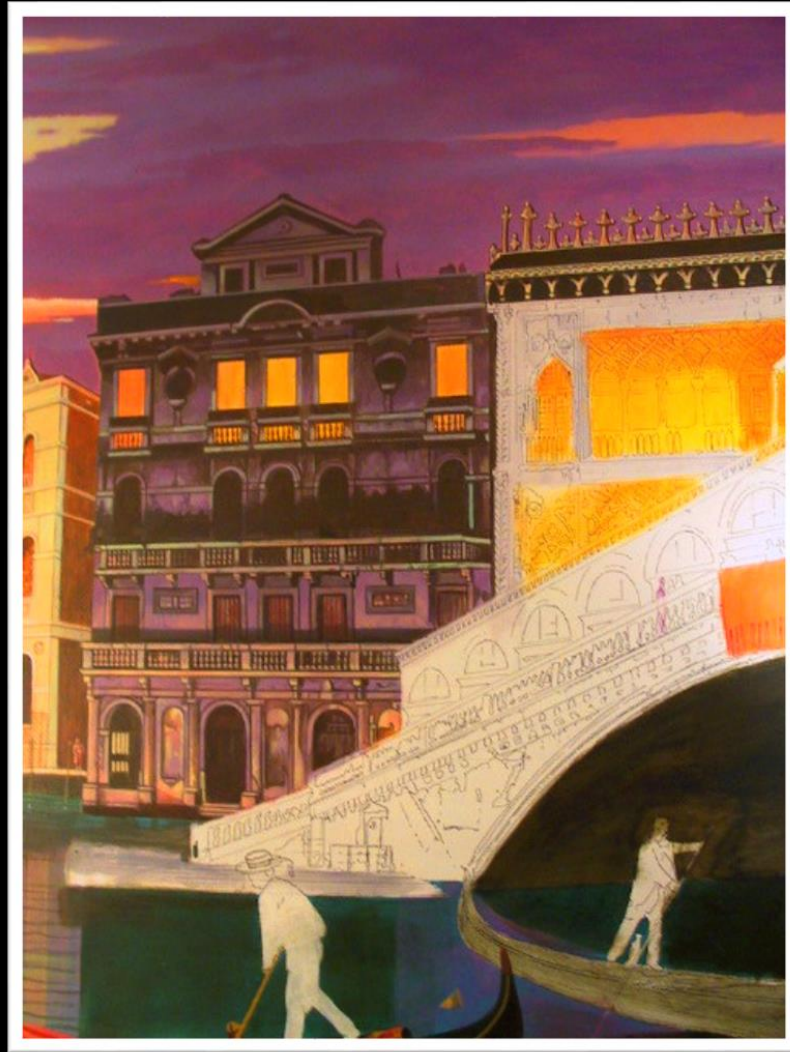
Moving on to the third building. First I glazed the interior's illumination. Since the glaze is thin and transparent, I can rapidly cover the entire area without fear of loosing the drawing.
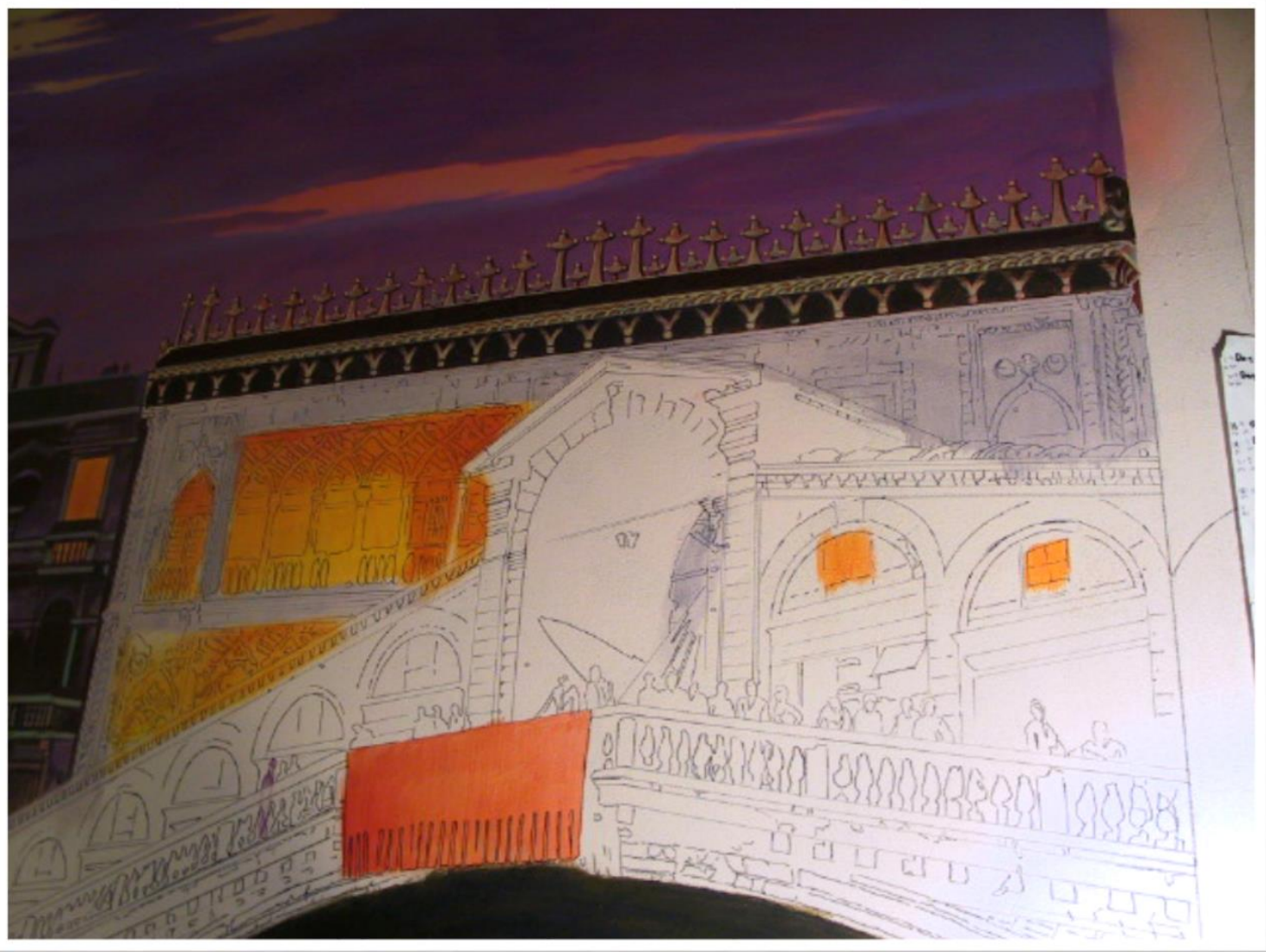
Detail of roof and cornice.
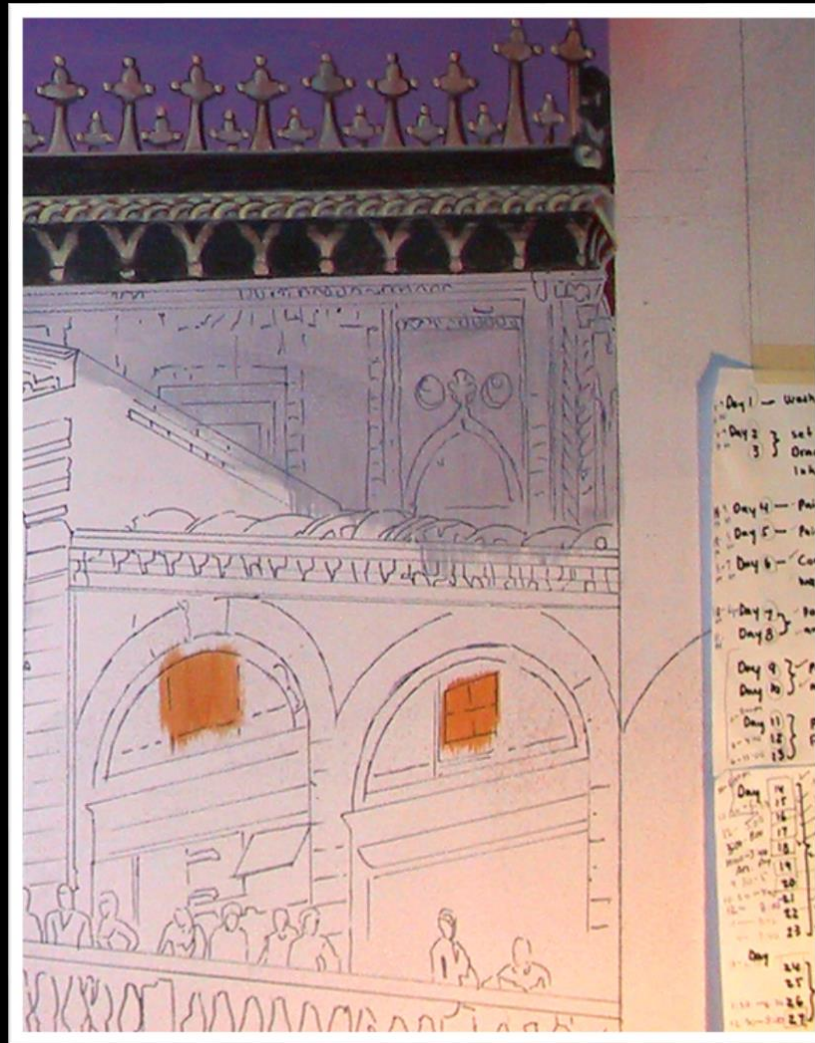
My work schedule is taped to the right side of the wall. I estimated 30 days to complete
the commission. It took instead 36 days to complete. But during that time I had also
started another mural and added a few elements to this one.
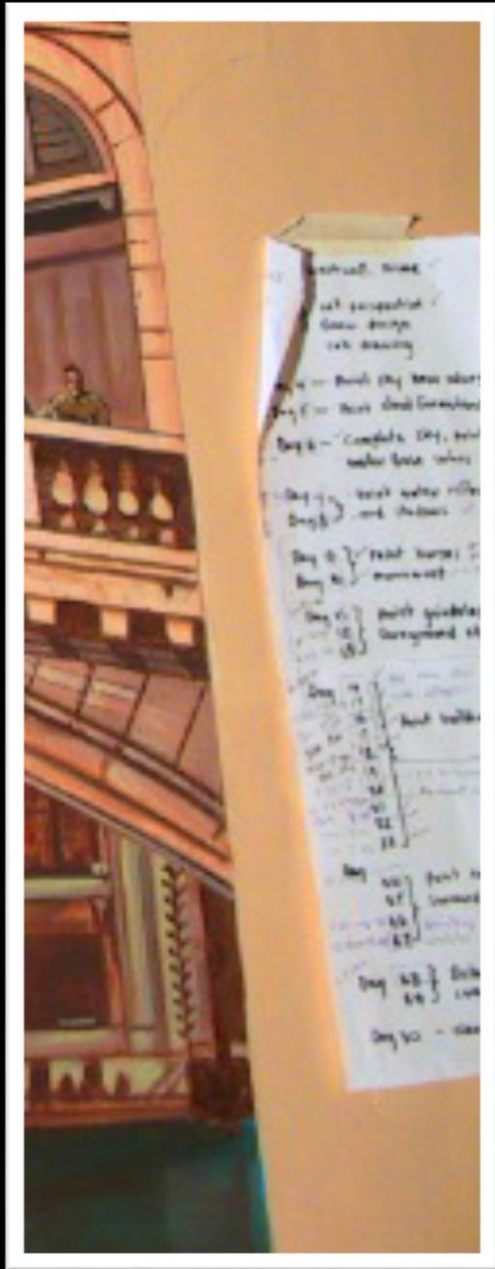
Here's another detail of my work schedule. My practice is to assign a task to each day. Then I complete that task regardless of the time it takes. This could be anywhere from 4 to 10 hours, though I try to divide the tasks into 6-hour blocks. This does not include setup and cleanup time. Crossing out the days is my motivation to finish.

