

**Foxgloves at Painswick**  
oil on canvas,  
18x16

# The **GARDEN** on the **WALL**

**Louis Turpin** cultivates vivacious flower patches and vivid views with abstract shapes, stroked linework and lively color.

by John A. Parks

**B**ritish artist Louis Turpin makes paintings that bring the experience of being in a garden right onto the gallery wall. He re-creates the luscious colors of blooms and foliage in vibrant layers of paint while rendering the rich variety of forms, from flowers to leaves to trees, with a graphic clarity, making them work more as designs on a two-dimensional surface than as depictions of three-dimensional forms.

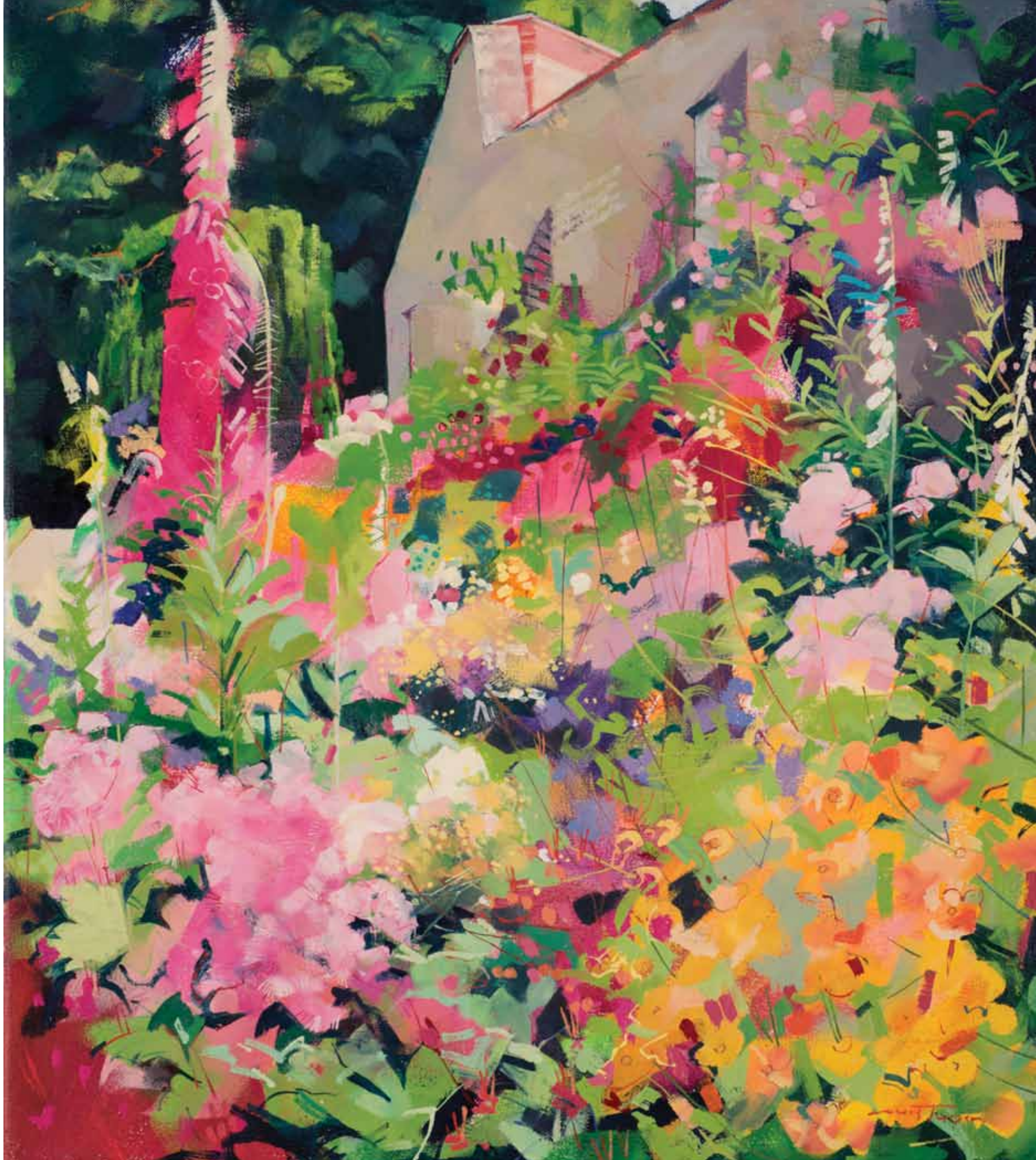
The artist includes perspective and classical space in his paintings, but the illusion of three dimensions is always secondary to the demands of the painting in its primary role as a flat object. The resulting pictures have an immediacy that plunges the viewer into all that is best in gardens—flowers, views and architectural features—without wearing them down with anything approaching labored rendering. Rather than describing a garden, the paintings seem to stand in for the garden itself. A lightness of spirit pervades the work, a sense that the paintings were a pleasure to do. What, after all, is the purpose of a garden if not for the pleasures

