

PETRA and THE OLGAS

The unveiling of *Eternity* was the climax of an incredible 12 months of sculpture activity, but it also marked two other adventures. One of these was a visit to Petra, and the other to see the Olgas.

One of my shipmates who shared my sailing lessons on the Solent in the *Fair Endeavour* was named Peter. When he found out that I was a sculptor he suggested that I should visit Kuwait and try and sell some of my work to his boss as the town was bereft of all forms of art. I sent Peter a few photographs and told him that on our next trip to Australia I would come via the Gulf. I didn't hold out much hope of selling anything to the Arabs as I knew that figurative representation was against Islamic law, but I hoped they would like the Symbolic Sculpture. Besides, going to Kuwait was a good excuse to visit a place that I had been dying to see all my life, *Petra, Rose Red City half as old as time*. I had read Iain Browning's magnificent book and found the text fascinating and the photographs mouth watering. I made some enquiries at our travel agent and found that if we bought a *Round the World* ticket and kept going East, we could stop off anywhere we liked, and end up back in London.

Our first leg to Kuwait would be via Jordan. We would hire a car in Amman and drive down to Petra and stay for a couple of days to explore the Lost City of Petra.

Then I had another idea. Wouldn't it be fun to go from Petra to Ayers Rock in Central Australia? Next to the Rock are some mountains called the Olgas and ever since seeing photographs of them I had longed to see them for myself. The travel agent said there was no problem in breaking our trip in Alice Springs for a few days on our way to Melbourne.

We could then fly to Canberra and do whatever I was meant to do with Ron, on to Sydney, and up to Hawaii to see Chris Hemmeter before going home. It would be a long trip and take six weeks, but, as the boys were now at boarding school, we were free to travel if we were back for the holidays.

We set off for Amman. I had read and re-read Browning's book and decided that we had to be in Petra at the time of the Full Moon so at five in the morning we could walk in the moonlight through the canyon that leads into the city and then climb to the High Place to watch the sun rise.

I have never seen a more clapped-out looking vehicle in my life as the one we collected at Amman Airport, but as the man behind the desk said that it was very reliable and it was the only one available, we climbed in and headed south down the highway towards Karak. Our only excitement on the journey to Petra was a fleeting glimpse of the Dead Sea as we climbed over a pass.. It was the most desolate and barren country we had ever seen in our lives, as dead as the dead sea! As we seemed to be the only car on the road I prayed the man was right and the car was reliable. The only thing we passed was a Bedouin on a camel heading for a black tent surrounded by children.

We reached the new town of Petra, drove up the only street between mud-brick houses and arrived at the hotel. In those days there was only one hotel, which had been described in the brochure as having atmosphere as the Reception Desk was in a Nabatean Tomb! The young Arab teenagers sitting around on the pavement by the hotel entrance jumped up to welcome us and grab our cases. The Reception Desk was set into a sort of cave, which I suppose could have been a tomb, which was very appropriate as the place was quite dead and we seemed to be the only people staying. We registered and

were led away to our room, which luckily turned out not to be another tomb, although not by much, as it was very basic and rather smelly.

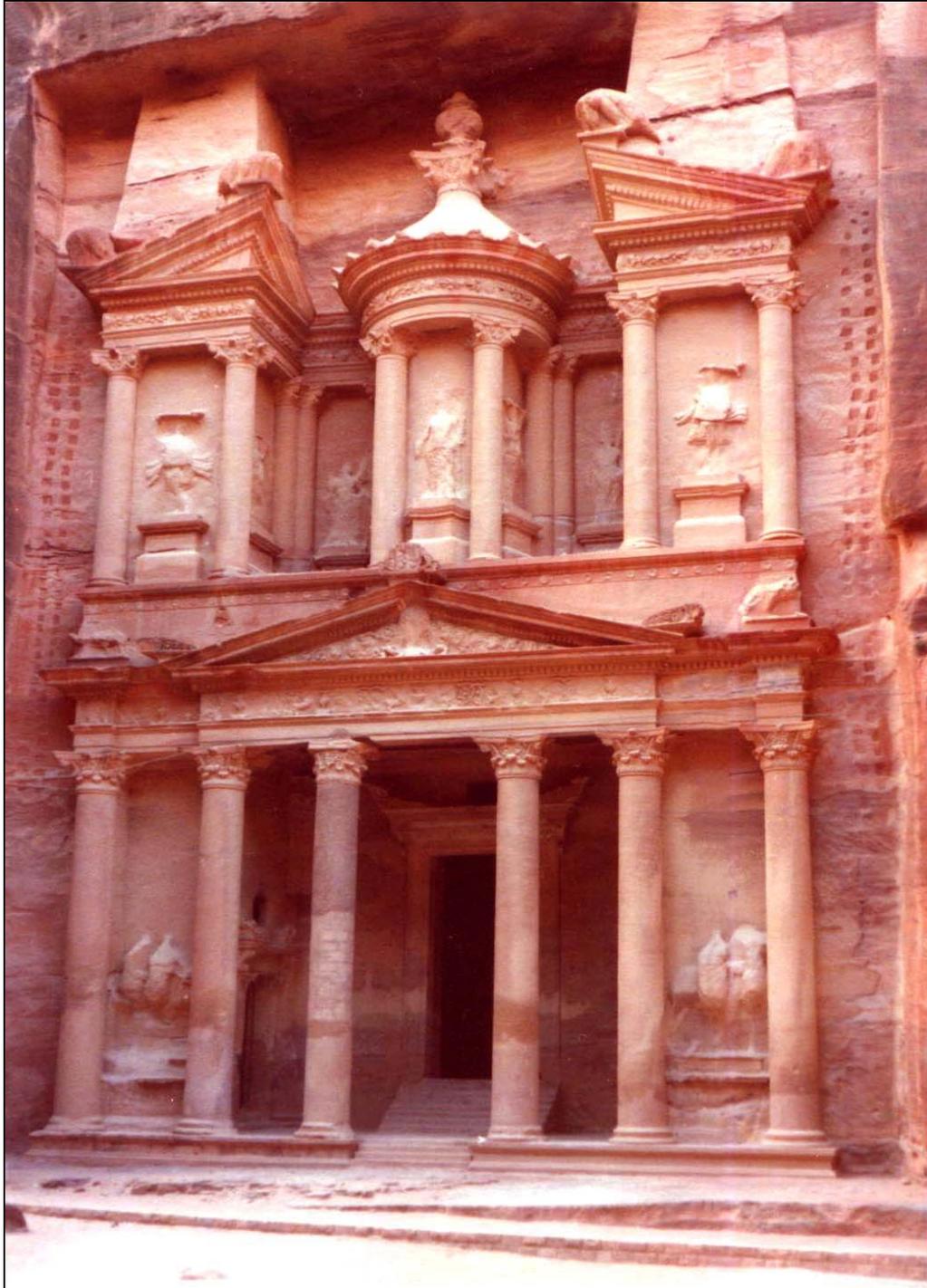
By now it was mid-afternoon so we hurried back to the lobby to find out how we could visit the *Rose Red City*. The concierge introduced us to a guide who was of course called Mohammed. We mounted two very scrawny horses that were waiting for us at the front door and set off down a track that led to the entrance of the Siq at a sedate pace following Mohammed on foot.