To be able to do highly detail work without being overwhelmed by the challenge, it is necessary to have the ability to compartmentalize any job. This way you only concentrate on one thing at a time. This is why I like to plan well in advance. When I'm painting, I don't like figure things out there and then. That would be too much work and no fun. So think ahead and work with the confidence that you came prepared.

I was still working on the third building when I began blocking the bridge with a wash. Notice one of my reference photos at the bottom left corner.
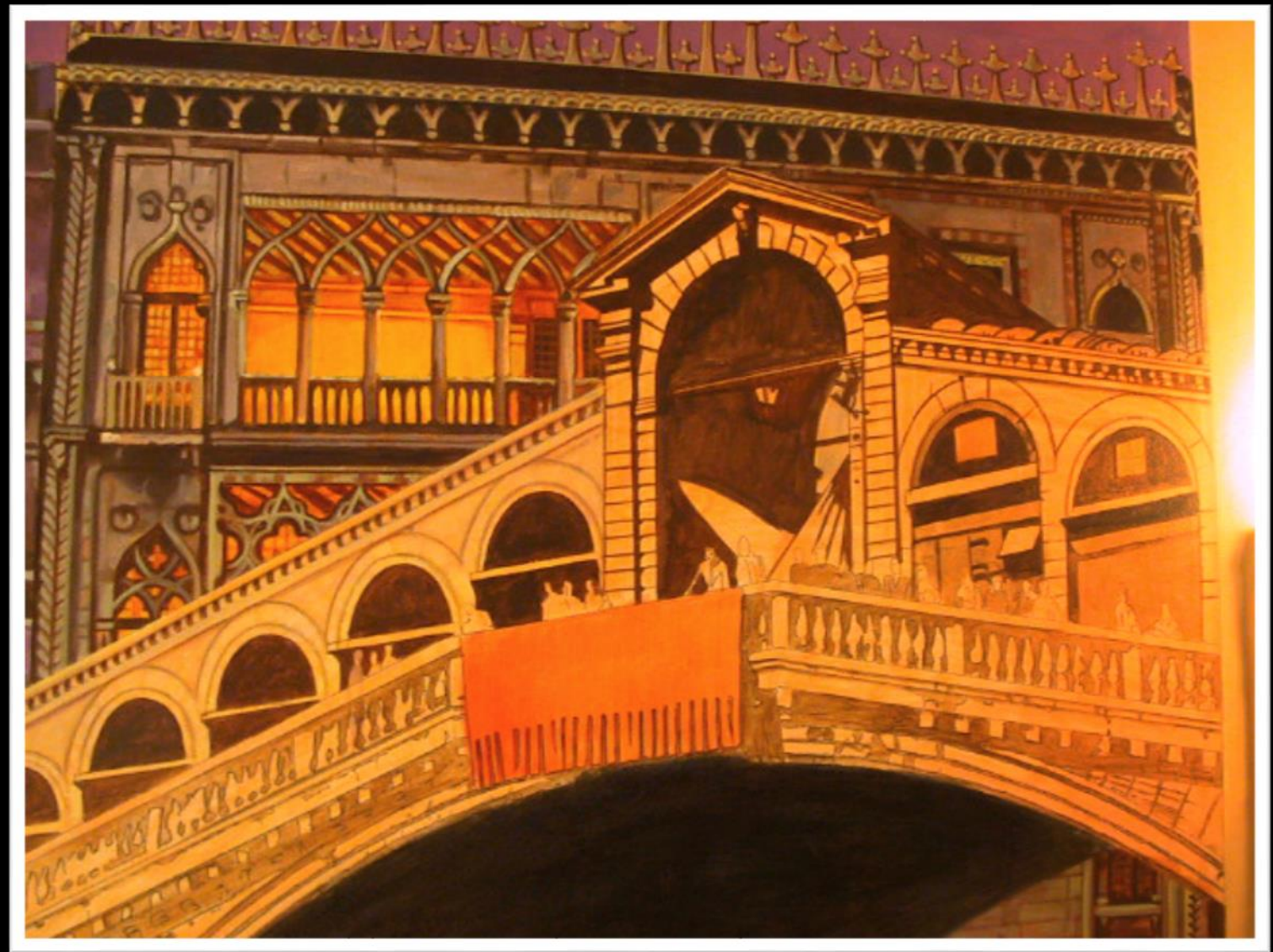
With the third building completed, I began to glaze darks on the bridge.
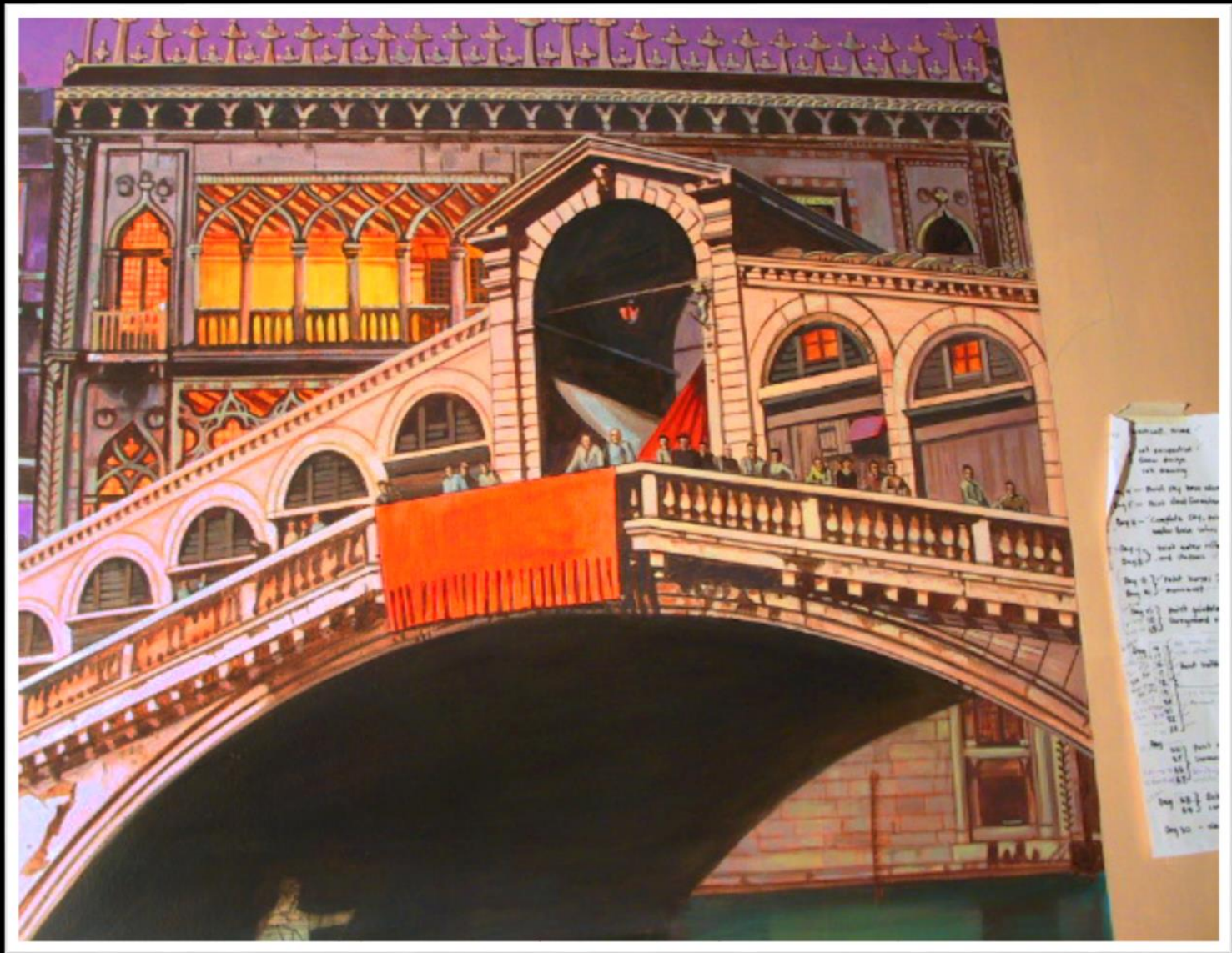
Continuing with the bridge.
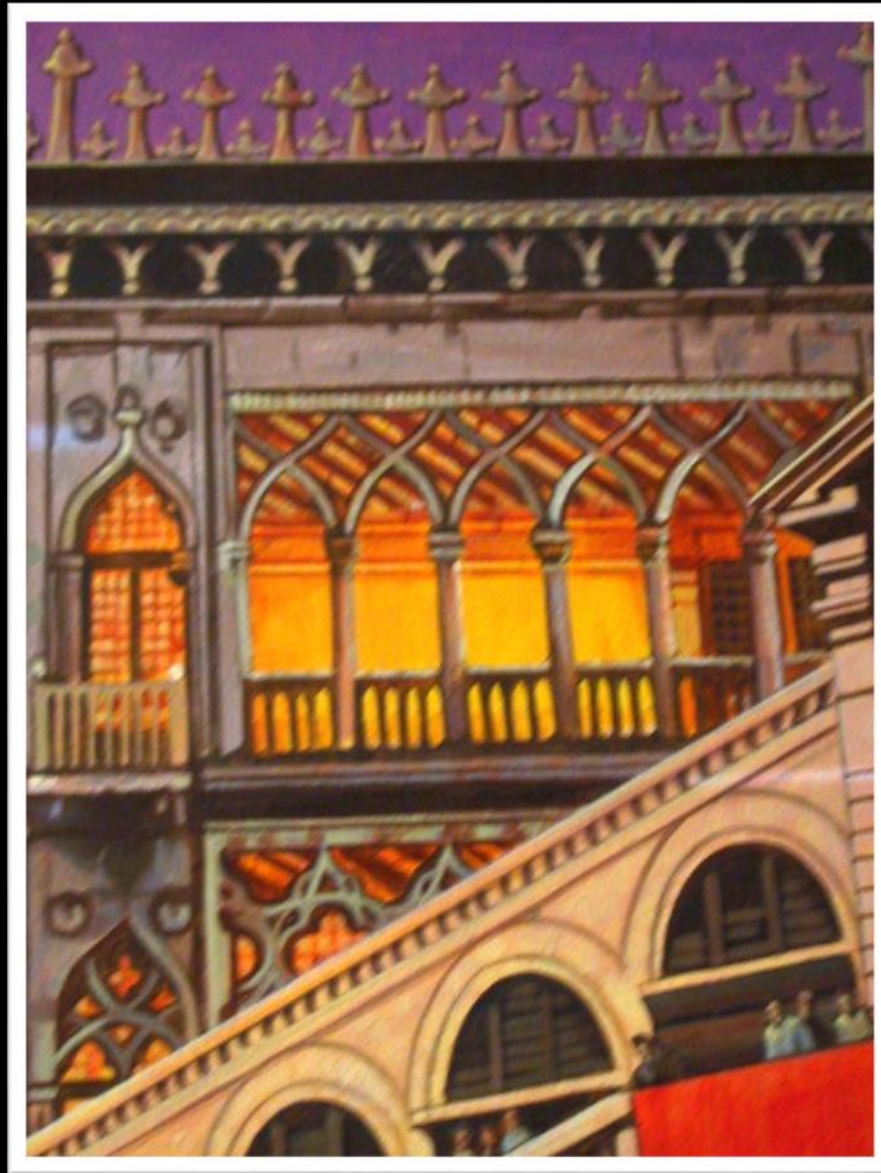
Details of the illuminated balcony on the third building.
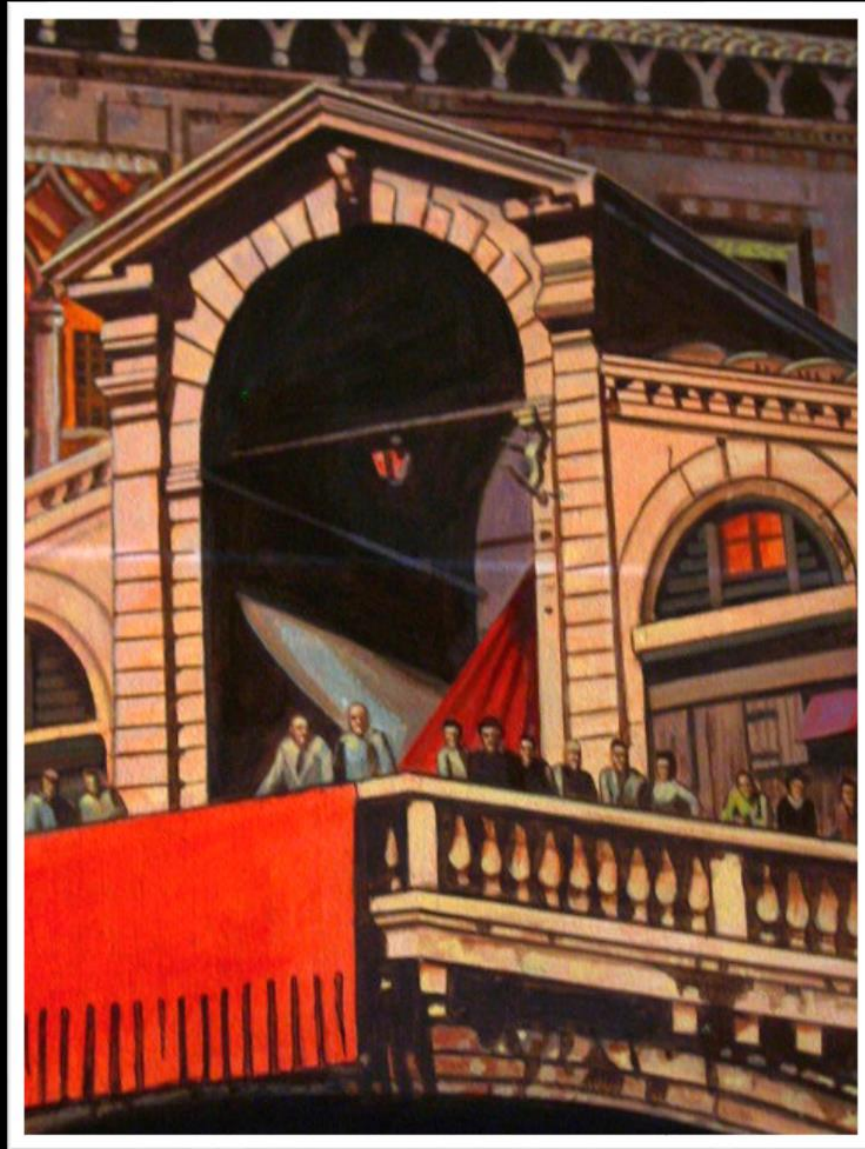
Bridge detail.