of light, texture and color enjoyed through the quiet contemplation of natural forms in an ordered setting?

## **NATURAL INCLINATION**

“When I walk around a garden, I like to get deep into it,” says Turpin, whose search for subjects has taken him all over the British Isles. “It’s quite an intense experience; it’s actually communing. I’m finding something that just makes it, for me, a place where I can see the future painting. Later on, when I make the picture, I know I’ll move things around, but in this first moment I’m arriving at a concept for the painting. The finished painting comes out of that concept so that, even when I start to change things, that idea is always in the background.”

Turpin’s strong feelings for nature and gardens began during his childhood in London, after World War II. “There were a lot of bomb sites in the section I grew up in,” he recalls. “They





## TURPIN'S MATERIALS

**Canvas:** 12-ounce cotton duck primed with acrylic primer  
**Paint:** oils by C. Roberson & Co., Schmincke and Winsor & Newton

**Medium:** Winsor & Newton distilled turpentine

**Brushes:** various sable brushes with a preference for wedge and chisel shapes, and a selection of signwriting brushes

**Leaf materials:** Japan gold size and gold transfer leaf

LEFT  
**Church in the Hill**  
 oil on canvas, 26x24

OPPOSITE  
**Red Bus Eaton Square**  
 oil on canvas, 14x16

became expanses of wildflowers, growing out of the rubble. They were very beautiful in many ways. I remember that with each week new things came up, and as a small child, I was excited by that. Then there was the planting in the garden outside the Brixton Library, which included forsythia in the spring, a brilliant yellow. I had an emotional response to the color.”

### COLOR GROUNDWORK

Turpin begins a painting with pencil drawings done on site. “This involves both recording the subject and moving areas around on the paper to construct the painting and juggle elements,” he says. “These aren’t straight copies of the subject in front of me. Eventually I have a firm feeling for the painting, which I then take to the studio. There I make an

abstractly blocked-in underpainting to keep the image fresh in my mind. I have at times close to 20 of these alla prima paintings on the walls of my studio, which means that when one painting is finished, I already have another ready to start. Usually, I then work this second stage through to completion.”

Turpin’s underpaintings tend to be loose. “I’m placing the tonal value but also establishing the structure,” he says. “To all intents and purposes, my underpaintings look like abstract paintings. They’re areas of color that overlap but don’t involve linearity. They may look abstract, but within them, of course, I have ideas for the painting, and I see beyond them to the structure I want to overlay.”

Another part of Turpin’s underpainting strategy is to activate

the color throughout the work. “Sometimes I’ll put down the complementary color of an element, and then I’ll often put a red under the sky,” he says. Putting complementary colors down in the underpainting allows for lively color action when the overpainting is in place. Leaving gaps or a degree of transparency in the top coat gives the color considerable vibrancy as the opposing hues shimmer against each other. Occasionally the artist will simply keep the red in the sky, reinforcing it with a few more reds for greater richness.