The narrowest part of the 'Siq'

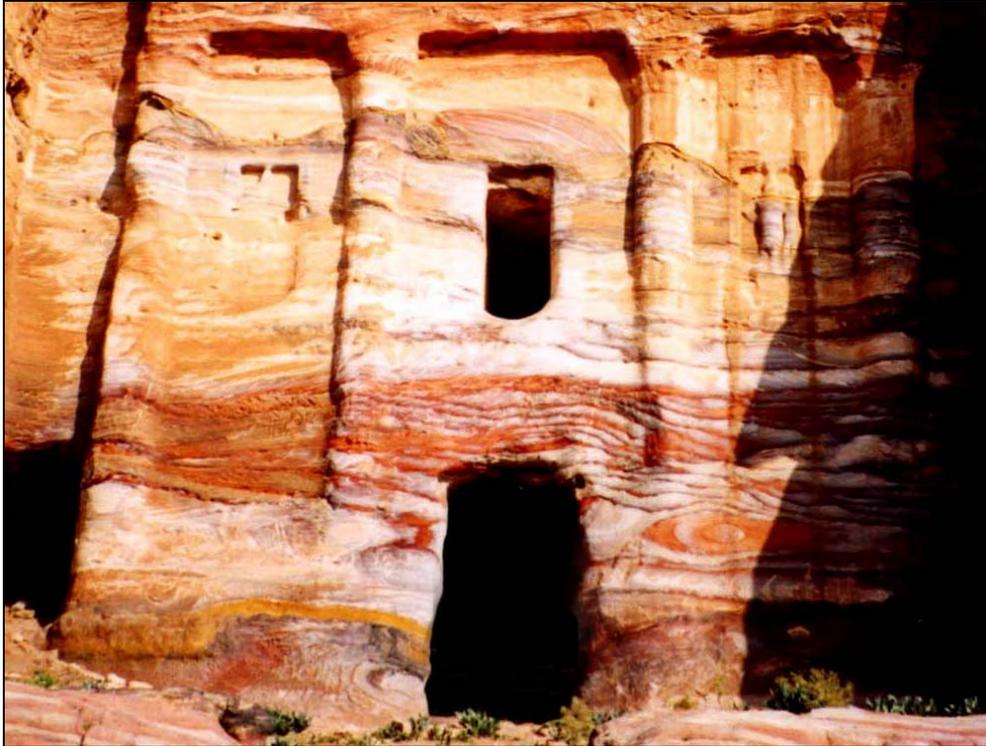
Entering the canyon is a quite remarkable experience and to think that it is the only way into this mysterious ancient city is utterly amazing. Petra had been the capital of the Nabateans for six centuries before the Romans conquered them and occupied it around AD 100. For centuries, when everything was carried by camel, it was the hub of the trade routes from India to Italy and the north coast of Africa. It commanded the way to the Mediterranean in the west, the Red Sea to the south, to Samarkand in the north and China to the East via the *Silk Road*.

Mohammed spoke very good English and was very knowledgeable about the Nabateans and the ruins. We rode along behind him as he walked at a steady pace puffing away on the cigarette that was permanently stuck between his lips. The Siq narrows to about 10 foot in one place and is over 100 foot deep. Both walls were in shadow with only a slit of blue sky visible above us. Coming out of the canyon and seeing the Treasury for the first time was sheer magic, a step back into the past.



The Treasury

Mohammed led us down the wadi to the open ground where the Arab traders had pitched their tents in the past. The walls of the wadi are honeycombed with tombs carved into the solid red sandstone cliffs. The entrances of the buildings looked like Greek temples, but instead of cut stone blocks the workmen had created the façades using flint chisels. I don't think there is anything quite as spectacular in the world.



Silk tomb

The light was quickly fading and Mohammed said that we must return before it became dark. By this time we were getting along very well with our guide and he in turn with us, because he told us that very few tourists showed any interest in the history of his people. On hearing that I thought it would be a good time to test my plan on him for the following day.

When we dismounted outside the hotel I told Mohammed that we intended to get up at five o'clock and walk through the Siq in the moonlight up onto the High Place to see the dawn rays hit the altar as the sun rose over the horizon. I asked him if he would like to guide us and then take us to see Petra's other great temple, *El Deir*.

He looked at me in surprise and then broke into a smile and said that he would be delighted, but we would have to walk all the way and it would cost me \$20 now. I thought that was pretty reasonable for a day's wages so we shook hands and he trotted off down the road saying, "See you at five."