Bridge completed.

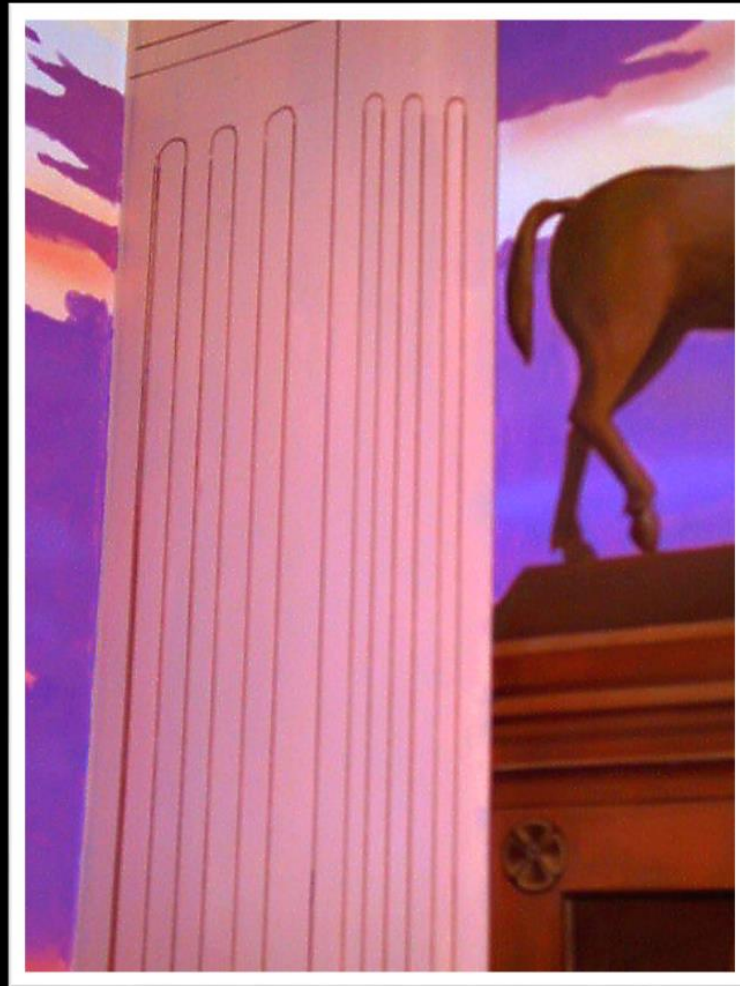I continued by painting cast shadows and reflection on the water.

Gondola completed.

Second gondola completed (minus an oar). Notice light from water ripples being reflected under the bridge. These simple brushstrokes add more elegance to the finished piece.

Right side of the mural completed.

Background Buildings

I designed a framework of square columns to "encase" the scene and make it look like an actual extension of the restaurant. Never forget that the architectural elements of the given space are harmoniously incorporated into the mural —and this should also includes the lighting sources in that space.

Completed column and top beam. Placing columns between adjoining walls was an effective way to tie in the two scenes into a cohesive panoramic view. It also added a three dimensional quality that was hard to miss.

The top beam fits nicely with the existing wood molding and provided an architectural reason to place that column there. Sienna marble is associated with wealth and prosperity and its subdue shades lent richness and warmth. The total look radiated elegance and class.
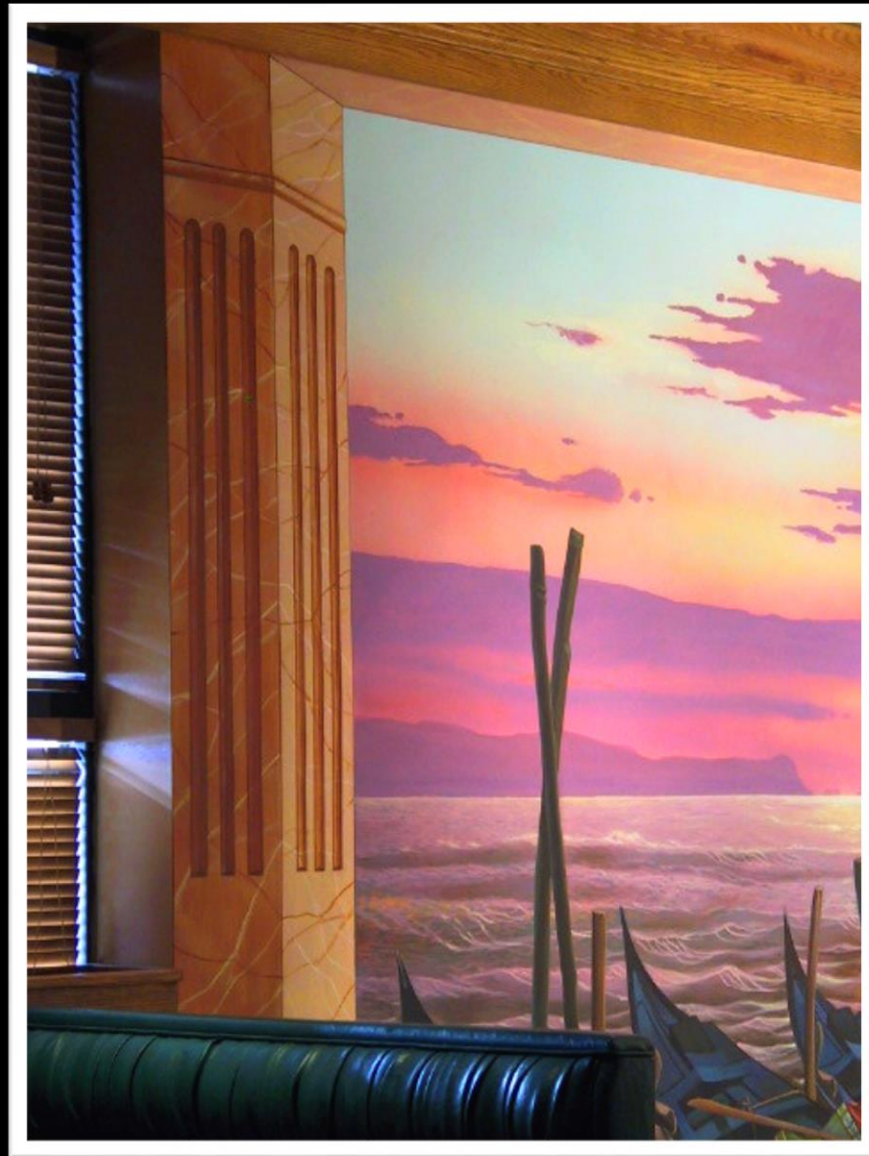
Detail of column on extreme left of the mural.

Detail of column on the right end.

Finishing Details

There were still several details to complete, such as the buildings seen between the pedestals for the horses. Some trivia: I needed imagery when I painted the reliefs on the pedestals. At the time I was reading a book on Napoleon's invasion of Spain. And so, some of the images in the book became the reliefs, such as Francisco de Goya's "The Third of May".

