

# ON THE WATERFRONT

*Mammoth murals of six of the world's harbors will begin gracing the lobby of American Express Tower in January.*

By Gail Friedman



PHOTOS: BOB SACHA

**O**n a mountainside in Hong Kong, Craig McPherson was surrounded by enormous butterflies and watched like a hawk by hovering flocks of birds. In the public gardens of Venice, he was questioned by government security guards for sketching too close to the site of an economic summit meeting.

In New Jersey, he worked out of a panel truck parked in a factory lot. And, in Istanbul, he settled next to hot air vents on the roof of an eight-story building during a heat wave. Istanbul couldn't get any hotter, he imagined, until four contractors showed up to tar the roof.

The 40-year-old Manhattan artist spent the past year traveling from continent to continent sketching some of the world's most beautiful harbors for American Express. The six resulting murals will grace the lobby of the American Express Tower in New York City beginning in January.

McPherson, whose artwork is in the collections of

**Artist Craig McPherson puts the finishing touches on a mural of Venice's harbor.**



**Craig McPherson spent a year traveling around the world for what might be the largest landscape art project ever commissioned.**

museums around the world—including the National Gallery in London, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., and the National Gallery in Sydney, isn't new to American Express. His series of paintings of New York City waterfronts at twilight is on permanent display at the Tower's 26th floor conference center.

When he was commissioned for that project, he was best known for the New York landscapes he painted from a studio near Harlem. Those paintings, which ranged in size from six-by-nine inches to seven-by-twelve feet, were exhibited and sold at a New York gallery.

Diane Bliss, a consultant who acquires art for American Express, says McPherson was just the person the company had in mind for the conference center project: a young artist who could express the company's commitment to New York City.

Chairman Jim Robinson was impressed by McPherson's work and suggested he paint the world harbor scenes for the Tower's lobby as a metaphor for the company's global presence.

"Our idea was that these murals will make a dramatic statement about American Express and its international businesses," he says.

**O**f all the world's harbors, McPherson chose New York, Rio de Janeiro, Sydney, Hong Kong, Venice and Istanbul for their visual beauty as well as for their role in history and today's world of commerce and tourism.

He spent about two months in each city, surveying, sketching and taking hundreds of photos that he would

later magnify to obtain more detail.

The murals—the two largest of which measure 50 feet by 11 feet—might very well be the largest landscape art project ever commissioned, Bliss says. They are so large that special canvas was woven in Belgium to hold the more than 500 pounds of paint that McPherson will put on each mural.

**Each mural required 500 pounds of paint.**



"It's a great challenge, since you don't often get commissioned for work of this magnitude," says McPherson, who describes his painting style as "somewhere between classical and impressionistic."

His work is based on methodical calculation. He used a surveyor's instrument called a theodolite—essen-

tially a telescope with a computer built in—to draw buildings in miniature. These were later enlarged onto full-scale canvas.

Overlapping science and art actually is an old concept, practiced during the Renaissance when artists often were architects, McPherson explains.

McPherson is spending about six months on each mural—two drawing on-site and four in the studio painting. The works require such painstaking detail that three assistants must help him. Still, he works 12-hour days, six-days-a-week. "I work up a certain momentum and sometimes I can't stop," he says.

McPherson's views of the New York and Venice harbors will be the first to go on display—in January. The other four murals, which will be hung as they are completed, are expected to be up by 1991. ■