Turpin has a further underpainting strategy; in some paintings he initially establishes areas with a layer of gold leaf. “Some paintings demand it,” he says. “Sometimes I use quite a lot and sometimes just a spot. I’m particularly fond of moon gold, a really

lovely transfer gold.” The artist uses the modern transfer method, in which the gold leaf is supplied on paper so that it can be pressed down onto a tacky surface achieved with Japan gold size. The paper is removed when the size has set, revealing the gold. This is less risky than the traditional method of deftly floating the sheet of metallic leaf onto a prepared surface. As the painting proceeds, Turpin often paints over much of the gold, leaving little gaps and small sections that flash with reflected light. “The gold gives this different kind of life to the painting,” he says. “It has a depth

all its own. The other thing about gold is that sometimes you see it and sometimes you don’t. From one angle the gold will disappear, and then it comes back. It’s just another element of the painting—one that gives it intricacy and depth.”

### BURGEONING SHAPES AND LINEWORK

While Turpin keeps his underpaintings loose, he establishes the final layers with many clear shapes and almost-hard edges. He simplifies trees, flowers and structures, honing them into clearly readable outlines.

The artist is unafraid to use highly saturated color and enjoys dynamic color oppositions, with brilliant oranges juxtaposed to strong turquoises or powerful violets sitting next to glorious yellows.

While he achieves most of the shape-making with broad, soft brushes, there are also fascinating long and delicate lines weaving in and out of the picture—strokes achieved with traditional signwriting brushes. “Signwriting brushes have marvelous properties,” says the artist. “Some of the shapes are very long and thin, and they hold a great deal of paint so





that you can pull one line for a very long way.” Other kinds of marks also inhabit the paintings—little dots or dashes, sometimes grouped to suggest texture and sometimes working as smaller elements, stamens, branches or flower petals.

With up to 20 in-progress paintings on his studio walls at any one time, Turpin says that he finds stopping a picture easier than he used to. “When I started painting, I’d work from beginning to end,” he recalls, “and then I’d have this sense of not knowing what I was going to do next. Now when I’m finishing, my eyes are on other canvases on the wall. I can think I know what I’m going to go on to as soon as I’ve finished one.”

Having more paintings in the offing clearly helps the artist avoid the pitfalls of overly fussing with a painting or pushing its finish too far. Liveliness and freshness are important and winning qualities in his work.

### ABSTRACT ROOTS

The curiously hybrid nature of Turpin’s paintings, working as both descriptive scenes and almost abstract objects, grew in part from the artist’s earlier endeavors. In student years he studied architecture, even making a trip to the United States in an attempt to meet Buckminster Fuller. He got all the way to Illinois Southern State University, in Carbondale, only to find that the visionary architect/inventor was away on vacation. Turpin did, however, meet Fuller’s second-in-command and spend some time on campus. Back in London, Turpin realized that he was really more interested in making two-dimensional objects and switched to a study of fine art, but in the meantime

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE  
**Higher Garden With Topiary**  
oil on canvas, 13x14

**Deep in the Garden**  
oil on canvas, 26x28

**New Square Towards RCJ** [Royal Courts of Justice]  
oil on canvas, 24x22



**“When I walk around a garden, I like to get deep into it. It’s quite an intense experience; It’s actually communing.”**

he’d picked up useful experience doing architectural drawings and gaining a command of space and structure.

As a painter, Turpin initially produced abstract work. Although he changed to representational art fairly quickly, his earlier approach still holds an influential sway. His sense of the painting as an object in its own right is very strong. “It always seems to me that whatever you do in a painting, in the end it’s just marks on a canvas,” he says. “If I’m making a painting in which there’s a sense of it becoming an illusion, I always quite like having some element that’s very recognizable as just an object—something that says ‘this is paint on a two-dimensional surface.’”