I touched up some of the figures in this gondola. Since the scale was small I kept details to a minimum. Still, my imagination gets the better of me. The man on the right suspects that his best friend is having an affair with his wife, who is seated next to him.
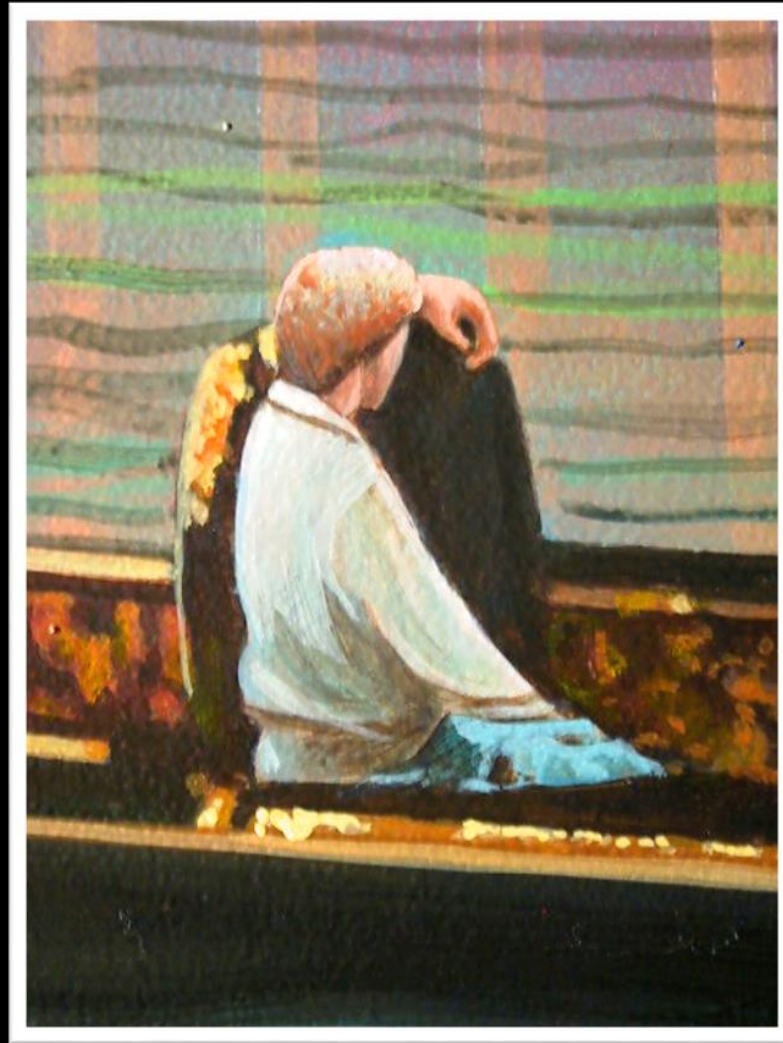
The best friend is avoiding eye contact. So, the husband's suspensions could be true! Hmm, I think the wife looks a little guilty... (Yep, making up stories also adds color to the scene!)
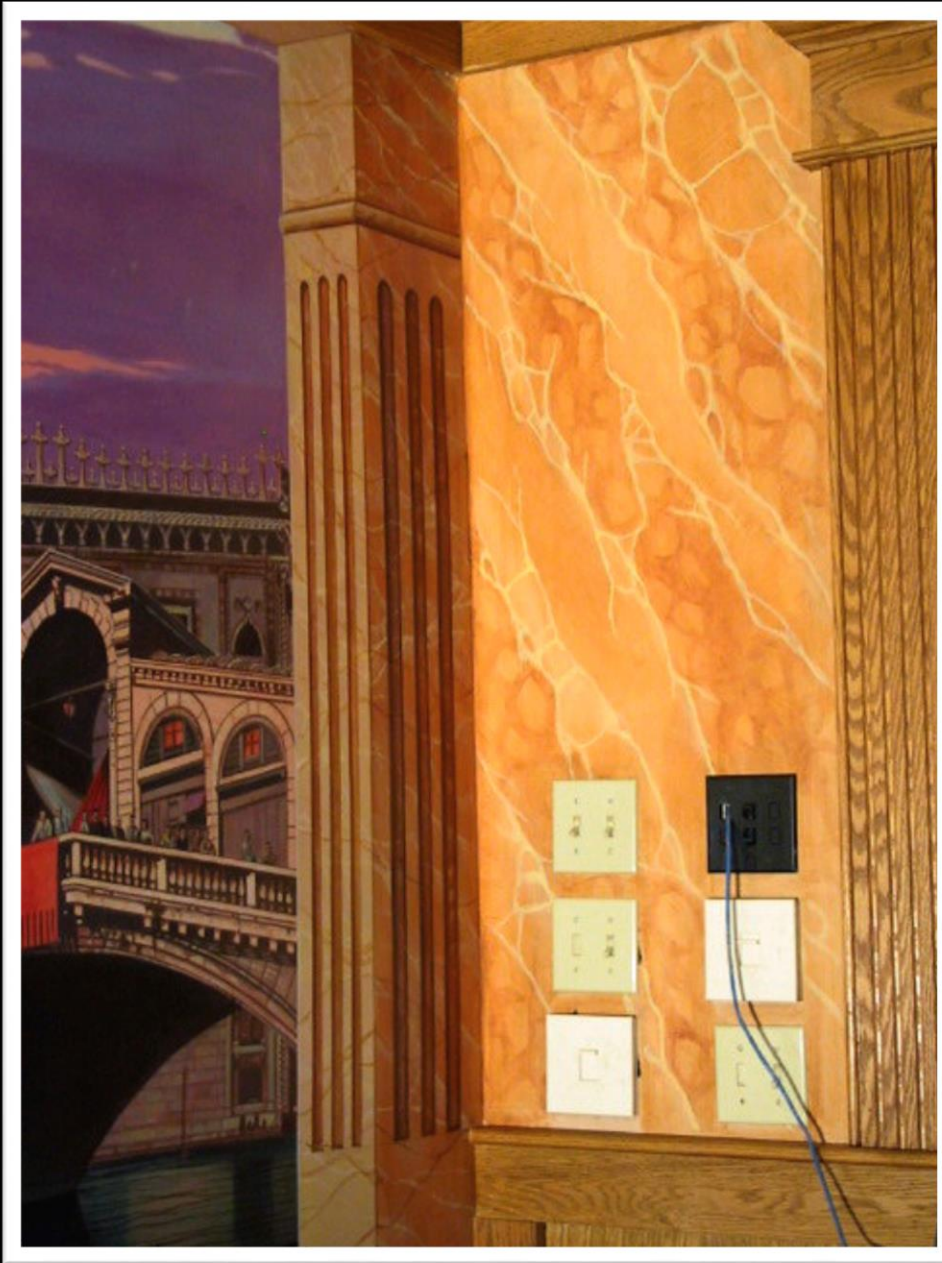
The Venetians place announcements of upcoming art shows on the Rialto bridge.
So, why not me?

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JOHN RIVERA-RESTO

www.muralmaster.org
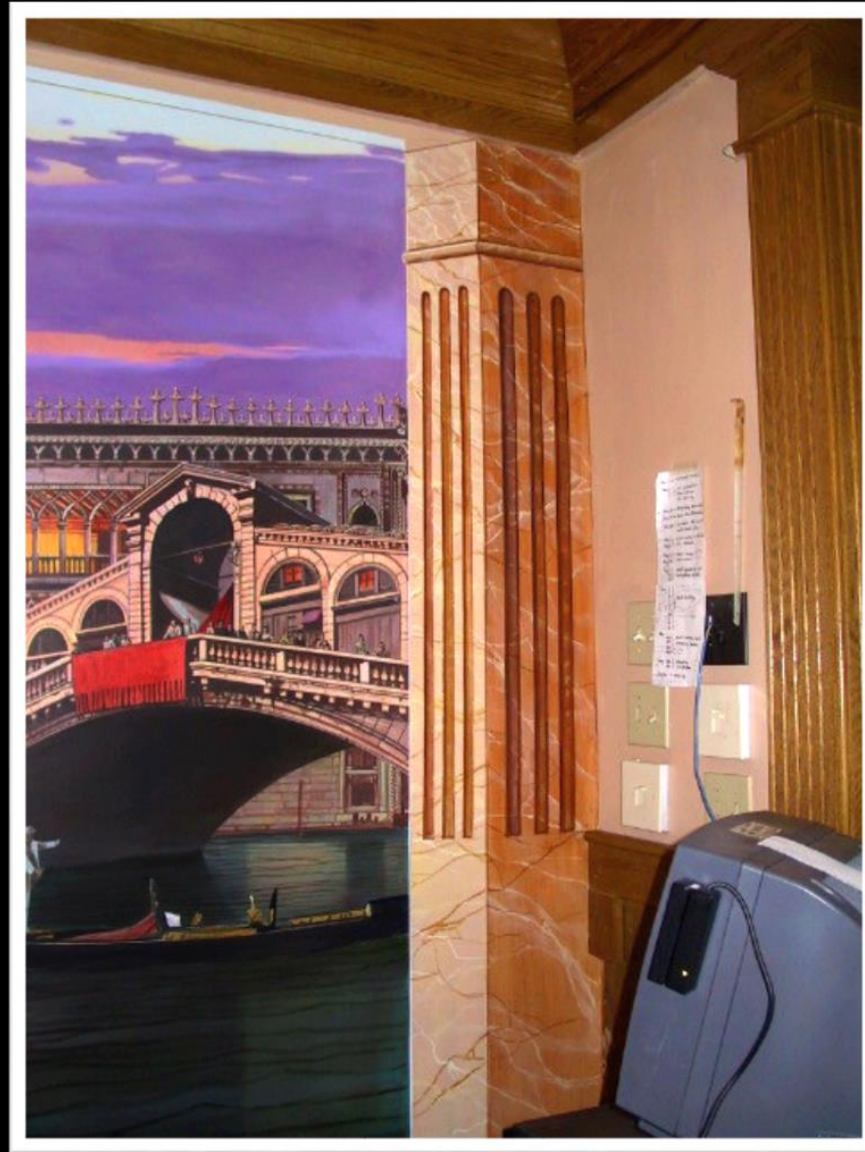
A small section of wall was an eyesore. So, what to do with it?

An easy solution:

Paint the wall to blend with the architecture. Besides, it provided another excuse to paint marble.

