

The Valley on Canvas



Toronto artist plans series of paintings featuring KV
by Paula White for This Week



Artist Antoine Gaber has been scouting the Kennebecasis Valley area for scenes for a new series of paintings. He is planning to complete to raise money for cancer research.

Toronto artist Antoine Gaber has traveled all over the world to paint. He's captured Tuscany at dusk, the Nile by moonlight, Monet's water garden in France, a stormy sea in Normandy.

Guess where he's going next? That's right -the Kennebecasis Valley. Mr. Gaber was in town last week scouting the area for scenes. "I haven't had a chance to paint my own country," laughed the Egyptian born artist. "There's some beautiful scenery around here to paint."

That's only part of the picture, however. The Valley paintings will actually be part of a larger project Mr. Gaber is working on.

He is planning to paint hundreds of Canadian scenes from coast to coast. And he's doing it to promote the arts and raise money for cancer research. "Love of life," Mr. Gaber explained. "I take the time to appreciate life and the beauty of nature, and at the same time, I love people, so finding a cure for cancer, which is so devastating to, so many families..., is so important to me.

It's typical for artists to feel passionate about their work. The same goes for scientists. That's why it doesn't come as a surprise that this project is so near and dear to Mr. Gaber's heart. He has spent 23 years as a researcher and consultant for pharmaceutical company, developing drugs for cancer patients. Specializing in drugs for breast and prostate cancer patients, Mr. Gaber helped develop Arimidex, which reduces the side effects for breast cancer patients undergoing treatment. In fact, one of his first works, an interpretation of Tamara de Lempica's *The Model*, was used by a pharmaceutical company as the poster to launch the drug. The painting features a woman with one arm covering her face.

"The arm covering the head also represents the stigma of breast cancer -the shame (some women feel) about losing a breast," he said. "This painting depicted a lot of the advances that the new drug had made."

Another of Mr. Gaber's paintings, *Breaking New Ground in Cancer*, was chosen to grace the front of the program for a specialist workshop held during an international breast cancer meeting in Nottingham, England, in September, 1999. The painting depicts yellow flowers in varying stages of growth, poking through dry, cracked earth. It is meant to celebrate the progress being made in cancer research, but at the same time, mourns the slow pace at which it is achieved. Mr. Gaber spent more than 20 years developing cancer drugs. It wasn't until seven years ago he decided to explore his artistic nature. He decided to buy himself some oil paints and a canvas for his birthday. Although by some standards Mr. Gaber is a "new" artist, he is, by no means, a neophyte. The 44-year-old comes by his talent honestly -it runs in his family. Many of his relatives on his mother's side are actors and artists, and one of his cousins is a popular actor and singer in Quebec. Mr. Gaber is also cousin to the famous actor, Omar Sharif.

Thanks to these connections, Mr. Gaber always knew he had an artistic side. In 1994, he began teaching himself to paint, copying masters such as Degas and Monet. He learned quickly how to play with light by blending colors and textures. The fact that Mr. Gaber is self-taught hasn't hindered his career. Working mainly with oils, his choice of subjects and his tendency toward the Impressionist style have earned him a respectable place in the international art world. His paintings have been shown both in Canada and abroad, and many now belong to European collectors.

Mixing an art career with a career in science isn't as oil-and-water as many may think. In fact, Mr. Gaber says allowing his creativity free reign has enhanced his scientific work. Both require imagination and an eye for detail. "For me, it's important to paint because it makes me sharper. It helps me actually to design better research studies for patients," he said. "I have designed with my colleagues a lot of very good studies that are actually being done at this time for colorectal cancer, actually, which could change the way colorectal cancer may be treated in the long run."



Because Mr. Gaber is starting his campaign on the East Coast, the Valley paintings will be among the first produced. He doesn't know yet which scenes he will paint, but St. Paul's Church caught his eye right away.

Once the paintings are complete, Mr. Gaber will use their images on a number of items, including calendars, coffee mugs, screen savers and umbrellas. Money raised from the sale of these items will be donated to The Antoine Gaber Cancer Research Foundation, a national organization established by Mr. Gaber this year. Its mission is to eradicate cancer and improve the quality of life for cancer patients by advancing research through the funding of ethical clinical trials.