K2

JAMES HART DYKE



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An exhibition of paintings of Pakistan's Karakoram mountains by James Hart Dyke.
Conceived and planned by William Mitchell.

Marquis House,
67-68 Jermyn St., St James's,
London SW1Y 6NY
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All paintings and drawings are for sale.

This exhibition will travel to the Forte di Bard (Museum of the Alps) in the Valle d'Aosta, Italy to be displayed alongside twenty of Sella's original photographs in:



12 December 2026 – 19 September 2027

All works with Forte di Bard | valle d'aosta have been promised to the Forte di Bard exhibition.

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John Mitchell Fine Paintings, London

The idea of a painting trip to the heart of the Baltoro Glacier began in earnest during James Hart Dyke's *Ascension Artistique* on Mont Blanc in 2022.

Whilst James was at his makeshift easel below the Grand Plateau, Armin Fisher was recounting his climb on Pakistan's Great Trango. We tried to imagine how James would react to those mountains and, like the crevasses looming ahead of us that day, it took a lot of 'route-finding' and perseverance to end up in the Karakoram a few years later.

From the outset, Armin's faith in the project was unwavering and soldiering on through a nasty skiing accident, he helped me assemble all the ingredients for a successful expedition. I am indebted to him for his introduction to his friends and guides Mirza and Gul of Karakorum Expeditions in Islamabad.

My sincere thanks go to my great friend and veteran of some great climbs together, Jeff Colegrave for his characteristic enthusiasm to join any project involving climbing and painting. The writer and mountaineer, Bruno Dupety, must be thanked for his willingness to embark on a month's trip to the middle of nowhere with a group of relative strangers and for his ongoing support with the exhibition.

Our lead guide in the Karakoram, Gul Muhammad, had the dual responsibility of getting us to the base of K2 and back as well as ensuring that all the porters and support team would wait for us whilst James was painting. His thoroughness and patience with the many tasks he had to oversee were exemplary and I cannot thank him enough as well as Mirza, and Samiya back in Islamabad. "*Gul, aap ek azeem aadami ho*".

Thank you to Ornella Badery, President of the Forte di Bard in the Valle d'Aosta, for her friendship and belief in this project and to her team at the museum. Pietro Crivellaro was kind enough to introduce me to the Director of the Fondazione Sella, Angelica Sella and the chief curator, Andrea Pivotto. I am grateful to Angelica Sella for so willingly lending the precious Vittorio
Sella photographs.

Nearer to home, Annabel Owen was our trusty base camp manager and did a wonderful job in collating passports, various permits and visas and, crucially, coordinating flight bookings. Thank you from all of us.

Steve Hayes has designed yet another beautiful publication for me and Felicity Stephenson has offered her valuable software skills at every turn. Meanwhile, my brother and business partner, James, has retained his enthusiasm for another painting expedition and the subsequent preparations for an exhibition.

To James Hart Dyke: none of this would have been possible without your trust in me. It wasn't always easy up there and your amazing resilience and determination paid off. I am indebted to you and to Sophie and your family for putting up with the absence and the 'unknowns.'

Lastly, I wish to thank my wife, Zanna, and my children for letting me disappear and go offline, literally! at the start of the summer holidays. I will always remember that one phone call from near Broad Peak when, inexplicably, a phone signal came to life in the middle of the night.

Foreword

"Wherever human beings are concerned, as they are in mountaineering, the writing, if it is to be true at all, must be human and personal or it will soon die of dry detail, and be forgotten."

Geoffrey Winthrop Young (1876-1958).

In July 2025, I went to the Karakoram mountains in Pakistan with a dedicated painter of wild terrain, James Hart Dyke. We journeyed in the footsteps of the pioneering Italian photographer and climber, Vittorio Sella who took a series of remarkable pictures of that region when on an expedition to attempt climbing K2 in 1909. In so doing, James Hart Dyke became the first landscape artist to paint the world's second highest mountain, K2.

For nearly two decades, I had always been fascinated by the idea of seeing the valleys, glaciers and mountains of the Karakoram. In the summer of 2008, I saw a poster on the London Underground for an exhibition at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art in North London. The title, *Frozen in Time: The Mountain Photography of Vittorio Sella* was beguiling, and I came away from the small but finely curated display of photographs, determined to revisit it before it closed that autumn.

I remembered one accompanying label above all others. It stated that apart from the enormous differences in altitude, the glaciers and valleys of the Karakoram are how the Alps would have looked during the Ice Age. Indeed, geologically, the gneiss and granite are not dissimilar to the Alps and I tried to imagine how the intrepid Italian who took these beautiful photographs would have felt as he explored the gigantic Baltoro glacier which lies in the heart of the western Karakoram range.

Although it took nearly two decades to get to the Karakoram since coming across Vittorio Sella in *Frozen in Time*, I had never quite put the idea of going there into deep freeze, unlike several other of my projects and dreams associated with mountains. The more I began to formulate a plan and think of how we could come away with a meaningful record of this remarkable area, in this instance through paintings, the more I admired the bravery and determination of those involved in the early explorations.

The 1909 Karakoram expedition was led by Luigi Amedeo di Savoia, Duke of Abruzzi and the cousin of Italy's king, Victor Emmanuel III. The duke wanted to make the first Italian assault on K2 which stands at 8,611 metres. No expense was spared and Vittorio Sella was brought along as the official photographer. Although the Italians didn't manage to scale K2, the extensive reconnaissance they made of the mountain's east, south and west flanks meant that Sella came away with a magnificent photographic record of not only the peak itself but the surrounding glaciers.

As beautiful and timeless as they now seem to us today, Sella's photographs played an important role in all the subsequent attempts on what was deemed as an unclimbable Peak. Indeed, it would take another 45 years before K2 was first conquered and this time by another team of Italians on 31st July 1954. In his well-known account of the endeavour, the expedition leader, Professor Ardito Desio wrote: "It is worthy of note that although there have been three expeditions since the one led by the Duke of Abruzzi, Sella's photographs have remained unsurpassed and have invariably been used as a guide in the planning of itineraries and the selection of campsites."

Although our 2025 expedition had no such lofty goals as the Abruzzi one from a mountaineering perspective, in paying homage to Vittorio Sella, James Hart Dyke broke new ground in terms of depicting the scenery and its setting. Sketching and painting nearly every day on the long route to K2, in all conditions and at altitude, his pictorial record of the scenery and its setting would be hard to surpass too.

Lured by adventure, a fascination with the unknown and, above all, a deep-seated love of the mountains, the time spent in the Karakoram brought our team and me an enormous sense of wonder and exaltation. In bridging the 116 years between the two adventures, the most appropriate title for this exhibition seems to be: K2: *Artistic Expeditions*.

The Karakoram mountains

K2 was first identified in 1856 by Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Montgomerie. He was working for the Trigonometrical Survey in India and notated it as ‘Karakoram 2’, albeit from 200 kilometres away and it is important to acknowledge that notwithstanding its great legacy both in terms of climbing and photography, the Abruzzi/ Sella expedition to K2 was by no means the first one. The first accepted attempt was in fact in 1902 and a summary below of the key journeys up to and including the successful ascent in 1954 will attempt to add some context to our own experience there. Even though there are records of explorers visiting the territory back in the nineteenth century, the most significant being Henry Godwin-Austen’s survey of the Baltoro Glacier in 1861, it remains a largely remote and inaccessible region.

Over 500 km in length, the Karakoram is the second-highest chain of mountains in the world, situated more or less on the same latitude as the coast of North Africa. The name translates as ‘land of black gravel’ from the old East Asian Turkic languages, *kara* meaning black and koram, earth with rubble. The northern Karakoram in particular is both dry and very barren and is situated nearly 1,500 km to the west of the Himalaya and K2 is the same distance from the Indian Ocean. The great Indus River flows to the south of the mountains and its largest glacier towards the east of the range, the Siachen, is ten times the size of Europe’s Aletsch Glacier. The third biggest after the Biafo is the 65-kilometre-long Baltoro which lies in the Baltistan-Gilgit region. It is part of the heavily disputed Kashmir territory which is now administered by Pakistan and home to four of the world’s mountains higher than 8,000 metres, namely, Gasherbrum I and II, Broad Peak and, of course, K2. K1, now known as Masherbrum, was also first documented by the Great Trigonometrical Survey under the leadership of Sir George Everest.

Without a significant monsoon season as such, the Karakoram is colder and receives far less rain than the Himalaya. Below the permanent snowline, many areas experience almost desert-like conditions and this explains why we were constantly battling dust during the approach to the Baltoro Glacier. Indeed, there are no lush Himalayan forests on the Karakoram’s southern flanks.

The Baltistan-Gilgit expanse contains more than fifty peaks over 7,000 metres in height and, yet, the single most striking feature of the Karakoram is no doubt its vast glaciers which are covered in masses of morainic rubble, stretching for dozens of kilometres and filling entire valleys. There is in fact more glacial ice in Pakistan than anywhere else on Earth outside the polar regions. What is more staggering is that they are in fact the remains of far larger rivers of ice which would have once flowed throughout this enormous wilderness during the last Ice Age, or Glacial Maximum, which ended about 10,000 years ago. In the case of our expedition, once there and looking up at the striations on the rocks far above the level of the ice and standing on smooth boulders, sometimes the size of an apartment block, it was only then that the proportions started to come together.

The two largest cities in Gilgit-Baltistan and those nearest to the Karakoram mountains are Gilgit and 200km to its southeast, Skardu. Being in Kashmir, Gilgit and Skardu are now controlled by Pakistan and although Gilgit has double its population with a quarter of a million people, Skardu, the capital of Baltistan, is the closest access point to the Karakoram’s high peaks and the Baltoro Glacier. Today, Gilgit-Baltistan has a burgeoning tourism industry and throughout the summer months the numbers of trekkers and mountaineers has begun to increase year on year. Indeed, since 2020 the air force base at Skardu has been designated as a commercial airport and, weather permitting, can be accessed from all the major airports within Pakistan.

Located at the confluence of the Indus and the Shigar rivers, Skardu’s altitude is 2,228 metres. It is in a particularly beautiful location and expands across a wide valley with lakes surrounded by woods. The two main destinations for any expedition to the Karakorams are Hushe in its eponymous valley, running due south from K2, and Askole which lies at over 3,000 metres in the relatively lush Braldu Valley. These are the last and only two settlements before venturing into the mountains via their valleys and glaciers. Although the remote villages remain cut off from the rest of the world during the winter, their roles as gateways for teams of walkers and climbers have helped lift them somewhat out of subsistence living. The large campsite at Askole, with



The ‘Bone Breaker’ Glacier

its year-round population of under one thousand souls, for example, is the rendez-vous point for the majority of high-altitude porters, cooks and mule handlers. Nevertheless, the latter half of the five-to-eight-hour journey to Askole by jeep from Skardu is often thwarted by landslides and flooding.

Leaving the outskirts of Skardu the road meanders for many kilometres alongside the wide Shigar River before heading north over a bridge spanning the confluence of the Shigar and the Braldu rivers. Thereafter, the journey on to Askole goes through the Sarfaranga cold desert and over a pass down into the Shigar Valley where there are many small villages surrounded by fields of maize, potato, groves of apricot and almond trees and settlement after settlement. These begin to become increasingly distant from one another before turning into sparse hamlets and then the road becomes less defined. With the climb into the foothills of the Karakoram via the Braldu Gorge, the trail becomes increasingly broken and unreliable. In certain areas, the heavily packed jeeps must negotiate precariously narrow passages, often perched over a ravine and on a few occasions, passengers have to get out of the vehicles as we would found out for ourselves. Often, a rock avalanche or a flash flood has covered the road with debris or simply obliterated it, and the drivers and their fellow porters construct makeshift ramps and bridges from planks and logs. Delays and detours are to be expected and frequently the teams find themselves stuck many hours from both Skardu and Askole. In many ways, this section of the voyage to Askole is still considered quite new territory as until the 1990s, the trail ended at a village called Dassu well before the Gorge, and from then onwards it was several days of walking and crossing rope bridges before getting close to the destination. Nowadays, Dassu is used as a convenient stop for the drivers and foreigners to have lunch.



Towards the Sarfaranga Desert

Above Askole



All in all, even in good weather and optimal road conditions, accessing the Karakoram mountains can be a challenge in itself and not always guaranteed. In 2022, for example, the road was blocked by landslides for several months.

Aside from the much harder terrain and a more gruelling approach trek to the base of K2 and Broad Peak along the Baltoro Glacier (‘bone breaker’ in Urdu), there seems little doubt that this logistical difficulty involved in moving people and plenty of baggage between Skardu and an outpost such as Askole contributes to the regions significantly lighter footfall than in the Himalaya to the east. As an example, on a good year for mountain conditions, no more than 900 to 1,400 people make it as far as Concordia in front of K2 at 4,940 metres whereas in the more well-known areas to the east such as Annapurna and Everest, their attendant base camps can see as many as 45,000 trekkers annually.