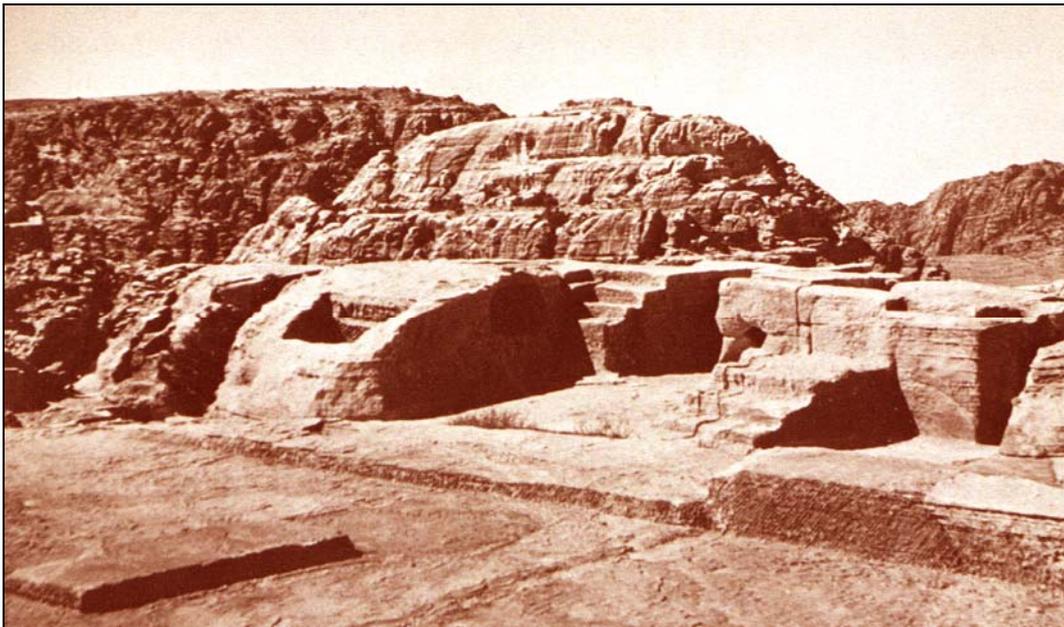
After a long cold shower, there being no hot water, we went down to the lobby to find something to eat. It turned out that there was no restaurant, but we would be able to have a plate of stew, a dessert, and a cup of tea in the reception hall. Drinking tea was fine by us as we had broached our duty-free bottle in the bedroom! We sat down on the round leather mushrooms that acted as chairs and waited for the meal. The stew arrived and we were instantly

reminded of our terrible meal in Urbino. It was disgusting! In fact it was so bad it was impossible to eat. The problem was that we couldn't get rid of it as we had in Italy, by wrapping it up in paper napkins and putting it in my raincoat pockets, because we were surrounded by grinning boy waiters.

We did manage to eat the flat pats of unleavened bread, but watching them watching us soon reduced everyone into fits of laughter. Eventually we asked them to take the food away as we were not hungry and bring us the dessert we had been promised. The worst giggler of all returned with a plate in each hand and plonked them down in front of us. On the plate was the pinkest castle of the wobbliest blancmange that was shaking as much as we were. It was also slippery and impossible to catch on the spoon! Before escaping I asked if we could have a bag of oranges and four big bottles of mineral water to take to bed. Having sampled dinner I thought that oranges would be the safest picnic lunch for the following day. After such a hilarious evening and a long exciting day, we fell into bed utterly exhausted and slept like camels.

At five o'clock we stepped out of the hotel into bright moonlight and looked around for Mohammed. He rose out of the shadows and after exchanging greetings we set off into the Siq. It was pitch black in the narrowest parts of the canyon, but we had the glowing end of his cigarette to follow as we stumbled along. We walked out of the Siq and turned left up the canyon, passed by the Treasury, which looked magnificent in the deep shadows created by the moon, and headed for the path that led up to the High Place.

Our eyes were now adjusted to the dark so the steep climb in shadow all the way up the path was quite easy. When we reached the rim of the canyon we stepped out into the gossamer-silver light of the full moon. The scene was as breathtakingly beautiful as it was peacefully serene. We continued to climb until we came to the 20-foot high obelisk that guards the entrance to the Sanctuary. The obelisk is carved out of native rock, so trying to imagine the amount of material that had to be removed left us gasping with admiration. On further for about a hundred yards and suddenly we arrived on the flat courtyard floor of the High Place bathed in moonlight.



The 'High Place' of Petra in moonlight

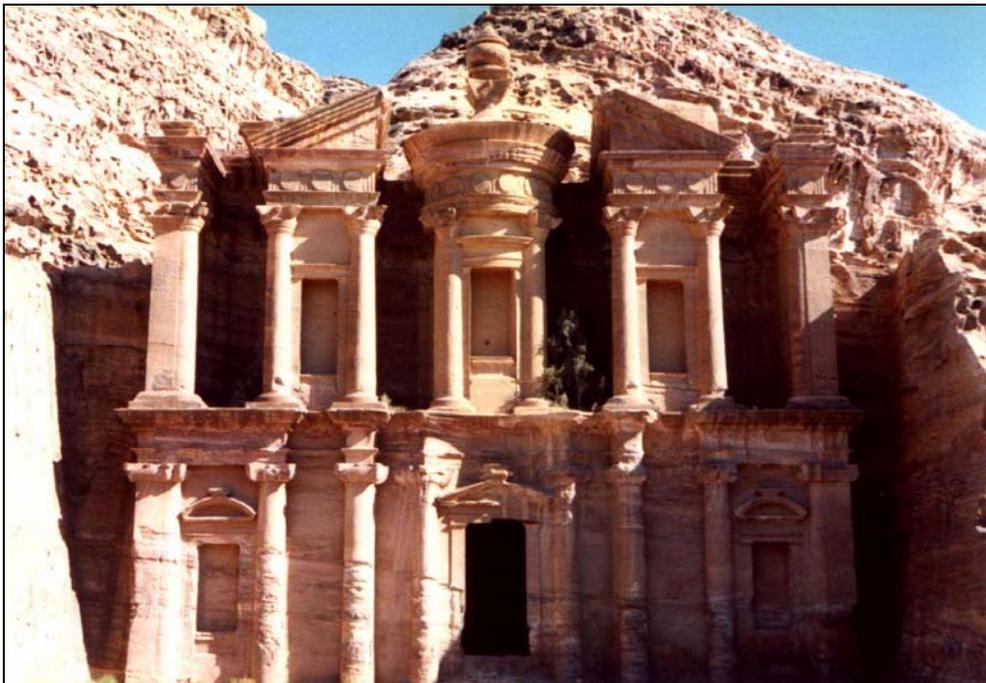
The area is as big as a tennis court with a six-inch high sacrificial altar (on the left of the photograph) about the size of an average dining table in the centre. At the back of the area there is a raised altar and to the left of that there is a large circular bowl, all carved out of the native rock.