The success of Turpin’s approach can be seen in *Higher Garden With Topiary* (opposite) a scene in which a large number of blooms and plants occupy the lower part of the piece. Rendered as clear shapes with added delicate lines and touches, they seem to exist right on the picture plane. In the upper half of the painting, the viewer sees beyond the blooms to a grouping of elaborate topiary hedges. These, too, exist in the painting as more or less flat shapes. Beyond them, the horizon, with a glimpse of sea and a swath of sky, is rendered with a similar directness. The unlikely sky color, a deep violet with a slightly pinker violet scumbled on top, inhabits the same color world as the blooms below. The nearly square format of the canvas further asserts the objecthood of the painting.

In other paintings the artist allows himself more perspectival depth. *New Square Towards the RCJ* (left)



presents a scene in London where dense foliage in the foreground adjoins a railing that leads the eye steeply backward in space. The background is occupied by the facade of a building, beyond which the towers of the Royal Courts of Justice rise. Here the architecture has been simplified, with its geometry of rectangles and pyramidal roof forms making an intriguing counterpoint to the natural forms of the blooms in the foreground. Although it's hard to see

in reproduction, various areas of gold leaf glint through from the underpainting.

Turpin's taste for architectural structure is more dramatically displayed in *Cold Frames* (below), a painting in which the three-dimensional grouping of cold frames (frames with transparent covers, used to protect outdoor plants) are used as a kind of grid to contain the plants and blooms in the lower part of the painting. Beyond them, hedges and houses work as a further set of geometric shapes, this time lying more or less flat on the surface. Note how every element in the painting has a rich color gradient built into it as overpainting and underpainting play against each other.



OPPOSITE  
**The Secret Path**  
oil on canvas, 12x24

BELOW  
**Cold Frames**  
oil on canvas, 24x30



## CULTIVATED DELIGHTS

Turpin's knowledge of gardening and his familiarity with the great gardens in England has grown over the years. Early on, in the 1980s, he was inspired by a visit to Vita Sackville-West's garden at Sissinghurst, where the open-air garden "rooms" she created helped the artist transition from painting interiors to painting outdoors. Turpin gradually came to know the gardeners and staff at a number of famous gardens. He has free rein at Great Dixter, the glorious and innovative garden created by the English gardener/author Christopher Lloyd, now tended by Fergus Garrett. He has also worked in the garden of Lamb House, once the home of author Henry James.

Asked what his favorite kind of garden is, Turpin replies, "I like gardens that change." He talks about how the National Trust attempted to replant Sissinghurst identically every year, a policy that has happily changed. And he greatly admires the orchestration of plants at Great Dixter, where one set of blooms replaces another as the seasons progress.

Certainly, a sense of movement, progression and surprise inhabit his work, along with an enormous pleasure in the sensuality of form and the wealth of color. "People recognize that in the paintings," says Turpin. "I think that's what they respond to, a positivity to them that makes everything come together." 🍷

*John A. Parks is a painter, a writer and a member of the faculty of the School of Visual Arts, in New York.*

▶ VISIT TURPIN'S WEBSITE AT [LOUISTURPIN.COM](http://LOUISTURPIN.COM).



## MEET THE ARTIST

Louis Turpin was born and raised in London. Both of his parents were artists. After an early interest in architecture, which he studied at Regent Street Polytechnic, he studied art at Guildford School of Art and then Falmouth School of Art. He has worked as a full-time painter since 1985. Turpin has exhibited widely in the United Kingdom and abroad, and his work has appeared at Royal Academy Summer Exhibitions as well as at the Royal Society of Portrait Painters' Annual Exhibitions. His garden paintings have led to invitations to paint at both Sissinghurst and Glyndebourne. Apart from painting, Turpin is an avid musician and regularly performs as a front man for a blues band. He makes his home in East Sussex, England.