Leaving Skardu bound for Askole with a fleet of hardy jeeps laden with clothing, tents, mountaineering equipment and a month’s supply of food one’s mind inevitably turns to the earliest explorers determined to conquer K2 and thereby reconnoitre the highest concentration of soaring peaks anywhere in the world.

‘impossible mountain’

“The simple fact is that these are not mountains like other mountains, and one cannot look at them without disquiet and foreboding.”

Filippo de Filippi, Expedition doctor and chronicler to the Duke of Abruzzi, 1909.

In the wake of their 1909 expedition, the Duke of Abruzzi had declared -or so it was widely reported- K2 to be unclimbable and the mountain’s fearsome reputation proliferated. Given the enormous hazards faced and the months of effort put into their expedition, Abruzzi could be forgiven for thinking so, nevertheless, he wasn’t the first mountaineer or explorer to react that way when coming face to face with a wall of rock and ice rising nearly four kilometres up into the sky.

In this chapter, a brief overview of some of the best-known Karakoram expeditions will attempt to prove how difficult it was to conquer such a remote and fiendish mountain and why it took so many decades to do so.

In September 1887, the British Army officer, Sir Francis Younghusband had seen K2 from its north side, the Chinese face, and his reaction was as follows:

“I chanced to look up rather suddenly, and a sight met my eyes which fairly staggered me. We had just turned a corner which brought into view, on the left hand, a peak of appalling height, which could be none other than K2, at 28,278 feet in height second only to Mount Everest. Viewed from this direction, it appeared to rise in an almost perfect cone, but to an inconceivable height. We were quite close under it -perhaps not a dozen miles from its summit -and here on the northern side, where it is literally clothed in glacier, there must have been from fourteen to sixteen thousand feet of solid ice. It was one of those sights which impress a man forever and produce a permanent effect upon the mind- a lasting sense of the greatness and grandeur of Nature’s works- which he can never lose or forget.”

Nearly 140 years on, it would be hard to outdo such a passage of writing. One can only imagine a photographer such as Vittorio Sella preparing himself for an encounter with K2, and yet, Younghusband was not the first European to have seen it. In fact, it was Henry Haversham Godwin-Austen, another British soldier, who claimed to have got the nearest to it in 1861. His subsequent exploration and reconnaissance of the surrounding glaciers provided valuable information with regards to the territory and borders as much as anything else. Godwin-Austen was indeed the first person to survey the Baltoro Glacier and the long glacier running from Concordia past Broad Peak now bears his name.

In 1892, a British mountaineer and art historian -among his many other pursuits- Sir Martin Conway, became an early pioneer in the long story of K2’s ultimate conquest. Conway’s expedition received support from the Royal Society and the Royal Geographical Society and was notable in its mission to not only map and document the glaciers but also to climb a mountain in the Karakoram Range. They subsequently made the first two ascents in the Baltoro region: Crystal Peak, 5,913m, on the right flank of the glacier followed by Pioneer Peak, 6,970 metres, a subsidiary peak on Baltoro Kangri (then named the Golden Throne). Conway also became the first person to reach Concordia and named it after the same place on Switzerland’s Aletsch Glacier. From his camp there, Conway first caught sight of K2’s south face which, arguably, remains the peak’s best-known viewpoint.

As well as the successful ascents, Conway’s expedition was important because he and his team managed to produce more maps and itineraries with details of camp locations than any of their predecessors. The next expedition to the Karakoram was bound to focus on a formal attempt at scaling K2.

This took place a decade later under the leadership of a British mountaineer, Oscar Eckenstein who had been a member of Conway’s Baltoro Expedition in 1892. The other prominent leaders were the Scottish climber and the infamous occultist, Aleister Crowley and a Swiss doctor, Jules Jacot Guillarmod. Starting in early June in 1902 the team of six mountaineers and their porters followed one



Godwin-Austen Glacier

another setting up a series of camps along the Baltoro Glacier and by the middle of the month, they attempted to climb K2 via the northeast Ridge. Given the equipment, the conditions and the unknown entity they faced, it is remarkable to learn that they reached a height of 6,525 metres. Even more striking is that most of the climbing party spent nearly seventy days up at K2 which was a record at the time. They returned to Askole towards the end of August nursing sickness, fractured relationships and dreams. K2 remained very far from conquered but out of the beleaguered adventure came an important legacy in artistic and documentary terms. On 19th June, Dr. Guillarmod took the first ever photograph of K2. Guillarmod, the expedition's official doctor, had first glimpsed the peak the previous day from Concordia as the clouds receded. Kept awake during the night by the cold, he attempted in vain to capture an image using the moonlight. Early the next morning, at 06h15, he was able to make two photographs, and these became the pinnacle of a remarkable collection of stereoscopic pictures he took during the trip. Together with a thorough report of what they had achieved these photographs doubtless played a hand in motivating the next protagonists set on conquering K2. In this instance, it was the Duke of Abruzzi.

This Italian expedition of 1909, the inspiration for our own trip with James Hart Dyke will be examined in the next chapter, but the following journey to K2 two decades later was also led by the Italians and this time by another Prince of the Savoy family, Aimone Aosta, Duke of Spoleto and, crucially, the nephew of the Duke of Abruzzi. In reality, a preliminary reconnaissance the year before in 1928 had ruled out any credible summit attempt and the expedition's emphasis became a scientific one for which the duke received plenty of recognition a few years later by the Royal Geographical Society. Known as the Italian Geographical Expedition of 1929, one of its youngest participants was a geologist and mountaineer, Ardito Desio. He would eventually become the leader of the Italian team destined to conquer K2 in 1954.

Nine years after the second Italian expedition, and nearly half a century after Conway first stood looking at K2 from Concordia, it was the American Alpine Club's turn. In 1938, two Harvard educated climbers, Dr. Charles Houston and Robert Bates set off for the Karakoram. Having done the bulk of their expedition preparations themselves – a far cry from all the managers and workers involved in the Duke of Abruzzi's one- they were accompanied by three other climbers. The expedition would rely on six sherpas as well as a transport manager and having set up a camp at the junction of the Godwin-Austen and Savoia glaciers the climb began in earnest on July 1st. Using K2's south-east ridge, the same one used by the Abruzzi team and named after him, the climbers managed to get as far as two-thirds of the way up the peak to what is known as the Shoulder. From a camp established at over 7,500 metres, camp VII, the Americans made an exploratory climb along the Shoulder determining that it would be only another day of mountaineering to reach the summit. Given the difficulty of provisioning camps so high up and the precarious weather the expedition team retreated. Tantalizingly, they had made it to within several hundred metres of the summit and writing in the *American Alpine Journal*, Houston noted: "a way was found by which, with the smile of fortune, a second party may reach the summit."

Inevitably, more Americans would return the following year with finance from the American Alpine Club and this time the expedition leader was a German émigré, Fritz Wiessner who was an outstanding mountaineer. Using Vittorio Sella's annotated photographs of the Abruzzi Ridge, they started their attack on the mountain in early June. Reaching a record altitude, an astounding 8,382 metres, Wiessner's efforts were thwarted by a huge wall of ice below the summit. All in all, the adventure was fraught with disaster resulting in the death of one of the Americans and three of his sherpas. A combination of miscommunications, horrendous weather and delirium brought on by the high altitude left the reputation of the 1939 expedition in tatters but it had come closer to fulfilling Houston's prediction than anybody could have imagined.

Back in Italy, preparations for a further Italian campaign on K2 were underway but just as the *montagna impossibile* would retreat behind its clouds all over again, a new storm



James Hart Dyke and K2

was brewing in Europe: The Second World War brought an abrupt end to any more forays into the Karakoram.

In laying the groundwork for subsequent attempts on K2, it is undeniable that each expedition learnt from the previous one however splintered with internal conflict and incidents they may have been. The mountaineers and their operations managers relied a good deal on the various accounts and itineraries and, as much as ever, on Vittorio Sella's remarkable photographs.

After the war, logistical challenges and the sheer expense of mountaineering expeditions meant there was a gap of fourteen years before anybody attempted the second highest mountain in the world again and one that was no longer part of India. Fronted by Dr. Charles Houston and Robert Bates, with the backing of the American Alpine Club, a group of eight American mountaineers had managed to the secure a permit for K2 from Karachi in the newly created Pakistan. On their way to Skardu the team members found out that Edmund Hilary and Tenzing Norgay had reached the summit of Mount Everest and the news may have been either an inspiration or a deterrent to the Americans. Initially they made rapid progress in fine weather but *la montagna impossibile* wasn't ready to surrender. As one of the climbers would later write, "The mountain showed no mercy". It unleashed a series of storms of such ferocity that the climbers were forced to retreat from 7,700 metres. They descended the way they came up and this time they were lowering a rapidly deteriorating team member, Arthur Gilkey, who was ultimately swept away for good by an avalanche.

Back at base camp and once recovered from near death by exhaustion and exposure the seven survivors and their porters built a pyramid of rocks in memory of their lost colleague. Of all the ordeals K2 had put its suitors through, the 1953 expedition was one of the most gruelling and today the Gilkey Memorial stands as a makeshift and far-flung cenotaph for the nearly one hundred souls who have perished to date on K2. Visiting that large cairn near the end of the Godwin-Austen Glacier with its many flags, tin plates and ice axes that have been bolted to the rocks in their memory is a gloomy undertaking.

Back home in America and incapacitated by frostbite, the expedition physician, George Bell, told a reporter: "It's a savage mountain that tries to kill you"

'savage mountain' surrenders: The Italian First Ascent, 1954.

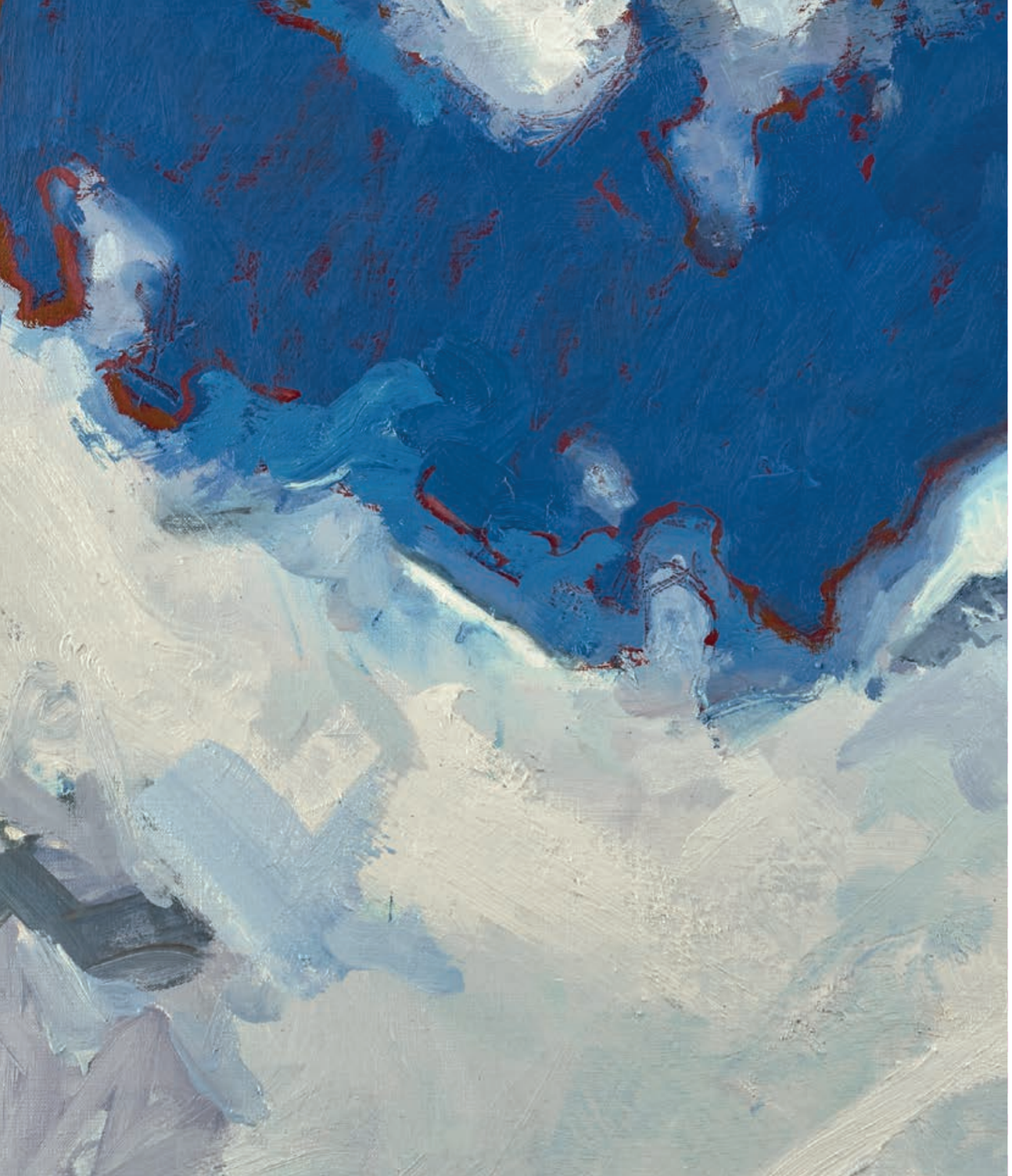
Whilst the American climbers were fighting for their lives on K2, at the end of July 1953 the prime minister of Italy received a letter from Mohammad Ali Bogra, Pakistan's own premier. Professor Ardito Desio, who had first been to the base of K2 in 1929, had been granted permission to lead another trip to the Karakoram and now on behalf of the Italian Alpine Club.