We sat down and ate an orange and drank some water. Both of us were dripping wet from the climb but we soon had to put on sweaters, as it turned chilly while waiting for the sun to pop up over the eastern horizon. Suddenly the first rays hit the mountaintops in the west where we could see a tiny white building perched on the summit that Mohammed told us was Arron's tomb. Then the warm sun rays started to travel across the High Place and lit the central altar. It was a wonderful moment and one that we shall never forget.

We followed Mohammed down the far side of the plateau, past the Lion Fountain, and out into the wadi where we chanced upon three tiny Arab girls wearing gold earrings and herding a small flock of black goats with bells. The girls wore ankle-length black and gold embroidered dresses. The two eldest also wore very serious faces but the youngest had a big grinning mouth.

We crossed the wadi floor and walked down the dry riverbed past the ruins of the Roman temple that they had built from dressed rock blocks. It is the only free-standing building that remains from what must have been a very important town with a Forum and market place. We were amazed to see that the ground was literally covered with shards of paper-thin Nabatean pottery, beautifully painted with thin red lines. You couldn't help but crunch it under foot. What a place this must have been 2,000 years ago!

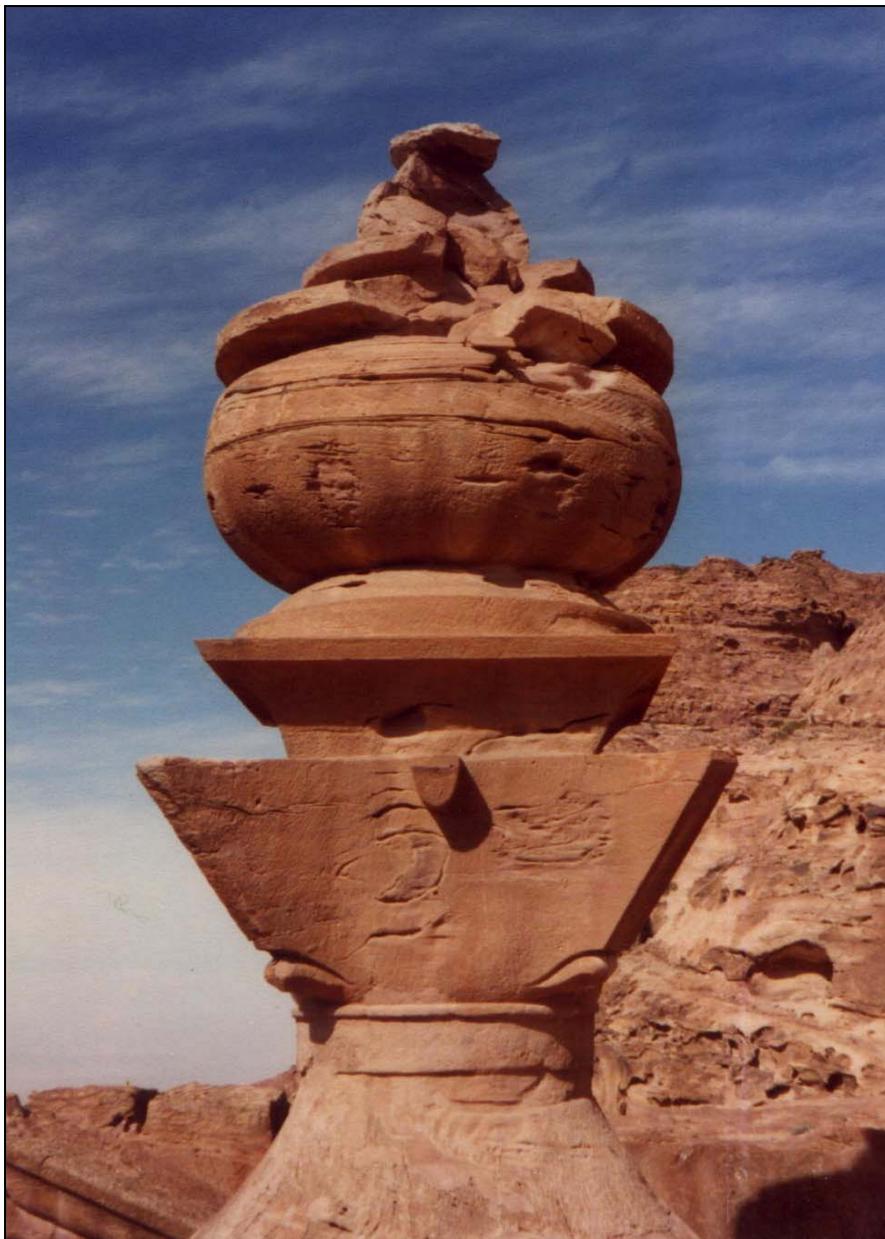
We came to a pathway that had been cut in the rock cliff and started up it following the aroma of Mohammed's tobacco. We reckoned he must be on his second pack by now and it was only ten o'clock! The track zigzagged back and forth getting narrower all the time until suddenly we stepped out onto the large sandy parade ground in front of *El Deir*.



El Deir

The Nabateans had carved El Deir into the cliff face. It was a hundred times bigger than I had expected from the photographs and incredibly well proportioned. It was gigantic! Opposite El Deir across the parade ground is an island of rock that provided a perfect viewing platform. We climbed it and sat down to drink in the beauty of the temple and eat another orange.

