

Sky Gazing

Vidya Gauci '82 Takes Art to the Highest Level

By Megan Youngblood





(Left) After designing the stencil for the beams, Gauci transferred the final drawing to board in her studio. (Right) In this view, Gauci completed the stenciling for the second floor beams before applying a sealant to the finish the project.

After top scaffolding, à la Michelangelo, decorative fine artist Vidya Carmen Gauci '82 worked for two months hand-stenciling 14 wooden beams on three sides for a public art project. Gauci was among three artists chosen for a competition to transform the new Santa Barbara Airport Terminal into a place that reflects the history and culture of its California setting. She completed the public art commission this past July for the City of Santa Barbara. She titled her work “Santa Barbara Sky Gazing” because it reminded her of a meditative practice from the *dzogchen* tradition of Tibetan Buddhists who lie on their backs, look up at the sky, and rest in a natural state of purity.

Employing a contemplative approach, Gauci has been creating private and public art for nearly 15 years. Expansive murals, custom paintings, ornamentation, stenciling, hand-painted fabric and furniture, and manuscript illuminations are among her specialties. Gauci’s works of art are informed by her time as a studio art student at Marymount Manhattan, by her experience in sacred art traditions, and by her aspirations to ever higher planes of beauty.

Before she creates a work of art, Gauci often seeks inspiration from the space where it will be displayed. In the case of the Santa Barbara Airport, when she first drafted the designs of the stencils, she had based the designs on the terminal’s architectural renderings. Examining the ceiling for the first time, she realized that she had underestimated both the size of the ceiling’s beams and the overall height of the structure.

“When I stood there and looked at how high up it was, I realized that the original art samples

I submitted had to be modified and made more graphic to stand the distance,” Gauci said. “I had to approach it with bolder colors. I had to correct the relationship of someone standing on the ground and looking up.”

Gauci transformed the design with striking colors and shapes in keeping with the local Spanish Revival-style architecture that could be admired from a great distance. She also collaborated with friend and designer-artist Lori Ann David to design

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—Vidya Carmen Gauci '82

the terminal’s “Santa Barbara 360°,” a 20-foot-in-diameter floor mosaic that reflects the local landscape. Within a Moorish arched structure, the medallion contains a continuous flow of Santa Barbara flora and terrain in the arrangement of the compass, reflecting their actual geographical placements in nature.

“When you’re looking at the ocean, there’s a palm tree. When you’re looking to the mountains, there are oak trees. As you come closer to the center, the focus is on the fruit of the tree,” she said. David and Gauci were together awarded the commissions of the floor medallion and the wood



VIDYA GAUCI



SARAH CLAREHART



beam stenciling, with each artist respectively taking each project to completed installation. “The wild Matilija poppy and hibiscus, the official city flower, are highlighted in both designs. What essentially inspired us as artists is what Santa Barbara is emotionally—its architecture, coastline, mountains, flora and that wonderful smell of jasmine that is often in the air when you land at the airport.”

Gauci began her quest for beauty through art as a Vedanta novice, when she was living at the Vedanta Society in Manhattan, a spiritual center that teaches the philosophy of the Vedas, the most ancient scriptures of India. Gauci’s interest in Eastern philosophy grew after she was introduced to the Ramakrishna Order of India at a yoga retreat. At the age of 20, she was studying to be a nun of this order. She had been teaching art at Valley Stream South High School on Long Island, when she chose to lead a more contemplative life and move to the monastic setting in New York City. While living there, Gauci enrolled at Marymount Manhattan to complete her studio art degree, which she had begun at C.W. Post.

“Just before the spring semester began, I took my portfolio to the College and made an appointment with Sr. Judith Savard,” Gauci said. “We had a portfolio review, and I brought in my transcripts. Within a day, I was awarded a full presidential scholarship. Sr. Judith and Hallie Cohen were very supportive of me with my work and combining it with my spiritual aspiration.”

After graduating *summa cum laude*, Gauci planned to officially join the monastic Ramakrishna Order. Sr. Judith recognized and appreciated Gauci’s artistic talent and wrote to her that the spiritual community was going to gain a great person while the art community was going to lose a gifted artist. Sr. Judith encouraged her to explore a way to

combine art with her spiritual aspirations. With that advice, Gauci continued studying art for two years at the former School of Sacred Arts in Washington Square Park. The school represented artists from many of the sacred traditions of the world, including medieval manuscript illumination, calligraphy, Chinese Taoist landscape painting, Russian Icon painting and Tibetan Thangka painting.

In 1985, Gauci formally joined the Vedanta Convent in Santa Barbara, where she served as a resident artist, creating sacred sculpture, manuscript illuminations and calligraphy while she immersed herself in contemplative life. She chose to re-enter society in the 1990s and leave the monastic vocation to explore her spiritual life differently and to create art professionally.

Gauci accepted a job managing an art gallery in Montecito, Calif., and joined a local decorative arts guild. That’s when she started painting on a more expansive scale. Her first mural was conceived for Lori Ann David, owner of Lori Ann David Design Studios, and was featured on the cover of the *Montecito Journal*, the town’s newspaper. Thus she began her long friendship with David. In 2000, Gauci established her own business, Vidya Gauci Decorative Fine Arts, working steadily through commissions received from designers, architects and a distinguished clientele.

Now that Gauci has completed the City of Santa Barbara commission, which began in April 2010, she is engaged in several other unique art projects: a portrait commission for a four-by-five-foot outdoor tile mural, wooden door panels depicting Santos in classic Spanish style, an exterior trompe l’oeil for a majestic residential garden, and coming soon a ceiling to be painted with motifs inspired by frescos in the Basilica of St. Francis in Assisi.

(Left) Gauci and David based their floor mosaic on this sketch drawn by Gauci, and (right) at the airport, David completed the installation of the mosaic's intricate design that reflects the local flora and terrain of Santa Barbara.



VIDYA GAUCI

Gauci was commissioned to create this oil painting on primed linen for a client who owns a classic Spanish Revival home in Santa Barbara. Titled *Merchants of Cairo*, the 54-by-38-inch painting is based on the watercolor entitled *Carpet Bazaar, Cairo* by Charles Robertson in 1887.

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