At 6 p.m on July 31st, 1954, almost a year later to the day, two Italian climbers, Achille Compagnoni and Lino Lacedelli, reached the end of a slope and took their final steps on to a wide expanse of snow. Above them was nothing but deep blue sky. The Duke of Abruzzi's 'impossible' mountain had been conquered by an all-Italian expedition.

The mountaineers spent less than half an hour on the top and as they began to climb down into the abyss below, heading for Camp VIII, the long and twisted saga of conquering K2 came to an end. For nearly half a century, K2 had resisted so many attempts to scale it. This was a truly remarkable and historic achievement in mountaineering terms, but, yet again, this came at a cost. The extreme cold and exposure had given Lacedelli and Compagnoni, as well as the other climbers below the summit, severe frostbite in their hands and feet and they still had the treacherous descent ahead of them. Their throats were so ulcerated they could only communicate with their companions via hand signals. Indeed, one of the youngest companions on the mountain, and crucial to the successful ascent was, Walter Bonatti, destined to become one of the world's greatest mountaineers. Working as a team it was a miraculous safe return to base camp where it fell to the fifty-seven-year-old Ardito Desio to break the news to the world.

From the outset, Desio's mission statement had been to 'conquer' K2 rather than make an 'attempt' on it and despite the hiatus brought on by war, politics and the lack of funding, Desio had never let go of his dream. With over five hundred porters, fifteen tonnes of equipment and, crucially, copious supplies of oxygen, this had been by far the biggest campaign to date. It is telling that before they left the Upper Godwin-Austen Glacier to return to Askole, the Italians left two commemorative plaques there. One was dedicated to one of their climbers who had died at base camp from pneumonia and the other to the dukes of Abruzzi and Spoleto acknowledging their respective expeditions. It read as follows:

In memory of Luigi Amedeo of Savoy
Duke of the Abruzzi and of Aimone
Roberto of Savoy Duke of Spoleto
Leaders of Two Italian Expeditions to these mountains.
This plaque was erected by the members of the
Italian Expedition 1954 to the Karkaoram -K2
after they had scaled the peak following the route
traced out half a century before up the Abruzzi Ridge.



Vittorio Sella and the Karakoram

By the time Sella went to the Karakoram as the official photographer for the Duke of Abruzzi, he was already fifty years old. In fact, he very nearly didn't go on the expedition. Back in January 1897, Sella had written to a friend, Samuel Aitken: "I accepted some days ago an invitation to accompany an expedition to the Himalaya next summer organised by S.A.R. the Duke of Abruzzi. I must prepare myself again for a long travel. The last I hope. Thinking of my feeble enthusiasm and to the deep displeasure of leaving home and family for six months."

Sella was certainly referring to the three expeditions that he had been on to the Caucasus Mountains between 1889 and 1896. The 1,000km long system of peaks and regions that lie between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, effectively bridging Europe with Asia, was largely unexplored territory. The chance to climb and document unknown mountains and regions was at the heart of what motivated Sella more than anything else. Returning from his first expedition to the Caucasus, Sella wrote to his friend Carlo Ramella: "That first Caucasian campaign had revealed new worlds and given glimpses of still others."

For an artist, craftsman, topographer and deep down an indisputable explorer, the call of the unknown was too difficult to resist and eleven years later, in 1909, the Karakoram assignment was no exception. This would in fact be Sella's third collaboration with Abruzzi but it would be his last expedition and the culmination of his career. Fundamentally, the duke was only interested in climbing K2 whereas Sella, an outstanding mountain climber himself, wanted to cover as much ground as possible with his camera. An agreement was reached allowing Sella to have his own porters and work independently from the duke where necessary.

Looking at his photographic legacy from this final journey, it could be argued that Sella had saved his best work for the end. Just as Abruzzi's name was linked forever after to K2's eponymous Southeast Spur, Sella's images of the mountain itself and its neighbouring peaks and glaciers consolidated Sella's reputation as the greatest mountain photographer of his time.

Through his family and growing up in the foothills of the Biellese Alps, not far from Monte Rosa, Sella had an impeccable provenance as a mountain man. He claimed: "I have loved mountains since I climbed them as a boy with my uncle." That uncle was Quintino Sella, a minister in the reign of Emmanuel Victor II, a textile manufacturer and a dedicated alpinist who had founded the CAI (Italian Alpine Club) in Turin in 1863.

As a child, Sella was interested in pyrotechnics and machines and after a stint in a cavalry regiment in Turin in 1877, he returned to his hometown of Biella, 70 km northeast of the city, to work in the family's textile factory. His hands on apprenticeship with the chemical processes influenced his understanding and keen interest in photography, a hobby encouraged by his father, Giuseppe, who was a dedicated photographer himself. When Vittorio was seventeen his father died prematurely. Although the loss brought his childhood, his years of dabbling in boyish pursuits to a blunt end, it spurred on his interest in photography and a desire to discover and embrace all things new and often scientific. The love of mountaineering and exploring came as the next logical step and when he turned twenty years old, Vittorio was an accomplished climber.

By the time Vittorio's grandfather established his own factory in Biella in 1835, the Sella family had been working as merchants and entrepreneurs in the wool industry for several generations. From spinning to dyeing cloth, the rapid factory expansion in the industry brought family prosperity and wealth and above all a great belief in progress. The Sella family embraced *modernité* and nurtured a strong sense of enquiry and intellectual independence.

Growing up in this small but dynamic town and milieu, it seems wholly fitting that when Vittorio made his first circular panorama from a set of glass plates, he did it from the bell tower of San Gerolamo, a former monastery in Biella. Incorporating the mountains, the town and the plains to the south, it encapsulated what mattered to him most: mountains, home and, at the same time, wide horizons. Perched on a hill next to the family's wool mill, he had lived there since he was ten years old. Throughout his entire



Homage to Vittorio Sella

life, San Gerolamo would remain Sella's home and as his remarkable panoramic photographs began to earn him fame, his whole career and life, even, could be compared to one long 360-degree panorama: starting at the foot of the Alps, taking in some of the most far-flung corners of the globe and returning to his hometown. Indeed, after the expedition to the Karakoram, Sella spent the next three decades of his life at San Gerolamo until he died in 1943.

Writing a tribute in 1943 in the *Sierra Club Bulletin*, the now famous photographer of the American West, Ansel Adams wrote: "Sella has brought to us not only the facts and forms of the far-off splendours of the world but the essence of experience which finds a spiritual response in the recesses of our mind and heart."

Looking back on his life, it was undeniable that those early climbs in the Alps with his uncle lay deep inside Sella's heart and mind and allowed him to take the decision relatively early on to become a dedicated *fotografo-alpinista*.

Sella had been a pioneer in so many aspects of mountaineering and, above all, his own craft with a camera. His combination of technical skill and expertise went hand in hand with an innate artistic vision. From his earlier voyages to such places as the Caucasus, Kangchenjunga, Alaska and the Ruwenzori in equatorial Africa, perhaps the most remarkable expedition he went on alongside the one to the Karakoram, Sella also knew what an important role photography could play in the survey of mountain areas and so did the Duke of Abruzzi. By the time he arrived in Rawalpindi on Easter Sunday, 1909, with his fellow expedition members chosen by the duke himself, Sella's credentials as a mountaineer and a photographer of the high mountain world could hardly be improved upon.

In 1882, the year Sella married, he made the first winter traverse of the Matterhorn going from the Italian side into Switzerland and later that year, he climbed it again armed with eleven glass plates to make a panorama from the summit. Physically and technically, this was an unprecedented achievement and in 1889, together with other members of his family, he made the first winter traverse of the Monte Rosa massif. The appeal of winter climbing was also linked to what he judged as superior light conditions for camera work. Sella maintained that "the great cold cleanses the air."

The Victorian climber and conqueror of the Matterhorn, Edward Whymper (1840-1911), admired the Duke of Abruzzi a good deal and respected him as a serious advocate of the discipline. Whymper referred to him as the 'royal mountaineer', who in turn had always looked up to another great British climber, Albert Mummery. Mummery's disappearance in 1895 on Nanga Parbat, also in Kashmir, certainly influenced Abruzzi's desire to climb K2 just as studying Conway's account of his 1892 reconnaissance did. An even bigger motivation was the Eckenstein expedition report from 1902 accompanied by the profuse stereoscopic photographs taken by Jacot-Guillarmod.

The team picked by the Duke of Abruzzi to go to K2 consisted of a physician and a veteran of many of the duke's former adventures, Filippo De Filippi, a trusted guide from Courmayeur, and no stranger to the Karakoram, Joseph Petigax and his son, Laurent plus the brothers, Alexis and Henry Brocherel. Joining them as helpers were Emile Brocherel, Albert Savoye and Ernest Bareux. Whilst De Fillippi would, as before with Abruzzi, serve as the exhibition chronicler, Vittorio Sella and his assistant, Erminio Botta were joined by a naval lieutenant, Federico Negrotto, in his capacity as the topographer or mapmaker.

As a party of thirteen Europeans, they left Askole bound for K2 on May 16th, 1909. They had over two hundred porters with them and having arrived at the Urdukas campsite a few days later, they resolved to retain one hundred of the porters to go with them all the way to K2. Once at the base of K2, they set up camp with provisions to last them a month. Next, they began a reconnaissance of the mountain's lower slopes before finally settling on the plan to attempt it via its southeast flank, a ridge identified as a possible way up by Aleister Crowley in 1902 after they had aborted their climb via the northeast ridge and at an astonishing height for that epoch of over 6,500 metres.



Evening: K2 looking from Camp III, 1909.

Silver gelatin print in duotone toning
280 x 378mm

On 30th May, Abruzzi and a chosen few guides left to start the climb in earnest. Four days later, the team returned having gone as far up the ridge as possible towards the Shoulder with a view to establishing a high camp. They had to turn back at around 6,000 metres and as a result fell way short of reaching the highest point achieved by the Eckenstein attempt.

Uninjured and back at base camp, Abruzzi and his colleagues resolved to try the northwest ridge. Ascending a steep snow slope, they had to abandon any further attempts at scaling K2. In the official account, De Filippi recorded the view they encountered as sufficient to "utterly annihilate the hopes with which we had begun the ascent."

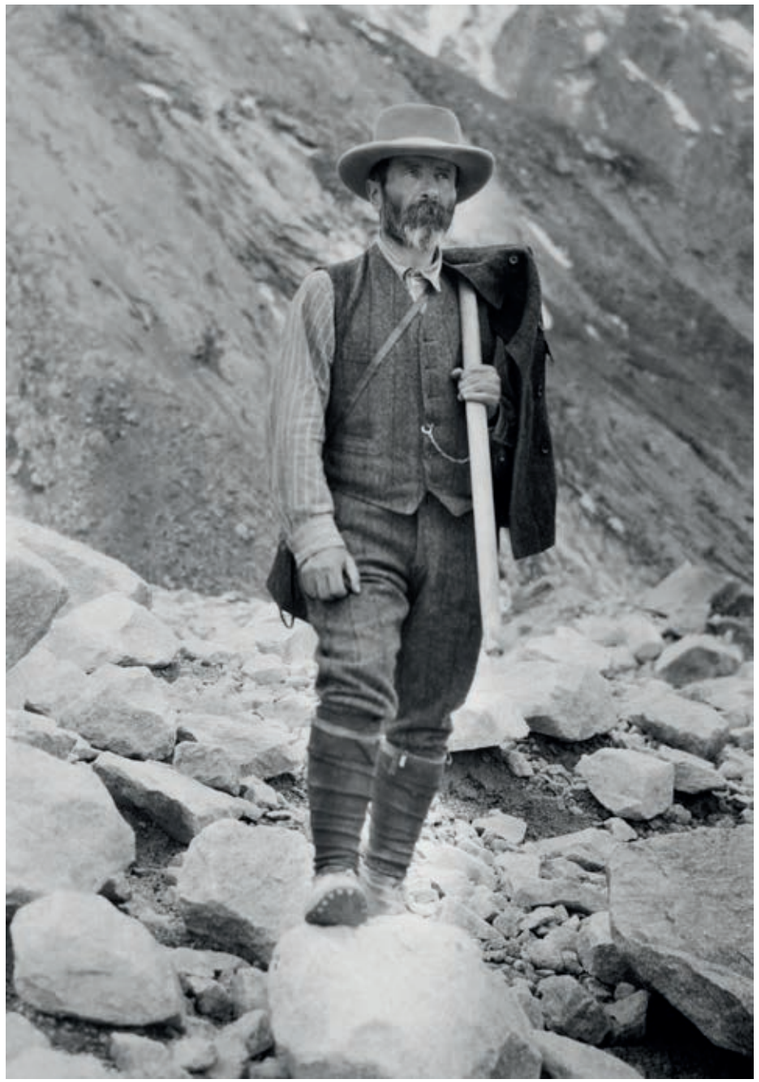
The outright failure in summiting K2 worked in Sella's favour. Rather than retreating down the Baltoro Glacier, the whole expedition party spent the next ten days exploring the glaciers and lower slopes of K2. The duke continued to look for possible routes for future forays and Negrotto got to work on mapping the surroundings in as much detail as possible. Whilst Abruzzi had been busying himself with scaling K2, in the meantime, Vittorio Sella had independently manned his own expedition, but his was an artistic one. Using an experimental double anastigmat Ross-Goertz lens, he managed to take many photographs, around three hundred plates in fact with telephoto views included. In powerful monochrome, these images would define high mountain photography for generations to come. The panoramas made with long exposures were a first of their kind and revealed just how sublime this remote landscape was. Back in Europe, when the Duke of Abruzzi addressed King Edward VII and a wider audience at the Royal Geographical Society in London, Sella's photographs from the Karakoram dumbfounded the room.