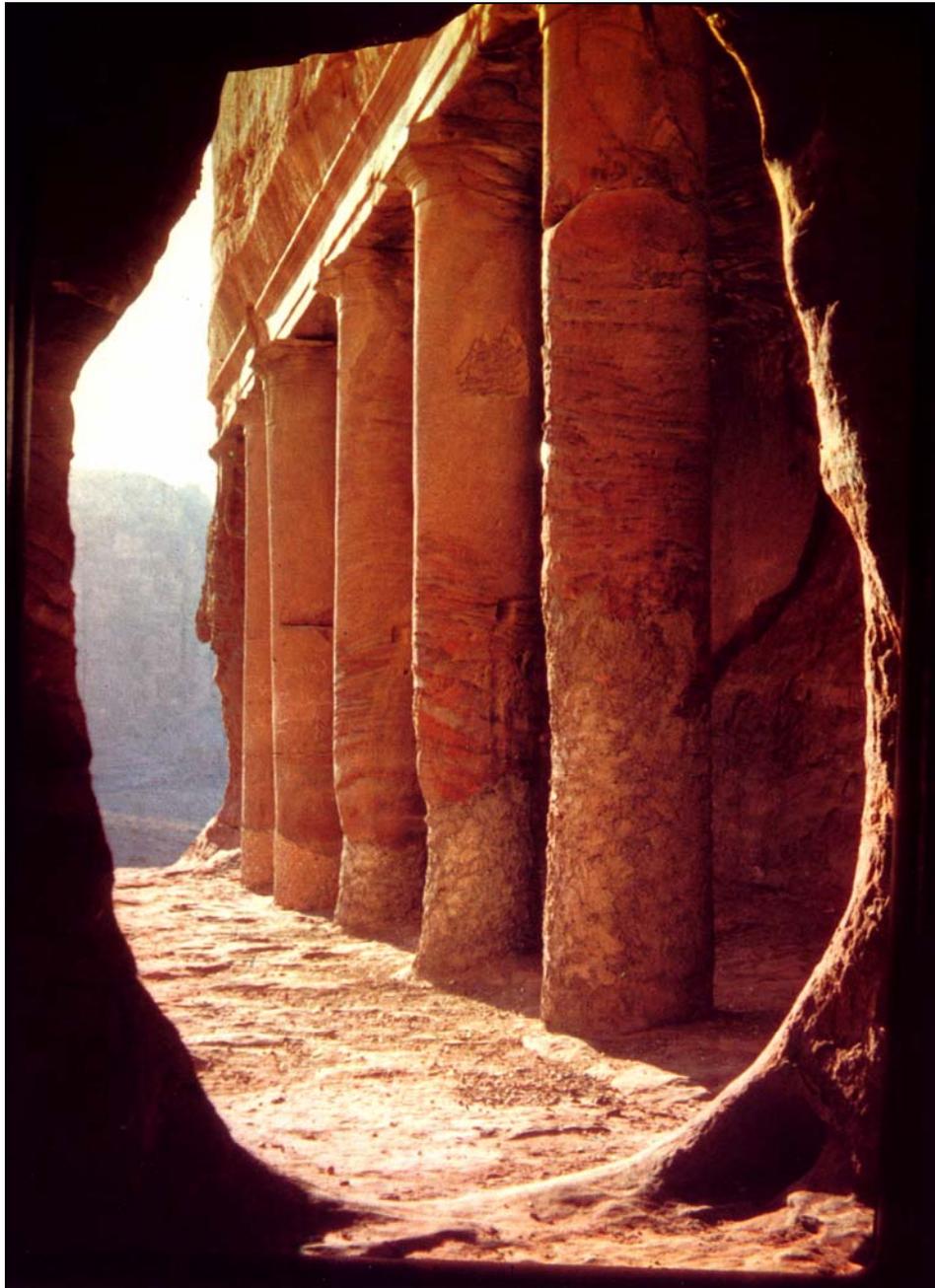
I had read that there was a path to the left of the temple that led up the cliff and allowed you to reach the great urn that stood on the apex. I was determined to climb it and see the view from the top, but first we had to walk over and have a look through the doorway. I could see that the door was big as just above it growing out of the building's façade were some tall gum trees, but to our amazement when we stood at the entrance we found the step was level with our chests. With a lot of scrambling we climbed in and examined the interior that was a complete contrast to the exterior, being utterly bare. Not a single ornate carving to be seen, just a giant square empty box.



