

Artistic Beauty from Horticultural Chaos

Scottish artist John Stoa who also happened to be a very keen gardener, discovered that his new allotment garden would not only provide exercise, fresh air and a supply of vegetables fruit and flowers but also a major source of inspiration for a new series of paintings.

John finds his love of gardening a perfect partner for relaxation while taking a break from the creative processes in his art world. The garden is also the main source for ideas for floral paintings. Recent ones have included rhododendrons, azaleas, pansies, roses, lilies, carnations and fuchsias.

The creative spirit

John has always been blessed with a creative spirit and spent half his working life in horticulture, landscape design, leisure provision and growing plants to perfection. When the government wound up the New Towns in Scotland where John worked in Livingston in landscaping and forestry, redundancy loomed on the horizon. By this time John's hobby of painting had taken on a commercial edge so it was not difficult to make the major change into a totally different career from horticulture to art even when approaching his 50th birthday.

Creativity combines art and gardening

John paints a very wide range of subjects, but specialises in snow scenes, figures and flowers, each one being quite seasonal.

In early winter John paints his figure studies as the garden takes a rest, until the winter snows come then he is into snow scene landscapes. Unfortunately last year the snow never arrived till March by which time, after a spell of still life subjects, he was looking for the emergence of the spring flowers, and winter landscapes had to go on the back burner.

During the spring and summer John's well stocked garden provides a wealth of flowers ready to be painted, from the Lenton roses, snowdrops and Aconites in February, tulips and Pansies in May, Fuchsias and shrub roses in July, and carnations and lilies in late summer.

Art holiday workshops bring enthusiastic amateur artists from all over to paint in the garden and around Taysides small old world villages and castles during the summer months weather permitting.

The garden has visitors almost every day.

The keen gardener wants to grow everything

The large garden was just not big enough to grow all the plants he just had to have and any way there was the need to include growing fruit, vegetables and cut flower for the house, as well as experimenting with the more exotic plants to test the warmer climate brought on by the greenhouse affect in Scotland so John rented a garden allotment in the middle of Dundee.

A site visit to select a suitable vacant plot had John wandering all over the 64 gardens confronted by the chaos of semi derelict sheds, greenhouses, fences of every type and colour, corrugated iron everywhere, walls, hedges, fruit trees, steps, paths, patios and all created and maintained with tender love and care. Everyone was happy, cheerful, enjoying the fresh air and exercise as well as the ample supplies of vegetables, fruit and flowers. They all had their little oasis of heaven to relax in.

John quickly realised this was an artist's paradise as well as a luxury garden to enjoy.

A moment to capture on canvas

There were potential paintings at every corner and changing scenery from morning to evening as well as in every season.

The cold March brought some late snow that turned the site into a winter wonderland with fantastic crisp colours of sheds, greenhouses, fences, garden furniture, trees and vegetables against a blanket of pure snow glistening white in sunlit bands with adjacent shadows of blue and purple.

Once spring came along the flowers and other garden plants brought a new dimension to the chaotic state of organised dereliction of old dilapidated sheds that may have a leaking roof but are proudly maintained by the plot owner.

Iceland poppies were a treat for painting at this time, to be followed by red poppies, then yellow and orange Californian poppies.

John started putting these images onto canvas last summer in a new project that will go on for quite some time as each season reveals new potential images.

Creative Processes Begin

To select a good view for a painting John looks at interesting shapes, colour, drama, texture and light. Often the obvious images appear through immediate impact.

The subject will then be photographed from many different angles and it may be necessary to take shots at different times of day. Morning and afternoon shadows are vastly different, and maybe a sunset background will enhance the picture.

The photographic image is studied thoroughly. Some parts may be cropped, some parts omitted, or things added from a range of photographs. The image may lend itself better painted over two canvasses or even three as a triptych on block canvas and hung unframed.

The photograph is used as a guide only and many things may be changed if it adds to a better painting. Often, creative thoughts present a huge array of options, and deciding which one to take can be quite frustrating so it is often worth considering painting a series of images, all taken from maybe just one photograph.

In his earlier training years John came across this problem and advice was to paint all the options as studies, then select the best one for a main painting.

To put this into practise he would often take a good photograph and see how many different paintings he could get out of it. He had managed ten from one photo until one summer he found Loch Ard near Aberfoyle in the Trossachs.

The Loch Ard Experience.

John had taken this thought to task. The Loch Ard view in summer had everything. Beautiful loch surrounded by pine trees, country cottage, view of Ben Lomond, small jetty with a boat, and a willow tree at the water's edge. All very Scottish. The creative processes had a field day. Which option to paint, and what was the focal point, the boat or the cottage, the loch reflections of Ben Lomond, and at what time of day? Then how about a sunset, a misty day, a snow scene, autumn colour, contemporary style, and of course should he use water, oil, acrylic or pastel. All this to sort out before size gets considered.

There was only one option. Paint then all! After painting 26 Loch Ards, John wants to move on, but keeps seeing another artist's style and thinking "Loch Ard would look great like that".

The First Selection

A heavy snow fall in February created a winter wonderland transforming the allotment site into a range of perfect snow scenes.

The first painting became, "The Old Apple Tree", showing an old knarled apple tree leaning over from storm damage against two dilapidated sheds, and all covered in a mantle of crisp white snow.

John uses acrylic paint as his preferred medium these days, although often going back to watercolour if subject matter suggests this treatment. The allotment paintings project was started using artists' acrylic on canvas. A typical painting is created using the following process.

The selected image is drawn up on white canvas with a 2B pencil, and a warm stain brushed all over quite fast and loose with watery acrylic to kill the white surface. The pencil lines still show through this stain, but are repainted with black acrylic to strengthen the drawing. Any dark areas are blocked in at this stage to create a tonal image of light and dark. This is followed by a quick colour block in over the whole canvas to complete many of the mid tones in a colour near to their final shades. John will then work from the focal point first with a bit more detail, then background and sky last. Final adjustments to darks and highlights complete the painting.

The first half dozen canvasses have been completed including one of John's own allotment, (but not for sale), with more being planned some of which will be painted in watercolour.

Several of these images are now displayed on John's website at www.johnstoa.com together with some of the photographs from which the painting ideas emerged.

Art Holiday Workshops in the garden

John feels that the allotment site has so much potential up every garden path that it would make a perfect location for an outdoor workshop during the summer months in addition to painting art class lessons around his own garden.

He is planning an art holiday workshop on the allotment site in July 2007.

This workshop will be scheduled into his summer programme of art holiday workshops which start in March and continue till September.

Details for these are always updated on John's website.

John's website started a few years ago, but keeps growing with new paintings completed by himself and his art class and workshop students.

The students can have their paintings exhibited on a special exhibition page on his website so that they can be viewed from all over the world. As John gets well over 1000 visitors to his website every day this is great exposure.

The website also displays John's limited edition prints, and you can take a walk around the artist's Scottish garden.

A new addition to the website is images of his allotment and subsequent paintings.

John's new allotment paintings and information on his workshops can be found on his website at www.johnstoa.com

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