Before returning to Askole at the end of July, Abruzzi did fulfil one of his stated aims in his Karakoram mission. He succeeded in setting a world record in altitude terms by climbing to 7,498 metres on Bride Peak (Chogolisa) which rises to 7,665 metres to the south of Concordia. De Filippi's lengthy, 470-page account of the whole expedition entitled *La Spedizione al Karakoram e nell'Himalaya occidentale 1909*, became an important milestone in mountaineering literature. One of its outstanding features was the selection of almost two hundred photographs by Sella.

Back in Biella, when he wasn't climbing mountains, Sella spent the rest of his life looking after the enormous pictorial legacy he had amassed over sixty years. It was more than a full-time business as it amounted to an unrivalled archive running into thousands of photographs. Prints of his work were in demand from all over the world from publishers, Alpine Clubs, dealerships, private collectors and geographical societies. For example, by the early 1920s, Sella had sold nearly a thousand prints to the National Geographic Society in the United States. He was awarded honorary memberships of the Alpine Club in London and the American Alpine Club as well as receiving many other prestigious awards.

The Duke of Abruzzi died in 1933 but two years later, Sella tried to climb the Matterhorn for the last time. He had to turn back before the summit as one of his guides was injured. In 1939, an 80-year-old Vittorio Sella received a letter, thirty years after going to K2. It came from Charles Houston who wrote: "Our debt to you and to the Duke of Abruzzi's expedition is greater than we can ever repay."

Looking at the sheer volume of work Sella produced during those several weeks in the Karakoram, much of the time up higher than the top of Mont Blanc, to all intents and purposes, Sella had led his own quest to K2 and with great success. Another important legacy from this journey, and one so ahead of its time, was the film that he made whilst up there. Following his cousin Guido Rey's advice, Sella had taken 20,000 metres of film alongside all his photographic materials and the resultant half-hour film was screened in Turin in February 1910. Its title was apt: *On the Roof of the World (Sul tetto del mondo. Viaggio di S.A.R. il duca degli Abruzzi al Karakoram (Record del mondo in Altezza.)* During what can now be classified as the first truly artistic expedition to the Karakoram, what Sella found there was a wild beauty and, in many instances, a terrain as remote as the surface of the moon. The next such expedition wouldn't take place until James Hart Dyke and I returned in July 2025.



Vittorio Sella on the Baltoro Glacier

Silver gelatin print, from film
224 x 165mm



Broad Peak looking up the Savoia Glacier, 1909.

Silver gelatin print
377 x 279mm

Early morning, Broad Peak Base Camp

James Hart Dyke: in the footsteps of Vittorio Sella

On Friday 11th July, 2025, I woke up and pushed a mantle of snow off the outside flap of our tent. Our small two-man tents were set out in a semi-circle amongst the rocks at an altitude of 4,900 metres. We were at Broad Peak Base Camp, and this was the coldest temperature we had yet experienced since leaving Askole. It had gusted and snowed throughout the night but now the air was completely still and off to my right I could see the top of K2 soaring out of a mass of clouds extending all the way down to the valley floor. My tent companion was already up, pulling on layers of fleece and down clothing and his all-important gloves. James Hart Dyke was determined to catch this vision whilst the skies permitted.

A decade earlier, in 2015, James had spent two weeks painting in the Alps following in the footsteps of Edward Whymper, the artist turned mountaineer, and a great admirer of the Duke of Abruzzi. That exhibition, *Whymper's Mountains 150 years on*, was timed to commemorate the one hundred and fifty years since Whymper and his hardy companions managed to climb five Alpine mountains and cross eleven passes over a period of thirty-one days. Four of those summits were first ascents. All in all, they ascended over 100,000 feet in the process. James was accompanied for much of the trip by a friend and patron, Jeff Colegrave, who was in fact still asleep in his tent that morning at Broad Peak. Reviewing his Whymper project, James wrote at the time: "The early mornings and late afternoons, particularly during the more settled weather of the second week, offered the best opportunities for sketching and painting. The rest of the day was taken up by negotiating glaciers and climbing ridges to find the best vantage points from which to record the various mountains and passes of interest to this project.''

This succinctly encapsulates the duality of painting and climbing, the unique craft of being a *peintre-alpiniste*. It was something Vittorio Sella would have wholeheartedly agreed with too. However, on this bitterly cold morning yet again, I couldn't help respecting James's devotion to the task. It was at least a dozen degrees centigrade below freezing but this wasn't the first time I had seen him working in such low temperatures.

Back in July 2022, James Hart Dyke and I had climbed Mont Blanc via its rarely attempted north face in order to paint from the summit at sunset. James was accompanied by a retinue of guides and climbers and a photographer as he ascended the Grands Mulets Route. This is a variation of the original one, *l'ancien passage*, taken by Jacques Balmat and Dr. Michel Paccard in 1786 on the historic first ascent of Mont Blanc.

Our objective was to re-enact and emulate as closely as possible the conditions under which the legendary French painter of the Alps, Gabriel Loppé (1825-1913) made his pair of summit paintings at sunset in August 1873.

Thanks to a weather window and judicious planning, James was able to spend nearly two hours on the summit from 8.15pm to past 10pm and paint two pictures in situ. Although there was only a slight breeze, the temperature was between -15 and -20 Celsius.

It was after ten o'clock at night when we started down with our headlamps on, retracing our steps to regain the Bosses ridge lower down. In the falling light and after a physically and emotionally draining time on the summit, I was aware that, as ever, each step still had to be carefully placed. James was extremely tired having pulled off such an endurance feat and, in this specific case, genuinely suffered for his art. It was still sinking in that he had not only climbed Mont Blanc via the Grands Mulets side but that he had managed to paint the sunset in situ from the summit. We made our way to the Grands Mulets hut under starlight, getting there at half past two in the morning.

Before the subsequent exhibition devoted to the *ascension artistique* in the manner of Gabriel Loppé, James summed up his experience to a journalist as follows: "Standing on the summit of Mont Blanc at sunset was not only the culmination of years of work as a landscape artist but also the most emotionally charged and intensely concentrated period of time I have ever experienced while making a painting."

Back at Broad Peak Base Camp that morning, watching him set to work straight out of the tent, I thought back to our climb up Mont Blanc. I remembered how hard James had to concentrate in the extreme cold and at that altitude and how he proved definitively that he could combine painting *en plein air* with mountain climbing. To pull it off, his planning and preparation had to be meticulous, and it took him many months to prepare his painting materials and his fitness. He built a folding easel with a painting box capable of withstanding the wind and holding the prepared canvases and panels he would work on.

For the trip to the Karakoram and K2 and with the knowledge that James would potentially be drawing and painting daily for over three weeks, getting the right working materials and the clothing required was essential. As ever in the mountains, the other vital ingredient for success was the weather.

According to our friend and mountain guide Armin Fisher, a veteran of several painting trips with James, going to Pakistan in late June and early July would give us the best weather for getting up to Concordia and back along the Hushe Valley via the Gondogoro La Pass. Having been to the Karakoram before to climb the daunting 6,286 metre Great Trango Tower, we relied on Armin's experience and expertise to find us the right guides and itineraries.

The preliminary research into a painting expedition suggested that even getting as far as Concordia isn't always a foregone conclusion let alone reaching the base of K2. Snowfall on the upper reaches of the Baltoro Glacier can make the passes unnavigable and, perhaps worse, the precipitation along the long approach to the glacier can trigger rockfalls. The next challenge was finding one or two guides and porters willing and understanding enough to let our team stop when the conditions were favourable enough for James to paint as we went. Given how most guides for trekkers and mountaineers in the Karakoram want to get the approach walks out of the way as fast as feasible, we were incredibly lucky that Armin's friends and contacts, the two brothers, Gul and Mirza, agreed to lead the artistic expedition.

The next hurdle was a political one and one which very nearly caused us to abort the trip. A few months before we were due to leave for Islamabad and just as we had started the applications for visas and trekking permits, a bout of fighting in Kashmir swiftly spiralled out of control. India and Pakistan were on the verge of a full-scale war, meanwhile the perennial conflicts in the Middle East surged ahead. Ten days later, an unexpected peace was negotiated and the news from our guides was favourable.

A month after, it seemed unusually fortunate that our small expedition crew were walking along the main street in Skardu having had no delays in flying from Islamabad. The road was jammed with people: mainly men and motorbikes. Nearly everybody was making their way to the mosques as it was prayers. We now needed another dose of good luck and urgently: we had to find some turpentine for James. Unable to fly from Europe with a flammable painting medium, our request for this seemingly superfluous piece of kit had either been overlooked or drawn a blank. In the many parts of our proposed and possibly over ambitious plan, this was in fact a key bit of the logistical puzzle. Without it James would not have been able to use oil paint. Using our guides' right-hand

James Hart Dyke, Hotel Garden, Skardu



Polo Ground in Skardu



The Khalkal Glacier opposite Broad Peak





Painting near Paju Camp at 4,000 m.

man in Skardu interpreting for us, we had to trawl through dozens of hardware shops before we found some. On more than occasion, and on the point of turning back, we had to wait in the front of the store whilst its owner finished his prayers.

The following morning on Wednesday, 2nd July, we journeyed to Askole and before leaving the main road, passed by the arena where the Duke of Abruzzi and his party had witnessed a polo game in their honour. The open stadium was empty and, unlike the 1909 expedition with its hundreds of handlers, we left with no ceremony and bundled into three jeeps.

During the first day of our long march towards the Baltoro Glacier, our guide, Gul, made us all register with Pakistan's National Park's authority. After checking our permits and a brief interview, one of the rangers delivered a compelling, albeit well-rehearsed, talk about the guidelines we had to follow as tourists. With the use of a large map, we were shown the extent and scale of the glaciers and valleys as well as what animals we might see including lynx, ibex and, at a very outside chance, a snow leopard. Before setting off towards our first camp, Gul announced that the Park's headquarters had confirmed that we could expect some very stable weather at least for the coming week.

It would take three days of walking to reach the start of the Baltoro Glacier. They were long days and, in altitude terms, we were already much higher than the top of most ski resorts in Europe. The midday sun seared straight down on us. As a result, we covered much of the distance from



Sunset, Urdukas

pointed out Gasherbrum, or G4, the near-vertical mountain just under 8,000 metres renowned to serious climbers around the world for its ‘Shining Wall’- its 2,500-metre west face.

Bit by bit, we could feel we were nearing Concordia and our first glimpse of K2, Mitre Peak, Broad Peak, Bride Peak and Marble Peak to name a few. We could now calculate getting to Concordia in hours rather than days and the closer we got the more the Karakoram mountains began to reveal themselves.

Reaching Concordia on Tuesday 8th July in the afternoon, it was quite windy and our tents went up as a matter of priority. The clouds had returned and the best views were in fact to the south, down towards Mitre Peak and Masherbrum and the pass that we then thought would lead to our return trek: a high-altitude traverse of the Gondogoro La Pass followed by a relatively easy descent through the Hushe Valley. Drinking tea and establishing that we would spend at least one rest day at Concordia, it struck us that we were possibly halfway through our expedition.



Ice sails



Concordia

Looking at the battered pole and sign with Concordia printed on it, and then further away, the free-standing structures on stilts used for latrines, I also realised that Concordia was more of a notion rather than an actual spot. The ice on which Abruzzi and Sella would have stood when their camps were pitched would now be many, many miles away. With this gigantic river of ice in perpetual movement, I wondered who in fact determines where exactly this mythical place should be year on year. We all wanted to rest but, at the same time, were anxious to see K2.