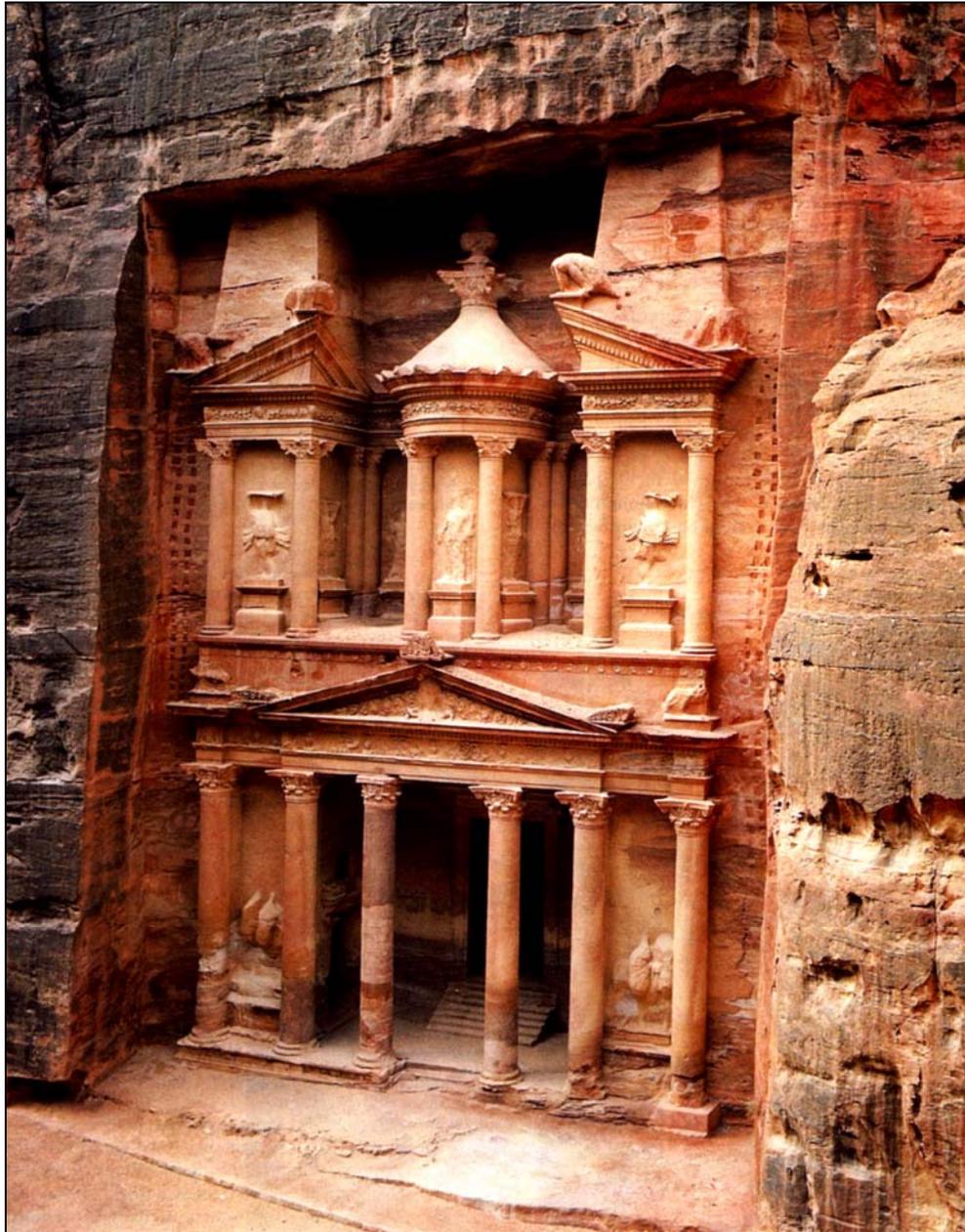
The urn surmounting 'El Deir'

Mohammed had remained at the rostrum and Margie returned to chat with him while I climbed the steps that led up to the urn. Once on the top you find that the plate the urn stands on is 20 foot across and you can walk right round the rim. It was an amazing feeling, a bit like standing on the outside ledge of the leaning tower of Pisa. Below me Margie and Mohammed looked like ants, while I felt like an eagle!

It was time to leave, return to the wadi and visit the other tombs. The King's tomb and the colonnades of the Urn tomb are as spectacular as anything I have ever seen, and all carved out of the cliff face with flints by hand! Some of the tombs were occupied by Arab nomads and to see a heavily-shrouded woman sitting beside a smoking fire while she cooked for her family, surrounded by this type of scenery, was quite a sight and filled one with awe.



The rock colonnade of the 'Urn Tomb'



One last look at the 'Treasury'

As we walked back past the Treasury and turned into the Siq Mohammed told us that if there was a sudden cloud burst the canyon turned into a raging river and that several tourists had been drowned there. I was glad to see that there was not a cloud in the sky. As we approached the exit we told Mohammed about the dinner we had had the night before in the hotel and asked him if he knew of somewhere else we could eat. "My brother-in-law has a restaurant and I will arrange that he feeds you tonight."

Mohammed drew a little map on a scrap of paper so we would be able to find the restaurant on the only street in town and we shook hands and said goodbye. He had given us an unbelievable day which earned him a big tip so he went off with a spring in his step, no doubt to buy some more cigarettes. He had told us that he was the proud father of 12 children! He didn't tell us how many wives he had.

The water was still cold but even so the shower was very welcome. It had been a long hot day but neither of us would have missed a second of it. On top of that we had Mohammed's brother-in-law's restaurant to look forward to and a succulent meal to end a perfect day. The duty-free bottle took a serious nudge as we put on clean clothes before setting out in the car to follow Mohammed's directions. There was only one street in the little mud town so after driving up and down it three times we were beginning to panic, because not only was there no restaurant anywhere to be seen, there wasn't even a shop, only rows of garage doors, all closed and no people.

We parked the car halfway down the street and started to walk down the middle of the road talking loudly in English to attract attention. Suddenly one of the garage doors swung up revealing some tables, chairs covered in plastic green gingham and a grinning man in his white nightdress. "English. Hotel. Mohammed?" "Yes, yes," we replied with relief and stepped into the garage. There was no menu and our host didn't speak English so we signalled that we would like some meat by bleating like a lamb and pointing at our legs. A big grin showed that our order had been understood and the man disappeared. We really did think he had disappeared for good, as nothing happened for ages. Either he had gone off to kill a sheep or had driven over to the next town to buy some mutton. Eventually he brought two plates to the table with an unrecognisable burnt offering on them. However, it smelt fantastic so we picked up our knives to cut off a mouthful, but found that they made no impression on the surface whatsoever!

With hysterical desperation we discovered a way whereby you could tear the meat apart along the lines of the muscle. It actually tasted very nice but you had to swallow the pieces whole. We ploughed our way through most of it and all of the unleavened bread, paid the bill and said goodnight with lots of smiles and a very big 'thank you'.

We rose early the following day and took the desert road back to Amman to vary the scenery. As we drove along in our old rickety car I again prayed that we wouldn't break down as I have never seen a flatter, more sun-baked godforsaken place in my life. The ground was covered with little black stones about the size of golf balls and when I picked one up I found that the underside was pale yellow. I wondered how many years the stones had been lying undisturbed under the blazing sun. It must have been millions. We arrived in Amman and went straight to the Hilton and booked a room for the afternoon, as the flight to Kuwait was not until late evening. We ordered a meal to be brought to the room so we could eat while taking a long hot bath before dropping off to sleep for a well-earned siesta.