There is a saying that says: -"He who paints nudes and marble will never starve." Prophetic words.

I used green tones on the water to pick up the restaurant's décor. The green also spikes secondary colors beatifically. Sometimes it still amazes me what a little paint can do. It really does improve the real estate.

Last minute idea:

Give the mural a permanent title. This seem an appropriate place to do so.

Mike and Debbie

Mike and Debbie Santo are truly wonderful people. Warm, friendly, and hardworking. I felt right at home the minute I met with them.

They were such gracious hosts, that the least I could do was to give them a free trip to Venice! And why not, I also threw in an expense account to shop Armani.
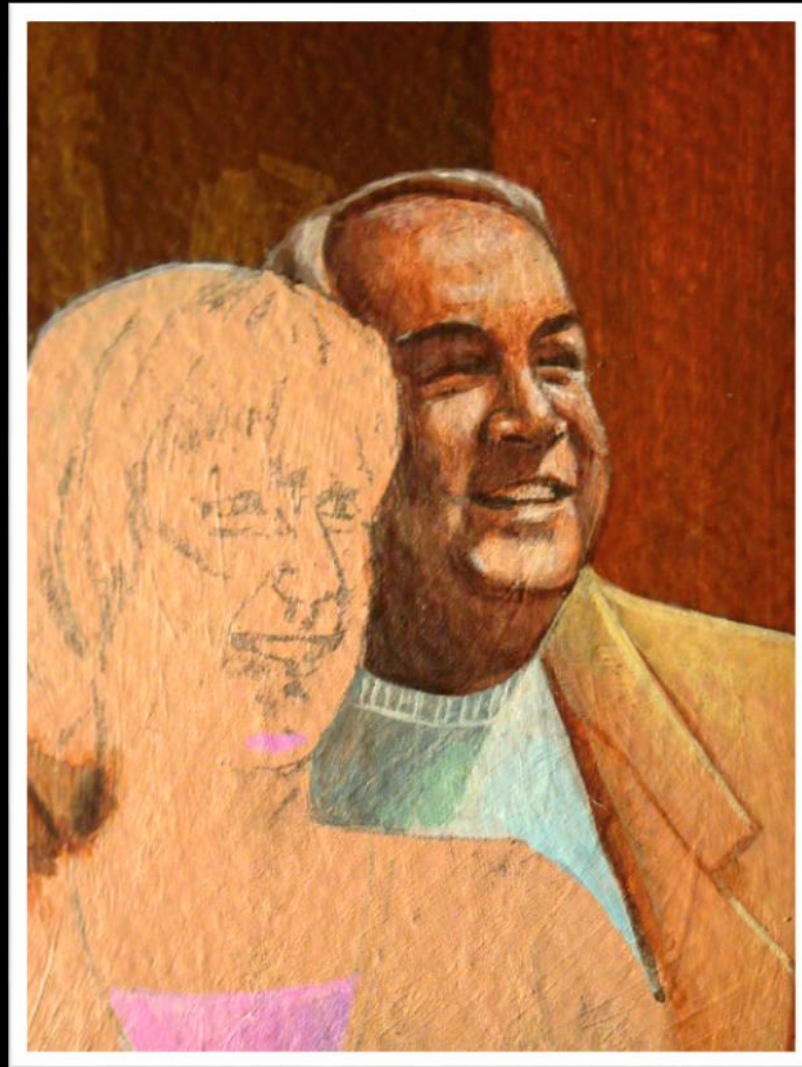
Setting up the shot. Make sure your lighting matches the lighting in the painting.

I made a sketch on tracing paper and then proceeded to prime and
block the image on the mural.

Mike is looking great in a camel sport coat from Milan and silk blend slacks from Armani.

I was not trying to do polish portraits, but only a likeness. For portraiture I prefer oils. But as an accent, this addition was a great touch to the mural.
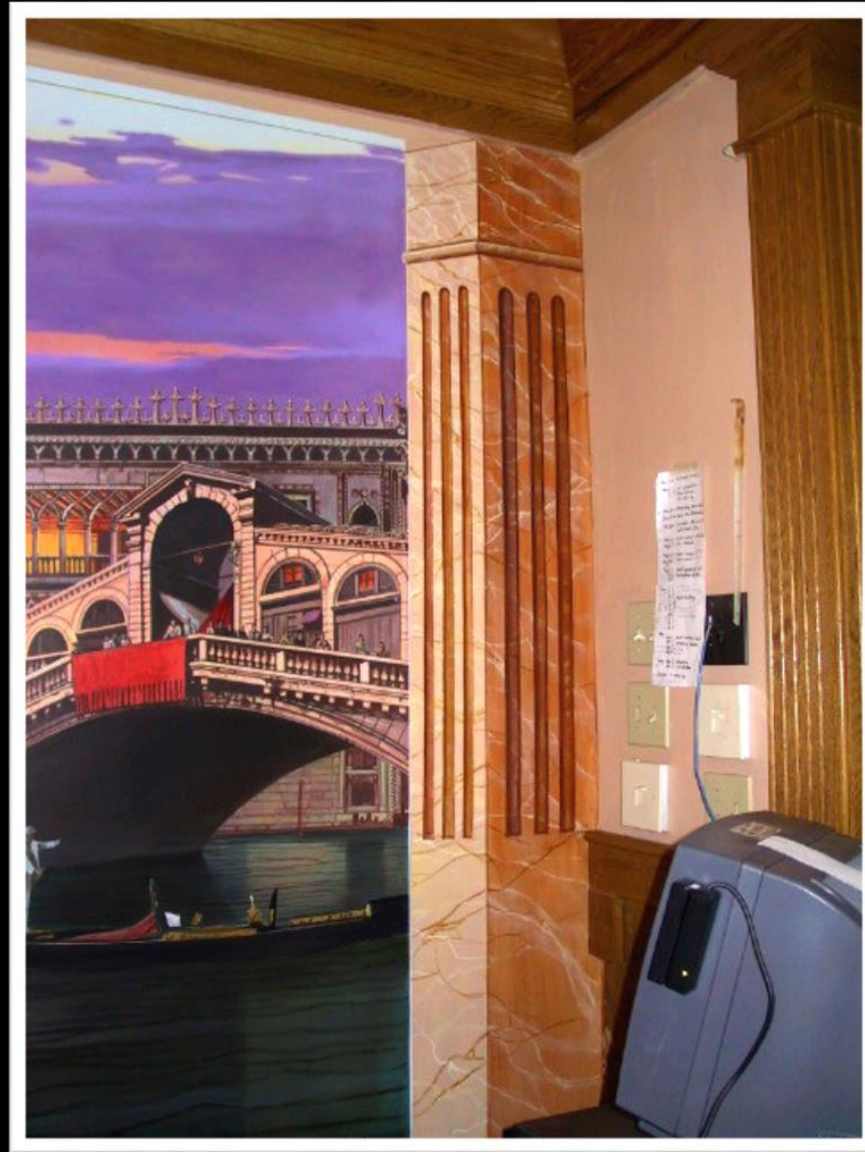
A small section of wall was an eyesore. So, what to do with it?

The happy couple in Venice. On the train from Rome to Venice, they made a stop in Firenze (Florence) were Debbie purchased this chic Tuscan ensemble. Mike surprised her with a beautiful necklace he purchased in one of the gold shops on the Ponte Vechio. Life is good!

Lighting

After completing the mural, new ceiling lamps were installed to provide improved illumination. The new lamps better approximated natural light. It made a world of difference.

On the 36th day I rested. The mural was done.