At five o'clock that afternoon, K2 rewarded us with an early evening performance. Like curtains on a theatre stage, the clouds that were covering its south-facing flank when we had arrived had all but gone. With a painter's glaze of the faintest pink, a monumental wall of snow and ice shone

James Hart Dyke painting K2

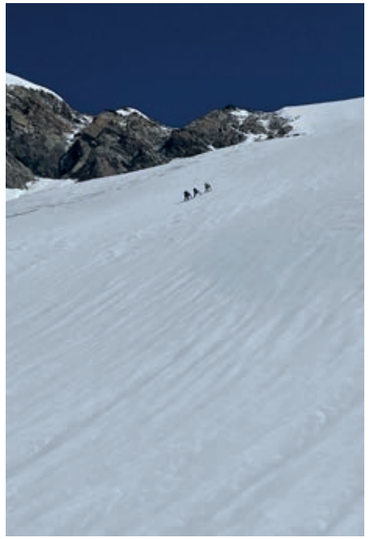


back at us. It seemed hard to believe that this almost symmetrical pyramid, this ‘eight thousander’ was in fact 12 kilometres away. Looking through the opening of our tent, flapping in the wind, I knew that James who was having a sleep was in for a treat. For a moment, I was both excited for him and very proud that he had come so far and lugging along his painting kit with, as ever, never a complaint. I also remembered what the great writer and climber, Leslie Stephen (1832-1904), thought of his friend and climbing companion Gabriel Loppé’s paintings: ‘the most eloquent language is but a poor substitute for a painter’s brush, a painter’s brush lags far behind these grandest aspects of nature.’

The walk to K2 Base Camp is mostly quite flat and follows the Godwin Austen Glacier which looks in part like a motorway of ice. The elevation gain is no more than a few hundred metres but on either side there are gigantic mountains: on the left are Crystal and Marble Peak and Pastore before getting to the Savoia Glacier which was first explored by Sella and Abruzzi back in 1909. On the right is Broad Peak with its distinctive eponymous flattened top. Its flanks are enormous with giant buttresses of rock and great gullies of snow and ice. The scale of Broad Peak, let alone K2, is staggering.

We visited the Gilkey Memorial and stood on a moraine nearby to look down at K2 Base Camp which was a cluster of about 25 tents, some much more spacious than the others. These were doubtless the mess or headquarter tents for various expeditions. We saw nobody moving around and returned to spend three nights at Broad Peak Base Camp. Meanwhile, James was sketching in pencils and oil paint at every opportunity, and we spent time talking to a few separate climbing teams. They were in the throes of putting in high camps up on Broad Peak. They would come back down for a few days to rest and wait for the right weather before venturing back up. A few of them had been there for

Below the col on Pastore Peak



K2 Base Camp





Gasherbrum IV seen from 5,600m on Pastore Peak

many weeks. When the sun disappeared, it stayed cold and windy and although we continued to drink as much water as we could to stave off headaches, at that altitude it was obvious that our appetites were not the same as during the approach.

After two days at Broad Peak, James had managed to make some very compelling studies of the views in all direction and, not least, some remarkable visions of K2 and Broad Peak at dawn and sunset. In the meantime, four of us, Bruno Dupety, Jeff Colegrave, Armin Fisher and I went to attempt the 6,209 metre Pastore Peak which lay directly across the valley from where we camped, the other side of the wide Godwin Austen Glacier.

Gul had been reunited with his brother, Mirza, at Broad Peak Base Camp and thanks to our cook, Ali's resourcefulness, one afternoon we all gathered in one of the larger expedition tents to mark his birthday with a large chocolate cake. Indeed, from Mirza, we learnt a lot more about which expeditions were attempting K2 and Broad Peak. With regards to our climbing Pastore, both the brothers seemed cautious about the weather and the fact that nobody had climbed it recently. Nonetheless, they agreed to allow two porters to come with us as far as our proposed high camp. This would be as near to the base of the climb as we could get up the glaciated valley which lies between the Baltoro and the Savoia Glaciers.



Pakistan v. Rest of the World at 3,300m

We didn't in fact make it to the summit. As we climbed the steep south-facing slope, the sun had started to loosen the snow but the views were remarkable. Our team back at Broad Peak had seemed a long way away whilst we were up the mountain, and we knew that we were due to return directly to them at Concordia. Having tackled what seemed like some never-ending slopes of awful loose scree on the descent, we returned to our overnight tents to find they had been packed inexplicably away and, crucially, the stoves for melting water had gone back to Concordia with the porters. It was a very long and tiring 20 kilometre walk back to Concordia where James and company were waiting for us amidst some lowering skies and low light. We didn't know it then, nor perhaps cared as we were all so tired, but we had had the best of the weather.

In fact, we had had remarkably good conditions and Gul reminded us several times that if the clouds start to build along the Baltoro some expeditions never get to see hardly any of the bigger mountains. However, the following morning, Gul and Armin decided that we could no longer go back via the Hushe Valley. Reports of an accident on the Gondogoro Pass had come via satellite phones and wet weather was on the way which would mean too much snow on the pass. This was a bit of a blow and especially for James as the lower Hushe Valley is far greener and more varied than the earlier parts of our journey. We had also planned to camp for a few days below Laila Peak to allow James to work there before going home.

The sun never reappeared and we went back down the Baltoro Glacier via the same camps under low clouds and drizzle interspersed with spells of heavy rain. It took us four days to get back to Askole. Sticking to the early starts with a stop for tea and soup for lunch, we followed the same itinerary back. The rain was tedious but getting off the Baltoro Glacier was by far the worst part. As forewarned the days of rain had loosened the rock along the moraines and on several occasions, we had to dodge fusillades of stone and boulders. It was a great relief to get back to the valley floor and we were certainly benefitting from the thicker oxygen in the air.

All our amazing porters and mule handlers were tiring like us and the last day as we got to Askole was in fact our longest. We covered 27 kilometres and those relentless bends in the valley we had come up a few weeks ago now seemed almost unfamiliar.

Back in Askole, we bade farewell to all of our porters and the cooks. None of it would have been possible without them and beyond their enormous levels of physical resilience, their kindness or willingness to help us at every turn, was their standout quality. Many of them had been fascinated by watching James at work and would often stand at a respectful distance in complete silence as they looked over his shoulder. According to Gul, they had certainly enjoyed the 'artistic' part of our expedition and it was of course a novelty for everybody involved to be accompanying and looking after a professional artist. We hoped that the more leisurely pace, the painting breaks, would have been some compensation for the tough lives they led. In our relatively emaciated and exhausted states, it was hard to believe that in a matter of weeks, quite a few of them would be going back up again all the way to Concordia and perhaps further.

Now on flat ground, grass even, one of the most enjoyable tasks was to look at the fruits of the artistic expedition. With space to spread out, James got out many of his small pictures and Bruno unfurled the large roll of reproductions of Sella's photographs that had accompanied us on our expedition. Lining up some of the scenes and reflecting on the 'now and then' factor -what Sella had captured compared to James- I paced about marvelling at what James had done. Most importantly, apart from some poorly stomachs and fevers, nobody had been injured. With no phone signal and therefore no contact with our families or anybody else, nonetheless, there hadn't been a single ill-tempered or cross word between any of us. The only casualties were the two goats who never came home but they provided enough meat up at Concordia to last at least three suppers.

On Friday 18th July we returned to Skardu and on the long and bumpy journey back, there was one especially memorable moment. Trundling through some flat farmland



the convoy of our jeeps suddenly pulled off the road. The Balti baggage men leapt out of their larger lorry and began pummelling the overhanging trees with sticks. To our great delight, we were practically pelted with the most delicious ripe apricots. Even after eating no fruit or vegetables since Skardu, there were still plenty of apricots on the ground as we got back into the vehicles.

Back in the same hotel we had stayed in on the way up, and in some clean clothes, we picked cherries off the trees in the garden as our damp kit dried out in the heat of the day. We had a whole day to ourselves and spent it dozing in the sun and even getting rid of our beards in Skardu.

In terms of preparing for the expedition, we had all kept our side of the bargain to one another and especially in terms of being fit enough and keeping any complaints of hardship to a bare minimum. Next was the right kit which was essential and we owed Armin a lot of gratitude for all his advice as to just how well equipped we needed to be. At the same time, and from his experiences there, Armin had managed our expectations at every turn as to the difficulty of moving up and down the Baltoro Glacier. Above all, James had planned for every eventuality and was so careful to protect the work he had done on the spot. Just like Vittorio Sella's plates stowed away in the hold of an ocean-going liner, we would be flying back to Europe with an invaluable body of work sealed in James's various boxes and his wooden painting case.

Gasherbrum IV

Inside was the first ever set of landscape paintings and drawings of the Karakoram and the world's second highest mountain.

During the short flight back from Skardu, just like on the way there, the captain announced in a rather theatrical manner that Nanga Parbat would soon come into view on one side of the aeroplane. From the window, the mountain looked so high it seemed to glide past the plane's wingtip and, yet, having seen the other eight thousanders from up close so recently, we knew just how far away it was -in every sense. Even in Skardu, which is surrounded by lofty, snowy mountains, the upper reaches of the Karakoram already feel a world apart. It is not only such a long way from anywhere but such an otherworldly location. Looking at some of the photographs in my telephone during the flight, I thought again of my visit to the Estorick Collection to discover Vittorio Sella, and why with Armin's encouragement we had gone to the Karakoram in the first place. With no mobile telephone or internet of his own back then, I tried to imagine Vittorio Sella in his later years, going through a box of monochrome photographs from the 1909 Expedition. After a lifetime of mountaineering, one can only speculate as to how seeing those vast stretches of ice and granite spires made him feel. For my part, the memories of making our way along mile after mile of broken rock on the glacier surrounded by such extraordinary scenery will take a long time to fade.

William J. Mitchell

Return to Askole



Nanga Parbat



K2 from Concordia, Big Sky

acrylic on oil on canvas
200 x 200cm

At first sight, the world's second highest mountain seems to conform to every notion of the perfect, symmetrical peak, to every child's conception of a towering pyramid of rock and ice. Indeed, from illustrations and photographs K2's south face would appear almost stereotypical to an artist. The reality could not be more different when first encountering the mountain at Concordia, its most famous viewing point. James Hart Dyke's title, *Big Sky* is deliberately ambiguous as the scale of the peak is extremely hard to gauge. In some respects, its size is quite unsettling to the human eye let alone the idea of translating that into paint on canvas. At 12 kilometres from Concordia, walking there can take up to 8 hours. The enormous wedge of rock blocks out the rest of the valley the closer one gets and on its right the Abruzzi Spur and the Shoulder jut out into the sky.







K2: midday 1

acrylic on oil on panel
42 x 42cm

K2 from Concordia

acrylic on oil on canvas
122 x 122cm

In 1909, the Duke of Abruzzi's official expedition chronicler Filippo de Filippi described the first time he saw K2 from Concordia as follows: "Down at the end, alone, detached from all the other mountains, soared up K2, the indisputable sovereign of the region, gigantic and solitary, hidden from human sight by innumerable ranges, jealously defended by a vast throng of vassal peaks, protected from invasion by miles and miles of glaciers. Even to get within sight of it demands so much contrivance, so much marching, such a sum of labours."

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta

Trango Castle on Pink

acrylic on oil on canvas
200 x 200cm

There are more than fifteen peaks within the complex which forms Trango Castle often referred to as Trango Towers. Great Trango (6,287m) and the symmetrical spire, Trango Tower (6239m) are best known for their world-class climbing routes and few ascents were attempted before the 1970s. Looking to the north from the Baltoro Glacier, Trango Castle dominates the skyline from Khoburtse Camp all the way past Urdukas. The setting sun produces extraordinary shadows in and around the exceedingly steep towers making them a compelling subject for any painter or photographer. Some of the early films made during expeditions to the Himalayas in the 1920s were often tinted in pink tones and during James Hart Dyke's research before the trip the colour began to inform his palette, especially in his preparatory sketches.

Forte di Bard
| valle d'aosta





K2 from Concordia last light

acrylic on oil on canvas
112 x 152cm



Trango Castle from Urdukas

acrylic on oil on canvas
112 x 112cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



Bride Peak from Broad Peak Base Camp, evening

acrylic on oil on panel
56 x 71cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta

Bride Peak (7,665m) is now known as Chogolisa. It rises up to the south of Concordia and with its distinctive flat summit, was first identified by Martin Conway during his 1892 expedition. Bride Peak features in many of Sella's panoramic photographs and in the wake of their attempt on K2 in 1909, the Duke of Abruzzi succeeded in setting a world record in altitude terms by climbing to 7,498 metres on its northern flank.



Towards Gasherbrum II

acrylic on oil on canvas
112 x 152cm

Looking up from the Baltoro Glacier, the extreme height of the mountains takes many days for a European accustomed to the scale of the Alps to fathom. On days when the peaks were in and out of the clouds, James Hart Dyke could capture some of the contrast thrown up by the shadows above the glacier.