Nothing could be more different to Petra than Kuwait. We arrived very late to be met by my sailing friend, Peter, and went to his apartment for what was left of the night. Next day he took us out to see the sights and then very kindly to the best restaurant in town which was on the top floor of the Hilton. It was a buffet meal and the centre of attraction was a whole roast sheep still with its head attached, but fortunately by the time we arrived someone had eaten the eyeballs. As we could see the Arab chef pulling bits off with his fingers and plopping them on the guests' plates, Margie and I settled for a rice salad. It was hard to see out of the windows of the penthouse dining room as they were coated with a thick layer of sand. Maybe they were left dirty on purpose because if you did look very hard you could just see the local cemetery

through the filth and the tiny dust devils spiralled between the graves. We couldn't wait to climb on board the plane and fly away to Singapore.

About 15 years after our visit to Kuwait a friend arranged two exhibitions of my Symbolic Sculpture in the hope that the Islamic Arabs would be interested. One was in Dubai and the other Abu Dhabi and both were miserable failures. We found the Arabs very hard work and the whole experience a bit like climbing up a steep sand hill, as shown below by Margie!



The only interesting thing I saw during my entire time there was a tiny truck filled to overflowing with baby camels. I thought that the Japanese manufacturer would have loved to have seen the sight.



Desert Ships

However, I was fascinated to see a lateen-rigged dhow. It was not until we sailed in dhows on the Nile that I really appreciated how wonderful these boats are, but that is another story.



Watching a dhow race

At last we were comfortably seated on an aeroplane heading for Australia, very thankful to have shaken the dust of the Middle East from our shoes although our time in Petra had been unbelievable and I count it as one of the great experiences of my life. Now we were heading towards 'The Olgas'.

We changed planes in Darwin for Alice Springs landing on a beautiful day. While Margie unpacked I slipped out and bought a Fire Opal as it was December 1st and our Wedding Anniversary. We walked down to the Todd and paddled in the river, which was something of a marvel because it seldom rains in Alice, but the day before our arrival it had been one of those rare occasions. Standing in the water I gave her the ring.

We left the town next morning and flew to Ayers Rock to stay for a couple of nights in the ramshackle motel that was the only accommodation available in those days. We were met at the gravel airstrip by the owner and taken to his motel that was composed of several steel cabins and a wooden shed. It was very primitive but right beside the famous rock that towered above us, completely dominating the entire world.



Ayers Rock



Wet roads, big rock!

The first thing to do was climb the Rock, so we were taken around to the one place where you can make the ascent. In those days there was a steel chain fixed between posts making it possible to haul oneself up, slowly. Once on the top you have to follow the white footprints to the cairn that marks the summit. Before setting off a young English mother asked us if we would keep an eye on her son and daughter as she refused point-blank to climb the rock.

On the top we saw the most amazing thing, a puddle of water. As I have said, it doesn't rain very often in the heart of Australia, but it had the day before we arrived in Alice and here on the top of the Rock was a puddle. The girls soon had their shoes off to cool their feet.



'Shell Shrimp' puddle on the top of the Rock

I bent down to wet the handkerchief I was wearing as a sweatband and I saw in the puddle some movement. On a closer look I saw that the water was teeming with little creatures, which I later learnt were Shell Shrimp. They are a very primitive form of life and look like tiny Trilobites, about half an inch long. They were scurrying around and we soon realised, mating with frenzy. I could only suppose that the fertilised eggs would lie in the dust on top of the Rock for another decade or two before hatching when it rained again and then there would be another hurried hatching, mating and dying episode. It was one of the most bizarre evolutionary things that I have ever come across in all the years I have been staggered by Nature's miracles.

In those days the Rock was still only visited by very few people as could be seen from the visitors' book that was kept in an old biscuit tin in the cairn on the summit. We all signed our names and then looked around the horizon. What a view, nothing as far as you could see, except far on the skyline to the east The Olgas, our destination for the following day.

I was terrified that our two young friends would wander from the white footprints as if one lost one's balance near the edge it would mean a very fast trip down the face of the Rock! The four of us headed back to the chain and climbed down to find the bus had left. The driver had said that he would be back every hour so we would just have to wait. It was very hot by now so I suggested that we should go and sit in the shade of some trees that were growing a little way along the base of the rock. When we got there we found a beautiful sandy-bottomed swimming pool of crystal-clear water, so we all walked straight in and sat down. It was utter bliss and we were really very sorry when we heard the bus return and the driver blow his horn. I wonder what happened to those two children and if they will read this story.



'Ayers Rock' swimming pool!

It is virtually impossible to take a photograph of the Olgas except from the air so in the afternoon we hired a little aeroplane to do just that. We had a wonderful flight and I happened to see on the far side of the Olgas there was a tiny stream running out of one of the giant chasms that separate the domes. When we returned I asked the motel owner if he could arrange for someone to take us out to the Olgas and leave us there for the whole day. He said he thought that would be possible although why anyone should want to do it was quite beyond him. He even offered to rustle up some grub for us if there was some left over from the barbecue that evening!



The Olgas

There was no dining room in the motel so dinner was served straight from the fire as we sat on logs under the stars. It was wonderful and we had absolutely no complaints as it was far better than our dinners in Petra.

Margie was up earlier than I was and when she stepped outside she caught a fleeting glimpse of a dingo slinking away from the barbecue. We set off in a jeep towards The Olgas as soon as we had finished breakfast. It took well over an hour to reach the first chasm. We walked up the gully and I was astonished to find that mountains are actually a conglomerate rock laid down as small boulders in a riverbed. Ayers Rock is a giant block of sedimentary rock that had been tipped on its edge as can be seen from the vertical strata. I wondered at the amazing things that must have happened when Australia was being formed billions of years ago at the time of the Earth's birth. Thinking about this somehow made our being there even more exciting.

I asked our guide to drive on around the edge of the monster domes to where I had seen the stream. He didn't believe me but said that he was ours for the day, so it was all the same to him. We found the stream, collected our tucker and said goodbye, telling him that we would return at five in the evening to be collected.