Postcard Shots

The following slide show of postcards can not be found in any of Venice's tourist shops. The Venice in these postcards does not exist in the real world; it belongs to the Venice of the imagination. That is the miracle of painting, it reconstructs reality and shapes it into a new reality that is more beautiful, pure and idyllic. The real challenge faced by the painter that constructs these new illusions of reality is not to make them beautiful, or pure, or even idyllic. The real challenge is to make them interesting. You be the judge.
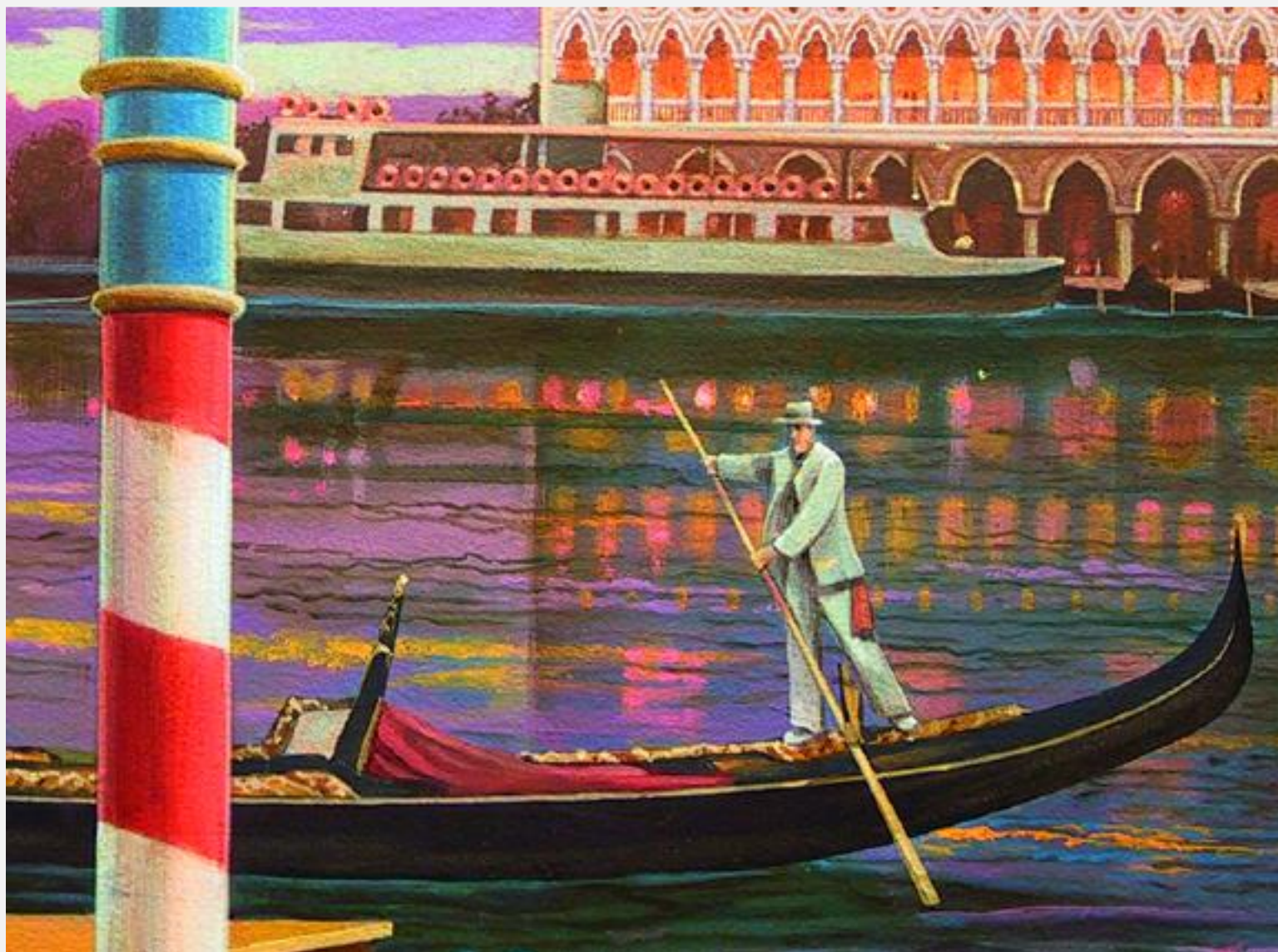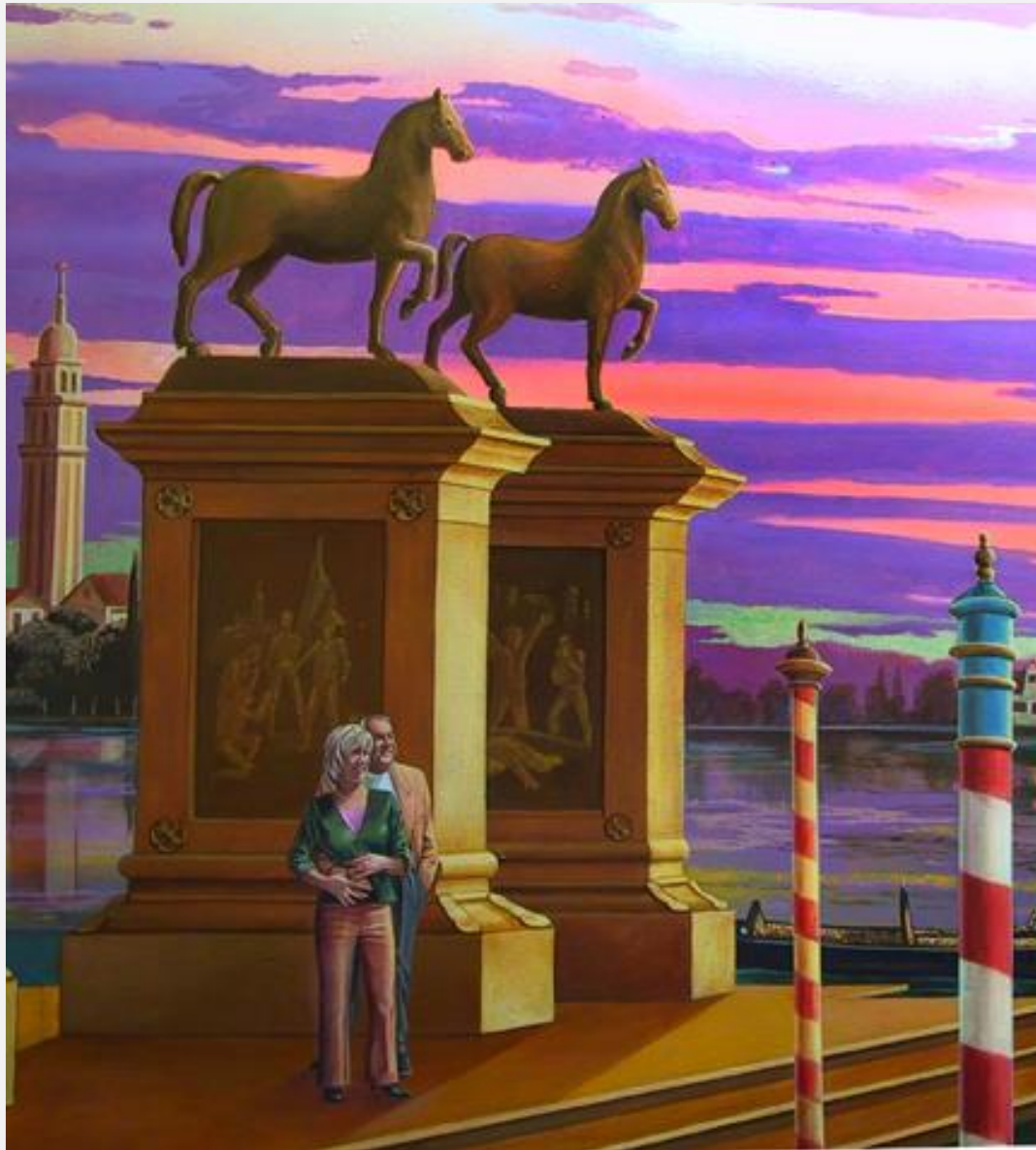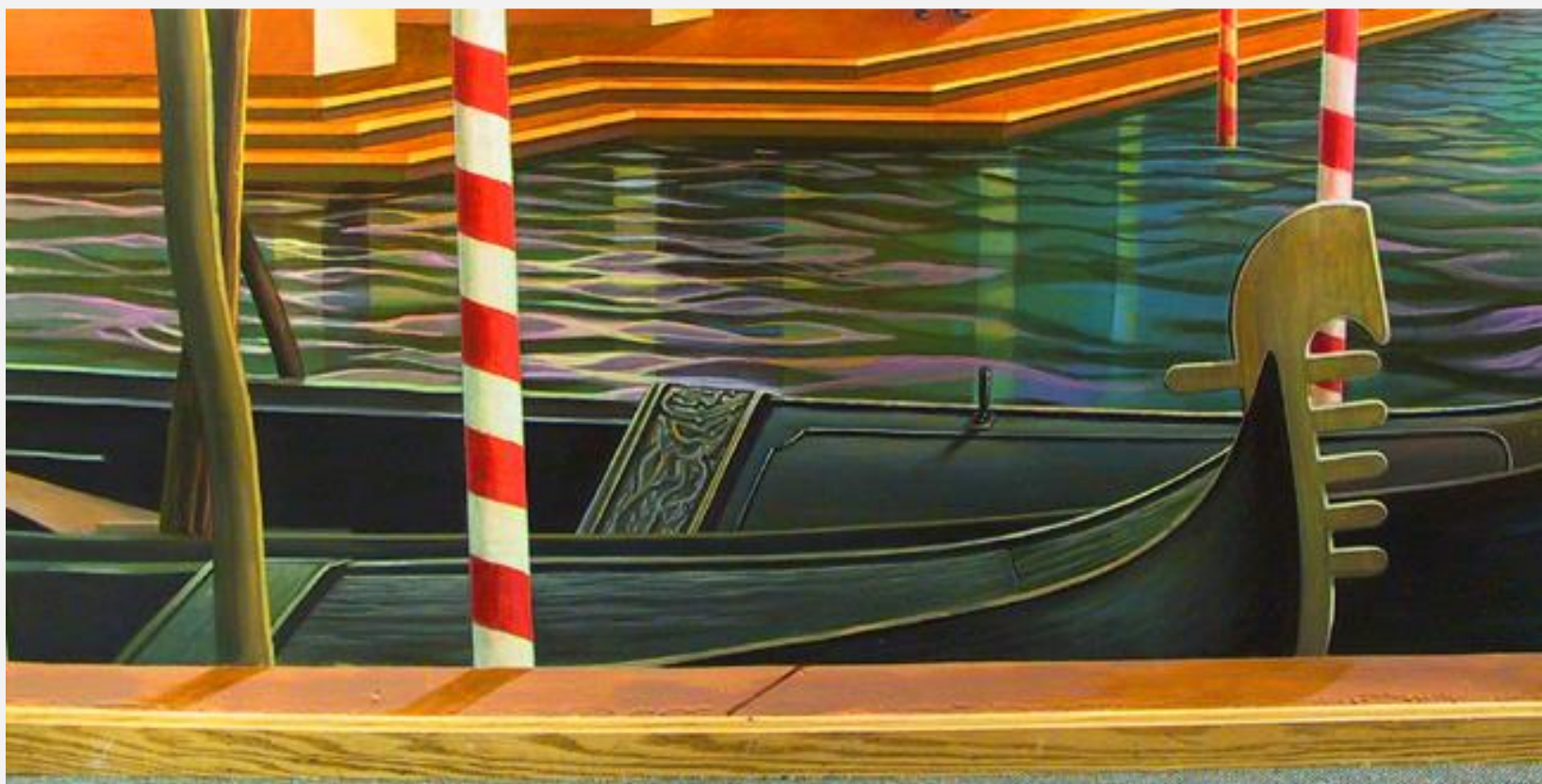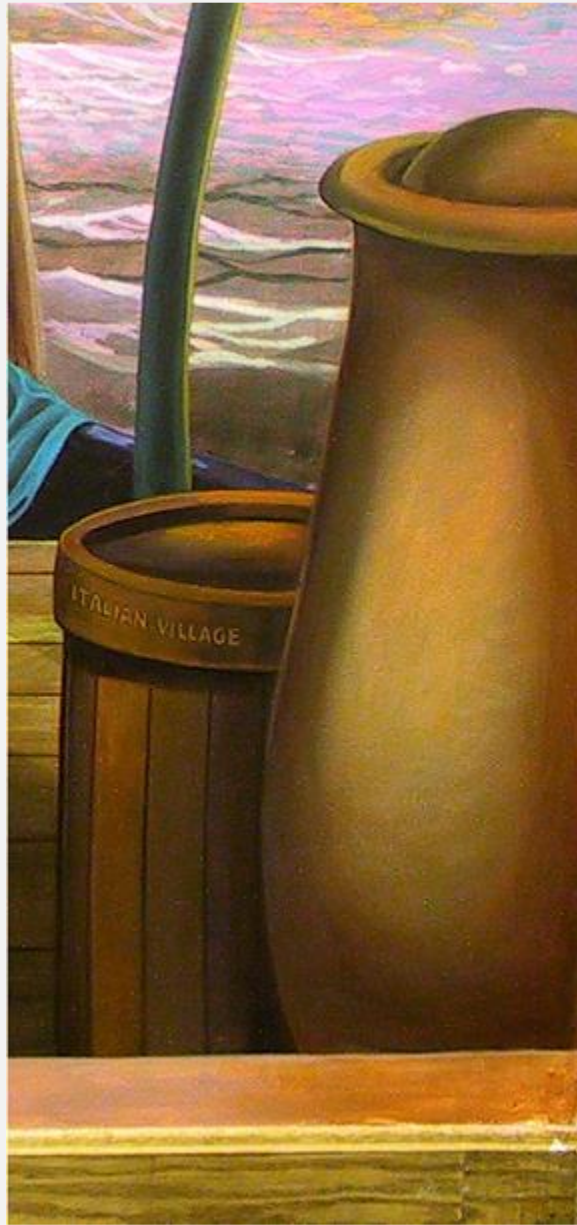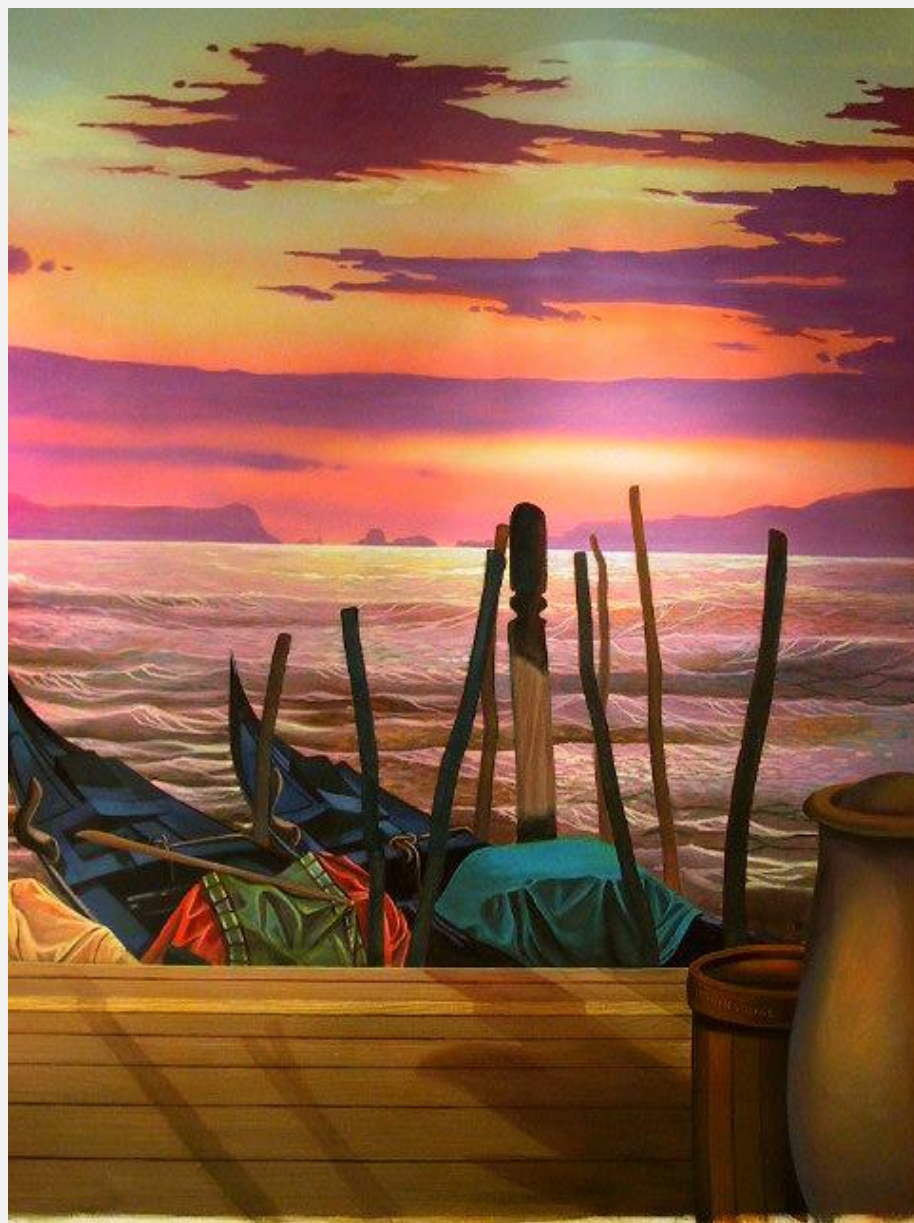
Acknowledgement

I would like to express my thanks and gratitude to my then fiancée, Miss Nancy Anne Lewis —now my wife, who was responsible for the creation of this photographic diary about the making of these murals.

Everyday she would call and ask: -"What are you doing today?"   And, -"Where were you at two o'clock in the morning?" These photographs, small low quality images not intended for reproduction, were my best defense.

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Comune di Venezia Mural

by John Rivera-Resto

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www.muralmaster.org

"An art can only be learned in the workshops of those earning their bread by it."
Samuel Butler

About the artist

John Rivera-Resto considers that his true gift lie not with the paintbrush, but with the pen. He began writing, directing and acting at the age of 14. His first English play, *Death of a Mercenary*, was a finalist in the 1997 International Playwright's Festival in London, UK.

He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Art Education from Cleveland State University, Ohio, USA in 1995.

He earned a Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts with a concentration on propaganda art from Vermont College of Norwich University, Vermont, USA in 2001.

He interned with The Washington Leadership Program in Washington DC, USA, in 1994.

John is also a popular speaker and educator. He has presented seminars and lectures in the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Indonesia and Thailand.

Through his website, muralmaster.org, he receives e-mails from over 20 countries.

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