Forte di Bard
| valle d'aosta



Broad Peak from Broad Peak Base Camp

acrylic on oil on canvas
200 x 200cm

Like its neighbouring peak to the north, K2, climbers attempting the 8,047-metre Broad Peak can spend up to between eight and twelve weeks at Base Camp - if not longer. The camp's altitude is just under 5,000 metres situated up above the east side of the Godwin-Austen Glacier. During our own painting expedition, we slept three nights at Base Camp and awoke every morning to snow on the ground. From there we went to K2 Base Camp and the junction of the Godwin-Austen and Savoia Glaciers where Vittorio Sella took many photographs.

Forte di Bard
|valle d'aosta

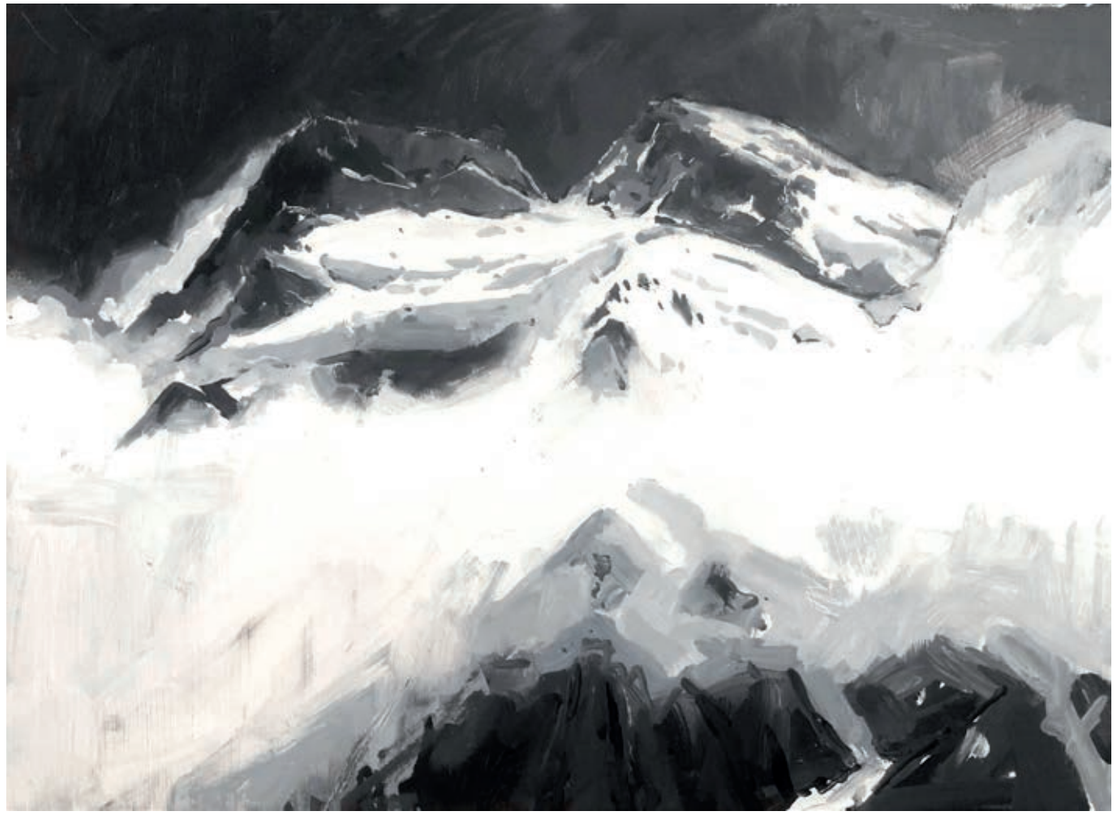


Paju Camp and the Baltoro Glacier- last light

acrylic on oil on canvas
112 x 152cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta

Paju Camp is an important stage on the long journey to Concordia. Built into the mountainside, the camp has some running water and is surrounded by juniper and poplar trees as well as various shrubs offering some much-needed shade after a few days of walking through the barren Braldu Valley. Thereafter there is hardly any greenery. Climbing the slopes above Paju Camp, a trekker goes over 4,000 metres for the first time and is rewarded with the first view of the enormous Baltoro Glacier and, weather permitting, Broad Peak and Gasherbrum. Most expeditions take at least one day to rest and acclimatize here and for James Hart Dyke, it meant he could paint at dawn and in the evening.



Broad Peak from Broad Peak Base camp b/w

oil on acrylic on card
30 x 42cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



K2 from Broad Peak Base Camp

acrylic on oil on canvas
112 x 112cm

It takes 4 ½ hours to reach Broad Peak Base Camp from Concordia. Getting off the Godwin-Austen Glacier to climb up to the camp felt like getting off an ocean of ice. Floating in a sense above the valley floor, it was a reminder that the glacier is 170 metres deep at this junction. The distance between the two base camps makes little difference to the scale of K2. In this magnificent composition, the gradation in James Hart Dyke's sky above the summit ridges suggests an atmosphere of enormous proportions.

Baltoro Cathedral from Urdukas

acrylic on oil on canvas
152 x 112cm

For many trekkers in the Karakoram, the campsite at Urdukas is a destination in itself. It can take up to a week to reach it on foot from Askole, and many people spend a few nights there before turning back down the valley. Located at just over 4,000 metres on the south side of the valley, it is perched a hundred metres above the glacier on a rocky outcrop with space for several separate groups to camp. During the Abruzzi Expedition in 1909, Urdukas was used as their official base camp for their attempt on K2. Alongside Concordia, Urdukas offers the most spectacular views in all directions and one of the first opportunities to look down on to the glacier. Its most distinctive feature is a vast, smooth boulder the size of a small apartment block. Perched on its top, especially at dawn and dusk, Hart Dyke made many sketches looking towards the wall of Baltoro Cathedral and Trango Towers.

K2 and Marble Peak -on site study

acrylic on oil on panel
30 x 42cm

Although in a small format this is a marvellous insight into the painter's working method: an archetypical plein air study. Looking up from Concordia and in a few deft brushstrokes, Hart Dyke managed to create an enormous sense of distance between the 6,256-metre Marble Peak and K2 emerging from the cloud many kilometres to the north. The abstract squiggle of light umber spilling off the right of Marble Peak seems to offset K2's mighty summit brilliantly.







Broad Peak from Concordia
last light study

acrylic on oil on panel
42 x 42cm



Broad Peak – pink & purple

acrylic on oil on panel
42 x 42cm



First light from Urdukas (on site study)

acrylic on oil on card
30 x 42cm

Broad Peak with cloud

acrylic on oil on canvas
112 x 112cm

For most of the time that Hart Dyke was camped at Broad Peak in July 2025, there was a strong breeze and the mountain above him came in and out of cloud. For accuracy of atmosphere and colour this large format canvas of the sight looking up the western flank would be hard to rival. During the breaks in the cloud cover, the guides and porters pointed out the locations of the various camps that had been put in up Broad Peak during the past weeks. Some of them were almost invisible to the naked eye and using binoculars, we could make out miniscule tents dotted amidst the snowfields and slopes.





Uli Biaho and Trango Castle from Urdukas

acrylic on oil on panel
56 x71cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta

This is the view immortalised by Vittorio Sella in 1909 looking back across the Baltoro Glacier from the camp at Urdukas and back down to where the valley eventually leads to Askole, the starting point for so many expeditions.

The glacier is a few kilometres across at this point and pitted with lakes and crevasses. From left to right are Paju Peak (6,610m) and the remarkable granite spire, Uli Biaho (6,109m) and Trango Castle (5,753m).



Paju Camp. Evening

acrylic on oil on panel
56 x 71cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



Windy Gap first light

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm



River Valley

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm



Broad Peak from Concordia evening light

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm

Armageddon: Akbar the guide

acrylic on oil on canvas
71 x 71cm

Akbar was the assistant guide whose meagre clothing consisted of a jumper, chinos and a pair of sandals. He seemed to glide through the rocky terrain before turning back to wait for people to catch up. As a commercial painter back near Skardu, Akbar wore his thin work overalls when it started to rain. Amidst all the rubble and ice, he looked like he was working in a contaminated area. *Armageddon* reflects the possible contradiction as to how an expedition conceived with an aesthetic goal in mind, at times felt at the end of the world in an area prone to enormous avalanches and the backdrop to a decades old conflict between its neighbour to the south.





Broad Peak from Broad Peak Base Camp - study

acrylic on oil on canvas
71 x 56cm

This study is packed with an atmosphere of high-altitude and sunlight. Working onto a warm ochre ground, Hart Dyke's brushwork seems to cascade down Broad Peak in diagonal lines. The contrast between the flat, shining ice on the Godwin Austen Glacier and several hundred metres of vertical rock rendered in strokes of Prussian blue and Payne's grey is particularly striking. The slash of turquoise running up the peak between the base of the rock and the glacier is equally eye-catching.

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



Great Trango, Trango Castle

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



Bride Peak from Broad Peak basecamp evening

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm



K2 from Concordia, evening

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm



Askole evening light

acrylic on oil on panel
56 x 56cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta

In and around Askole there are some small hamlets built on the south facing terraces above the Braldu Valley. Looking at the various fruit trees and steep plots of maize, the landscape brings into mind Greg Mortensen's 2007 book, *Three Cups of Tea* and how the American climber stumbled into a small village nearby after many days lost on the Baltoro Glacier. As the last settlements before K2, the Balti people rely entirely on subsistence farming in this valley for the few months of the year when it is warm enough for crops and fruit to grow.



Braldu Gorge

acrylic on oil on panel
56 x 56cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta

Looking back at Askole, Hart Dyke's study in oils shows the narrow road to the south side of the Braldu River which leads into the verdant fields and woods surrounding the village. It is hard to believe that within a few hours of walking away from Askole towards the glacier, the conditions become almost desert-like.



Broad Peak from Broad Peak basecamp

acrylic on oil on panel
42 x 42cm



Broad Peak from Concordia, last light

acrylic on oil on canvas
112 x 112cm

Forte di Bard
|valle d'aosta

Made from an on-site study in oils, Hart Dyke's painting of the sun setting on Broad Peak is a very similar composition to Vittorio Sella's photograph of 1909. (see p.). Devoid of cloud, the scale of Broad Peak is majestic and from this angle the notch on its wide trapezoid summit, to which the mountain owes its name, is distinctive. Here the rubble on the glacier in the foreground takes on a sandy hue in the falling light and the sliver of pink to the left of the composition pulls together the sense of distance across the glacier.



K2 from Concordia – last light 2

acrylic on oil on panel
42 x 42cm

Forte di Bard
|valle d'aosta

Broad Peak from Concordia- pink and purple

acrylic on oil on panel
42 x 42cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta





K2 from Concordia

watercolour, pencil and pastel
on grey card
30 x 21cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



Angel Peak from Broad Peak Base Camp

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm

This beautiful white pyramid is the 6,802-metre Angel Peak also known as Angel Sar. Rising up below K2's south-west flank, it appears completely dwarfed by the mountain and yet it is nearly 2,000 metres higher than Mont Blanc. As the sun began to fade, Angel Peak would shine like white marble.



K2 and Godwin-Austen Glacier

acrylic on oil on panel
30 x 42cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



K2 from Concordia: midday

acrylic on oil on panel
30 x 42cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



Gasherbrum II -on site study

oil on acrylic on card
30 x 42cm

The economy of brushwork used in this *plein air* study is especially striking in the foreground. In a matter of a few lines the painter manages to establish a great sense of distance between the grey, rubble strewn glacier and the lower ramparts on Gasherbrum II in the distance.

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



Evening view from Paju Camp

acrylic on oil on canvas
56 x 71cm



Great Spires from Paju Camp, evening

watercolour, pencil and pastel on card
21 x 30cm

Using an outline done in pastel, this sketch is a master class in using the mixed media to maximum effect.

The blank mountain walls make the spires appear to float above the glacier under a sky cleverly conjured in vertical lines.

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



Cathedral from Paju Camp, evening

watercolour, pencil and pastel on card
21 x 30cm

Leaving the peaks as outlines over the blank card, all the focus in this watercolour turns into the trees which surrounded Paju Camp. Going above the camp gave us the first sighting of the Baltoro Glacier as well as a sublime panorama of the peaks to the north of the valley.



Towards Shigar

watercolour, pencil and
pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm



Cathedral from Paju Camp

watercolour, pencil and
pastel on orange card
21 x 30cm



K2 in Pink: from Concordia

oil on acrylic on panel
30 x 30cm



K2 in Pink

silkscreen print
52 x 52cm
(1 from a series of 10)



K2 in Violet

silkscreen print
52 x 52cm
(1 from a series of 10)

K2 in Emerald

silkscreen print
52 x 52cm
(1 from a series of 10)



K2 in Blue

silkscreen print
52 x 52cm
(1 from a series of 10)





K2 and cloud, Godwin Austen Glacier

watercolour, pencil and pastel on card
21 x 30cm

This was one of the first sightings we all made of K2 from Concordia. For most of the afternoon on the day we arrived the peak was clouded over from the valley floor upwards. Looking north, all we could see were the large spines of ice and broken rock thrown up by the converging Baltoro and Godwin-Austen glaciers as seen in the foreground.



