

# From source to sea, a Melbourne artist paints the River Ganges

Kevin Pearsh has captured India's holy river and the Indian public, **Matt Wade** writes from Delhi.

THE River Ganges holds a special place in a billion Indian hearts. But a Melbourne-born artist has become the first to paint it from source to mouth.

Kevin Pearsh travelled by foot, boat and land vehicle from the river's source waters in the Himalayan ice cave of Gaumukh to the sprawling delta where the Ganges flows out into the Bay of Bengal to create an acclaimed series of 21 oils on canvas.

The France-based painter completed his journey in three stages in 2006 and 2007, keeping a comprehensive travel diary of sketches, notes, photographs and watercolours — all painted with Ganges water.

"I did it in three parts to try and absorb the vision," he said.



**“I often felt just like that little boy — sitting on the edge of a wall.”** KEVIN PEARSH

“But I didn't start any of the 21 paintings until I had finished the whole journey. It was only then that I felt I could begin.”

It then took Pearsh 2½ years to complete the paintings at his studio in Burgundy, where he has been based for the past 25 years.

A Varanasi boatman called Deepak, who accompanied Pearsh for the entire journey acting as interpreter and assistant, suggested he do 21 paintings because it was an “auspicious number” in Hindu astrology.

The large format canvases depict an array of scenes along the 2500-kilometre river, including the point at Devprayag where two mountain rivers meet to officially become the Ganges; bathers at the holy city of Haridwar; complex reflections in the waters off Varanasi; working river boats in West Bengal; the famous Howrah Bridge in Kolkata; and Ganga Sagar, where the sacred river finally meets the sea.

One of the most popular works features a solitary boy sitting on a wall contemplating the vast expanse of the river in the state of Bihar.

“I often felt just like that little boy — sitting on the edge of a wall with all the space of the Ganges in front of me,” Pearsh said. “We all have those sorts of moments.”

Two striking paintings portray the mysterious rock islands of Kahlgaon that emerge from the Ganges upstream from Kolkata.

The Ganges is sacred to Hindus and millions of Indians bathe regularly in its waters. But humans are incidental, or missing completely, in the majority of Pearsh's paintings.

“The Ganges holds its own presence and I didn't feel the need to always depict activity along it,” he said.

The collection, called *Ganga 21*, is now on show for the first time in Delhi and moves to Kolkata early next month.

Pearsh, who has paintings in many well-known collections, including London's Tate Gallery, was anxious about how his Ganges series would be received in India.

“I felt the only way to know if I had got it right, or was at least on the right track, was by the reaction of the Indian public,” he said. “But it has been absolutely phenomenal... they have



“There was an extraordinary sense of light, a wonderful transparency, that I was able to bring into the paintings,” says France-based Kevin Pearsh.

PICTURE: BRIAN SOKOL

never seen the Ganga in paint as a journey.”

Padam Talwar, program director-general of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, which is hosting the exhibition, said Pearsh's work had been enthusiastically received.

“They are beautiful paintings so thoughtfully and vibrantly

done,” he said. “It is the first time we are seeing such paintings of the Ganges.”

Pearsh, who has travelled and painted extensively in India since the late 1970s, said one of the highlights of his river journey was encountering the unique Ganges River dolphin.

“Sleeping on a boat every

night was extraordinary because you see and hear these wonderful creatures,” he said. “They would come up and you could hear a puff of air and they would go under again.”

The 59-year-old painter sustained a serious gash in his right arm during his journey when he slipped on flimsy sandals while

getting off a bus in Varanasi.

“I looked at this hole in my arm with blood going everywhere and thought to myself ‘This is probably not a good idea in India,’” he said. “I ended up having nine stitches. I made sure I had more sturdy footwear after that.”

The Ganges journey has had

a major impact on Pearsh's art. “I didn't realise this journey would have such an influence on my painting,” he said.

“There was an extraordinary sense of light, a wonderful transparency, that I was able to bring into the paintings. It has really changed the way I look at things now.”