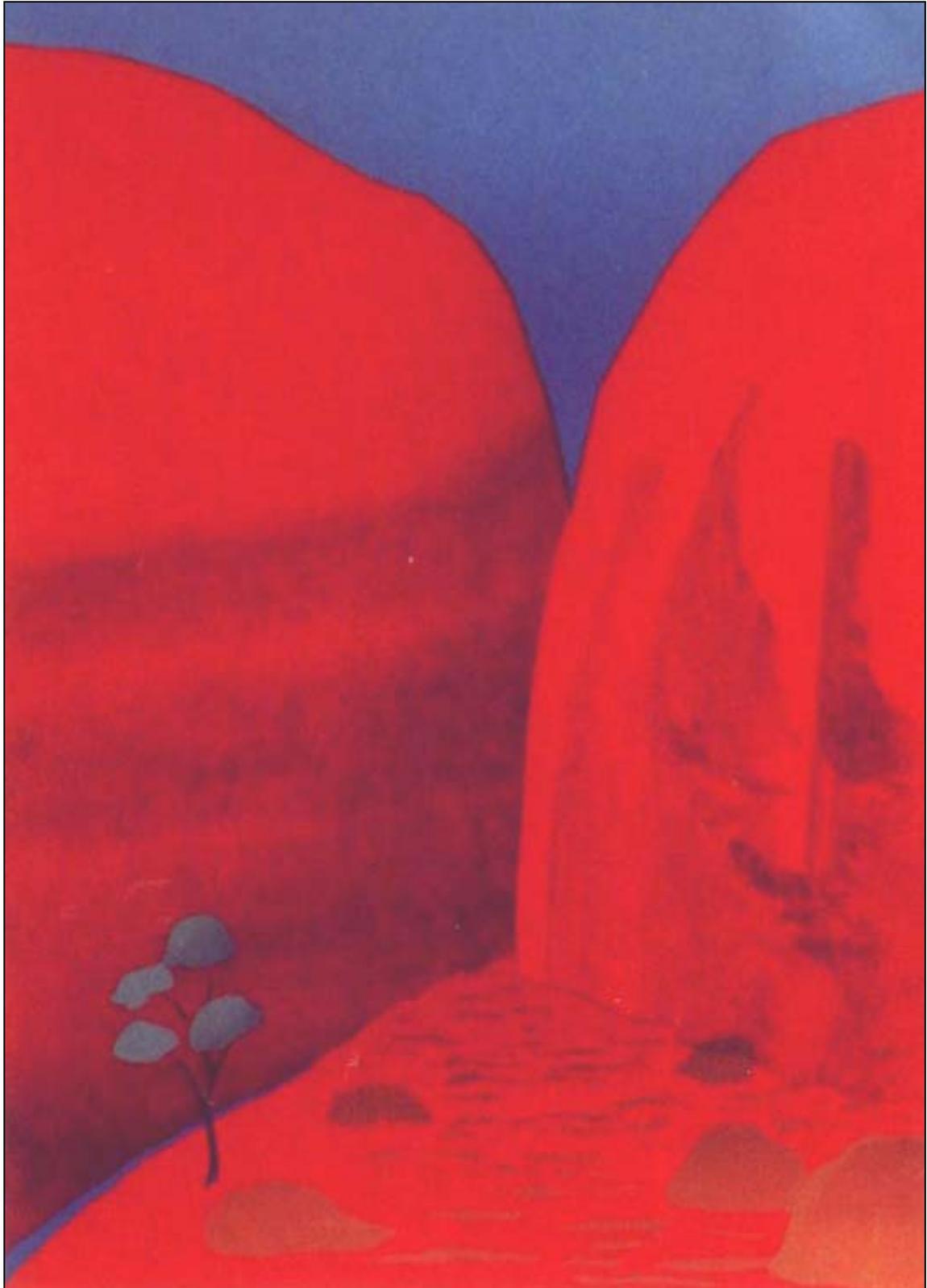
Our walk up the chasm alongside the stream was quite out of this world. The scrub was full of birds that took no notice of us. Suddenly we came to a ten-foot high barrier of rock down which cascaded a little waterfall. We clambered up the face of the barrier and found a shady grove of trees and a pool of crystal water. It was Paradise. By now the temperature had started to rise and we settled down in the shade of a cliff to enjoy the utter peace of the pristine Bush set against the most majestic scenery one could ever imagine.

Swallows darted back and forth across the valley and occasionally rested on the sheer walls of rock that soared above us although how they clung to the polished surface heaven knows. We ate our left-over meat from the night before and drank water from the pool. The temperature continued to rise and the radiated heat from the sunlit rocks around us quickly turned the valley into an oven. Off came our clothes and every ten minutes or so we would go and lie in the pool. The water level slowly started to drop, inch by inch, as we watched the shadows working their way around the cliffs until it was time to leave. When we reached the barrier the stream had ceased to flow and there was no sign of a waterfall. I couldn't believe that we had been so lucky to be here on the one day that we could witness such a sight.

Our guide was waiting for us when we walked out of the canyon. He asked how we had got on and then said that he was very pleased to see us because he hadn't fancied coming to look for us. I suppose it was a rather mad thing to do, but we had had a day that was beyond our wildest dreams in a place of unbelievable beauty.

Years later when I gave an exhibition of the Symbolic Sculptures at Wadham College in Oxford I met Mary Moser, the Warden's wife. She had taken up silk screen-printing and was holding an exhibition in her garage as part of the city's Art Week. One of the paintings immediately caught my eye as she also had been to The Olgas and her experience had inspired a print. I couldn't believe that she had included a little stream in the painting that reflected the blue of the sky. I look at the painting every evening when I take a bath. While relaxing in the hot water I think about the stream and our magical day in shade of the giant red domes with the swallows swooping around the canyons.

So ended one of the most incredible weeks of our lives and a Wedding Anniversary to remember. Petra and The Olgas, both places are quite unique and incredibly special. To spend a day in both places was as close to a miracle as is possible. Petra has seen centuries of history and is part of Modern Man's Civilisation, a hub of commercial trading, while the other was only known as a sacred site to a Stone Age people until 100 years ago. As Pop Begg would say, *How lucky can you be, butter side up.*



'The Olgas', Mary Moser



FREELAND GALLERY



Children bronzes mixed with Symbolic Sculptures

Piccadilly, London