K2

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm

Broad Peak from Broad Peak Base Camp

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
30 x 21cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



The Shigar River and valley

acrylic on oil on panel
56 x 71cm

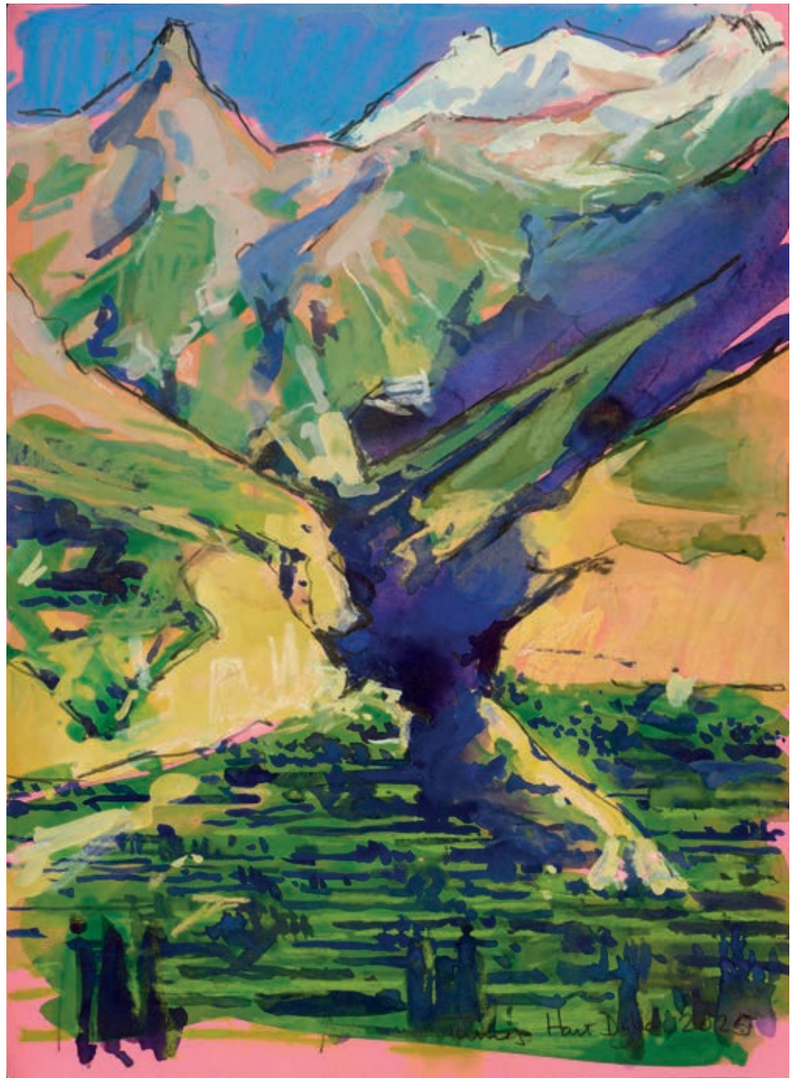
To get to Askole, the road initially follows the wooded banks of the Shigar River to the north of Skardu for over 30km. In parts, the valley is up to 3km wide and the silt-laden river meanders through wide expanses of sand and gravel brought down from the glacier as shown here.

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



First light from Paju towards Baltoro Glacier

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm



Above Askole

watercolour, pencil and pastel on pink card
30 x 21cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



K2 from Broad Peak Basecamp

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
30 x 21cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



Towards K2 Base Camp

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta

K2 from Broad Peak Basecamp

watercolour, pencil and pastel on card
21 x 30cm



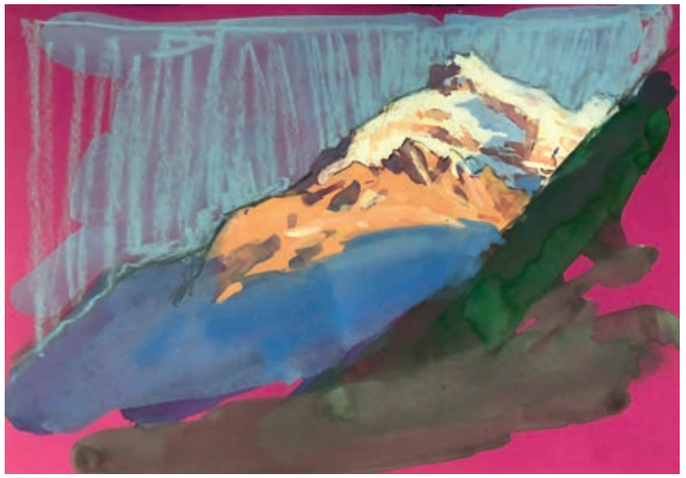


Bacri the Goat

pen and ink on paper
21 x 30cm

One of two goats to come as far as the camp at Goro II.The *bacri* (goat in Urdu) were carried on one occasion across a fast moving rivulet on the glacier and were never off a rope. Neither of them made it back to Askole but their meat lasted many days, dwindling into broth mixed with rice.

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



Unnamed peak on purple

watercolour, pencil and pastel on purple card
21 x 30cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



K2

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
30 x 21cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



Angel Star from Broad Peak basecamp

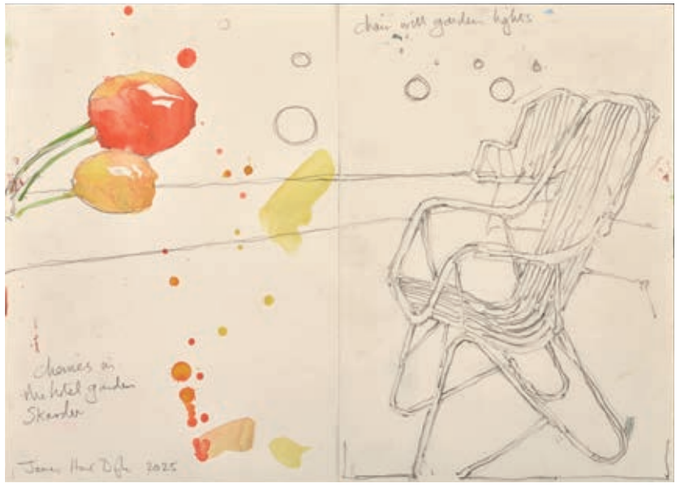
watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm



Broad Peak with cloud from Broad Peak Basecamp

watercolour, pencil and
pastel on grey card
30 x 21cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



Hotel Garden, Skardu

watercolour and pencil on card
30 x 42cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta

Skardu was our expedition's stopping point between Islamabad and Askole. With its own airport, the city is the closest access point to the Karakoram's high peaks and the capital of Baltistan. Our hotel was an old wooden structure not unlike an Alpine chalet and was surrounded by fruit trees. When the warm afternoon faded, lights came on in the garden. Later that evening as we sat eating handfuls of cherries, the different time zone and the waiting around made us feel tired and vaguely apprehensive. A few weeks later we returned to the same spot. In contrast to the barren wastes of the high glaciers, it felt like an oasis.



Uli Biaho and Trango Castle -first light

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm

Sketched onto a light grey background, this small watercolour of the view at Urdukas nimbly represents the strength of the shadows the painter would encounter every morning. The contrast between the shadow below the white spire of Uli Biaho and the mountain flank to its left is especially compelling.



Towards Paju and Baltoro Glacier

watercolour, pencil and pastel on grey card
21 x 30cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta

Like *Paju Camp and the Baltoro Glacier – last light* (see p. xx), this annotated study of the giant peaks along the Baltoro Glacier comes from the rest day, meant for acclimatisation. From a few hundred metres above the camp, Hart Dyke made colour notes as well as sketches looking towards the terminal point of the glacier, our destination the following day.



K2 from Concordia on blue

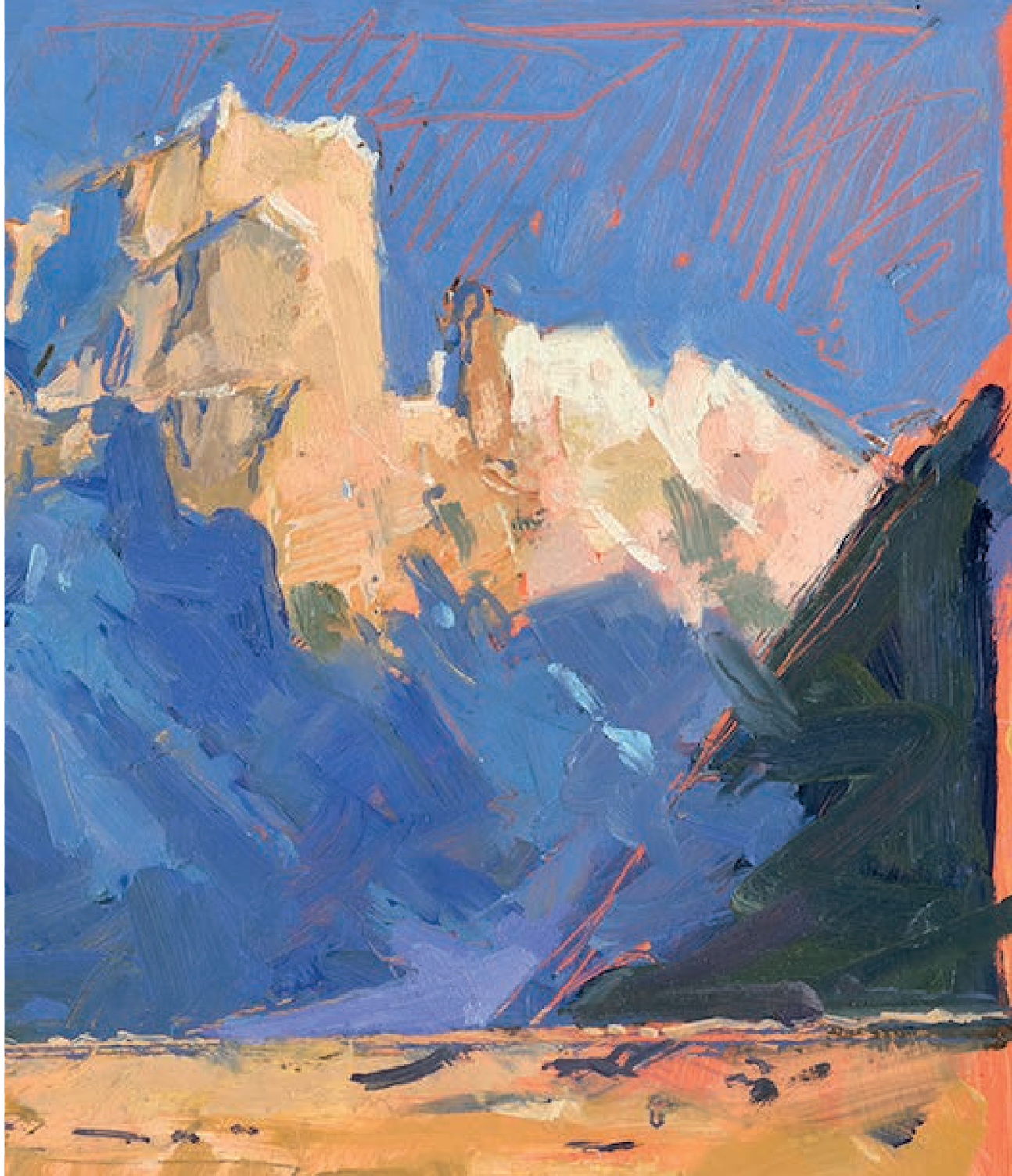
watercolour, pencil and pastel on blue card
21 x 30cm

Forte di Bard
valle d'aosta



K2 from Concordia, swirling cloud

acrylic on oil on panel
42 x 42cm



In the painter's studio: about James Hart Dyke.

The K2/Vittorio Sella project has been a journey, both physical and artistic, extending all the way back to the day when a young James Hart Dyke first saw a small oil study by the greatest British landscape painter, John Constable (1776-1837). James was visiting London's Victoria and Albert Museum with his parents, and the Constable painting inspired him to take a set of paints out into the rolling Chiltern Hills near to his home to attempt his first landscape studies *en plein air*.

Later on, when he was sent to school in Yorkshire, he was free to roam at the weekends and continued to paint in the expansive Yorkshire Dales. To this day, John Constable remains a strong influence on Hart Dyke's work.

After studying architecture at the Royal College of Art in London, Hart Dyke started to make his living painting views of country houses which was in vogue at the time. He also worked as an architectural designer and illustrator. His somewhat Bohemian lifestyle during the week was contrasted with adrenaline-fuelled weekends of skydiving - an activity he had been introduced to whilst serving in the Territorial Army (TA) Reserve force. However, when the wrong weather prohibited any jumping, James would retreat from the airfield to a nearby country churchyard to read works by John Ruskin and William Morris. His two lives seemed to contradict each other.

James Hart Dyke received a surprise letter in 1998 inviting him to accompany the now His Royal Highness King Charles as the official artist on a voyage to East Asia. Hart Dyke had been working with a new school of architecture set up by King Charles, then the Prince of Wales, and his work was brought to the prince's attention. As such, Hart Dyke ended up travelling on the Royal Tour. Sitting with the Prince of Wales, flying from Nepal to Bhutan, he first caught sight of Mount Everest wreathed in plumes of cloud. Determined to see it for himself, Hart Dyke returned the following year with paints and a backpack, setting out to walk and paint his way to Everest Base camp. A link between adventure and painting began to distil in his mind. The resulting exhibition of his paintings in London was a huge success and represented the start of a long association with painting mountains and one which eventually led him all the way to K2.

Over the years Hart Dyke has been working as a professional painter, he has spent much of his time in the Alps but has also travelled to remote locations, including Patagonia, inaccessible parts of the Middle East, the Atlas Mountains and Cailfornia's Yosemite National Park.

In describing himself, Hart Dyke often turns to a review of one of his early exhibitions in 2002. A critic working for *The Wall Street Journal* referred to him as a *'classical but modern painter'*. Indeed, whilst remaining part of the tradition of landscape painting in the United Kingdom he has been increasingly influenced by the Abstract Expressionist movement, especially Richard Diebenkorn's work and contemporary artists such as Cecily Brown. Further inspiration can be found in the powerful, painterly works by Jenny Saville who has taken narrative figurative painting into a new dimension.

Although the narrative element in landscape painting remains of fundamental importance to Hart Dyke, the process of periodically confining infinite spaces within canvas is exciting. The quality of paintwork, mark making and the gestural application of paint take centre stage in his work.

In recent years, James has compelled himself to create larger pictures and thereby free up his paintwork. When setting about the K2 project, he remained determined to tackle some more monumental and challenging large format pieces. Although the dimensions of the exhibition environments have perhaps limited him to an extent, the three 200 x 200cm. compositions *K2 from Concordia – Big Sky, Broad Peak from Broad Peak Basecamp* and *Trango Castle on Pink* (see p. 80) are a great tribute to his wish to liberate the narrative angle and push towards a degree of abstraction and, ultimately, sublimity in his paintings.

The relationship between the early climbers and the artists of their time has interested Hart Dyke for over two decades. In assessing how the Romantic movement responded to the



destructive forces inherent in the nascent, or First, Industrial Revolution, through landscape and especially mountains, for Hart Dyke there was evidently a beauty of sorts in the union of adventure and painting. Returning to his early years and his attempts to reconcile his dual love of skydiving and painting, Hart Dyke has come to accept that the dramatic mountainscapes he seeks out represent a connection to the spiritual and majestic dimensions of our world. In his own words he ascertains: *'I search out those landscapes which connect us more directly to the universe and in doing so hope to touch on the mysteries and beauty of our own existence'*. With climate change not only in full evidence

but in significant flux throughout the globe, Hart Dyke's association with wilderness has only heightened his sense of the importance of humanity's connection to landscape in the widest sense. James freely admits that over the years these trips to remote locations have become pilgrimages of sorts and yet his heart and soul are anchored in his homeland, in the British landscape.

As Hart Dyke journeyed up to K2, snippets of the striking film made during the 1924 Everest expedition regularly flickered through his mind. He even made a few sketches relating to the film during his time at Concordia and Broad Peak Basecamp. Filmed in black and white it recounts the voyage to Mount Everest and Mallory and Irvine's tragic disappearance. Perhaps of more relevance to James as a painter, sections of the film were tinted in bright primary colours just like some of Vittorio Sella's camera work in his own pioneering film, *Sul tetto del Mondo* released in Turin's theatres in February 1910. From his training as an architect, Hart Dyke's work retains a strong graphic strain, and he was keen to express this in the K2 project. The idea developed into making some silk screen prints from a painting representing K2 (see p. 150). Using four different and bright colour codes relating to the film, the silk screen images relate directly to those earliest 'moving images' brought back from the Greater Ranges, as the Himalaya were often to referred to a century ago. Keeping a painterly quality, the prints nonetheless express an element of reduction, and the bright colours could be associated with Pop Art.

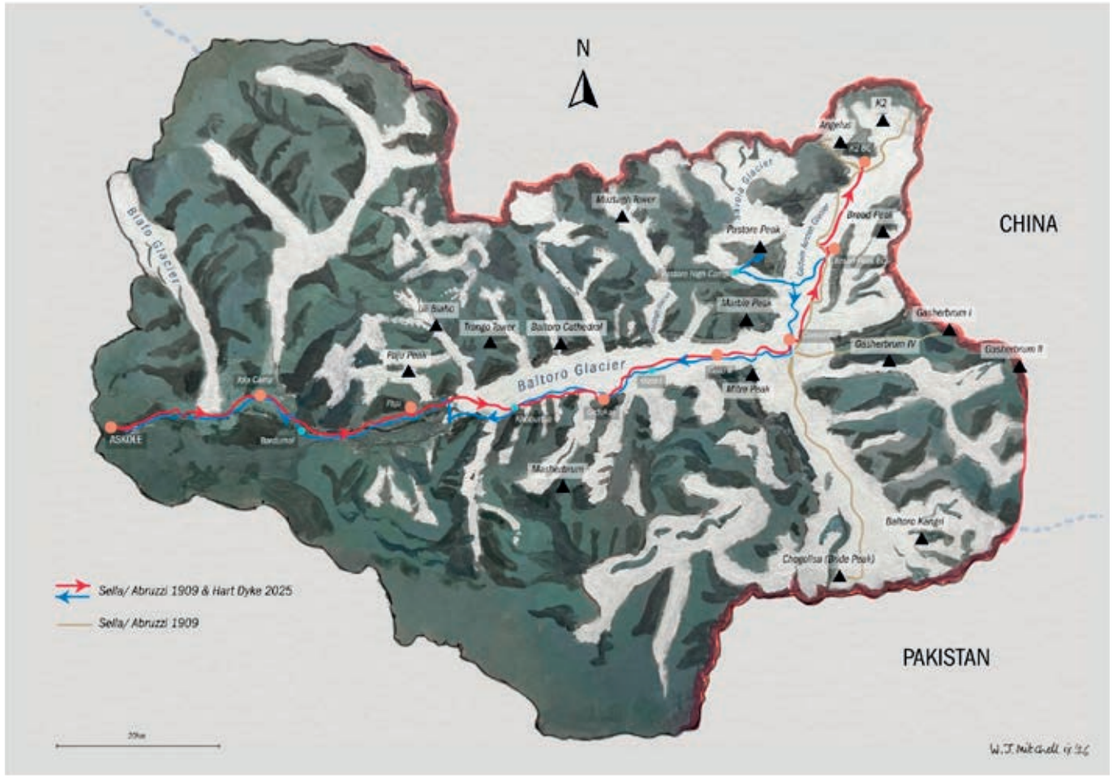
It is worth noting that Hart Dyke's use of primary colours is certainly not unique to the silk screen prints. In fact, strong primary colours crop up in many of his paintings, often used as the priming or 'ground' to resonate with the composition's palette. Indeed, a perfect example of Hart Dyke's desire to make a foray into a more abstract kind of work albeit with a foot in the narrative aspect of the landscape, is *Trango Castle on Pink* (see p. 80). The painting represents an important artistic diversion in giving himself the freedom to experiment with colour and brushwork. With such paintwork, *Trango Castle on Pink* succeeds in communicating a kind of inner excitement in the landscape.

At first glance, *Armageddon* (see p. 96) offers a complete disconnect from the other Karakoram landscapes. Indeed, however much Hart Dyke sought to extol the beauty of the Karakoram landscape, it seemed deceptive not to acknowledge the many social and geological problems associated with the region and not least the impact of a changing climate. No further evidence is needed than the devastating consequences brought about by the recent floods in Nepal and Tibet in 2026. The visual vocabulary in this painting entitled *Armageddon* is linked to a whole different section of James's work. This deliberate diversion from his landscape painting began when he was working as a war artist during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan which brought about his role working within the British Secret Intelligence Service to mark their centenary. The subsequent and critically acclaimed exhibition held in London in 2011, *A Year in MI6* was an important inflection point in Hart Dyke's career. It also led to many other commissions such as working for the producers of the James Bond film franchise and the Aston Martin car company. These projects allowed Hart Dyke to experiment with different forms of painting, many of them related to his time in the architectural world and working methods he had not gone back to since having the luxury to spend prolonged amounts of time at a painting school. *Armageddon* resorts to these graphic motifs to create a surreal image and one which echoes some of the paintings he made for MI6. The porter wearing a painting suit recalls an investigator in a biological protection suit, standing in front of a red K2. Reminiscent of a disaster or aftermath scene, the swirling spacial devices in purple and black connect the two images. Set amidst a landscape of ice and granite towers, it is an unsettling portrayal reflecting man-made problems.

Painting K2 and in the Karakoram is a defining moment in James Hart Dyke's career of over forty-five years. With the focus on his devotion to landscape painting, it has nonetheless allowed him to experiment with a range of painting skills and, crucially, larger paintings where his brushwork and texture can reach new levels of expression.



Karakorum: Spedizione artistica 2025. Dettagli su trekking, altitudine e campi
Karakoram/K2 trek details 2025.



Luglio		Tempo (hrs)	Distanza	Dislivello positivo	altezza del campo	altitudine mass
		Time (hrs)	Distance	Elevation gain	Camp altitude	Max altitude
Jul-03	Askole to Jhola	6h05	19.31 km	363m	3.118m	
Jul-04	Jhola to Paju	5h40	18.64 km	666m	3,410m	
Jul-05	Acclimatisation trek	4h50	4.96 km	591m		4,016m
Jul-06	Paju to Urdukas	8h30	19.50 km	1,088m	4,049m	
Jul-07	Urdukas to Goro II	6h00	11.10 km	461m	4,253m	
Jul-08	Goro II to Concordia	6h15	13.53 km	517m	4,593m	
Jul-09	Rest day					
Jul-10	Concordia to Broad Peak BC	4h30	8.67 km	362m		4,850m
	Broad Peak BC to Gilkey Memorial	2h50	6.75 km	178m	5,019m	
	Gilkey Memorial to Broad Peak BC	3h15	6.75 km			
Jul-11	Rest day					
Jul-12	Broad Peak BC to Pastore Peak BC	2h50	5.29 km	209m	4,930m	
Jul-13	Attempt on Pastore Peak	7h50		718m		5,648m
	Pastore Peak BC to Concordia	5h20	10.20 km	117m	4,593m	
Jul-14	Concordia to Goro I	9h40	17.56 km	272m	4,186m	
Jul-15	Goro I to Khoburtse	5h25	13.50 km	407m	3,831m	
Jul-16	Khoburtse to Bardumal	7h05	22.02 km	356m	3,235m	
Jul-17	Bardumal to Askole	7h15	26.70 km	464m	3,059m	
	Totali: Totals:	204.48 km	6,769m			

Artistic Expedition to the Karakoram, July 2025: Participants

Gul Muhammad. Head guide and expedition co-ordinator. Gul is the co-owner of Karakorum Expeditions with his brother Mirza Ali Baig who is the first Pakistani to summit the seven highest peaks in the seven continents. The brothers are based in Pakistan's mountaineering mecca, Shimshal. Their sister, Samina climbed K2 in July 2022 becoming the first woman in Pakistan to achieve that feat.

Armin Fisher. A professional mountain guide based in northern Italy and California. Armin climbed Great Trango in 2017 with Karakorum Expeditions and beyond the Alps and Yosemite, has led climbing and ski expeditions for over 25 years from Alaska to Japan and as far afield as Patagonia.

James Hart Dyke (see p. 152)

William Mitchell (see inside cover)

Bruno Dupety. A lifelong mountaineer away from his business in the engineering world, Bruno has climbed all over the world. He is an art collector and patron of the arts supporting such organizations as France's ADIAF (Association for the International Diffusion of French Art) amongst others and the author of several books devoted to art and mountains, notably *MONT BLANC Le Regard des Peintres and CERVIN MATTERHORN Le Regard des Peintres*.

Jeff Colegrave. Jeff worked in the global seed industry specialising in flower and vegetable genetics and began climbing in the Alps in his thirties. He has nearly completed all of the peaks in the Alps over 4,000 metres and has taken part in expeditions to the Himalayas. Over two Alpine seasons, he and Armin traversed the whole of the Western Alps on skis starting from the Mediterranean and finishing in southern Austria.

Lukas Nussbaumer. An Austrian from Linz with an encyclopaedic knowledge of climbing expeditions to the Himalaya and Karakoram, Lukas joined our expedition in Skardu due to a last minute postponement. With hitherto limited experience in the mountains, Lukas's fitness and endurance bore him through the trip and he took many fine photographs along the way.

The support team consisted of Akbar (assistant guide), Zarat and Hunar, Ali (our cook), Saleem (cook's assistant), Yusuf (cook's assistant), Anand (mule handler) and several other porters.



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