

Hidden colours – and gold



Louis Turpin

Louis Turpin describes to Vivien Donald how underpainting is used to enhance the vibrant colours in his paintings, sometimes with a glint of gold leaf

When I visited Louis Turpin in his studio last year he was working towards an exhibition to be held three months later entitled London Squares, Country Gardens. 'The title gives me something to work towards but my shows are always what I am working on at the time; they could be called work in progress', he told me.

The previous day Louis had travelled with his sketchbook to London from his Kent studio. 'I worked in four squares there and might have six paintings from that. The squares are so beautiful;

there was a really exciting blue door in one of them. Squares are landscape subjects and also cityscape, and I find the buildings interesting, but demanding. They add to the complexity because you've got to think about the painting and have a structure that anchors it. It's important not to let buildings become too tight so I rarely put in glazing bars because I don't want a line of windows. It's not about regularity, it's about whether a line is useful in the painting.

'I work in my sketchbook and bring

ideas back and either develop them or not. Normally I do pencil drawings in the sketchbook, make notes and draw details. Occasionally I take photographs, but most important is the drawing and realising the painting *in situ*. Back in the studio I try to get the canvases started, mapping out paintings. I use my references, but then try to get back to my relationship to the landscape at the time. The things that excited me about it are what I try to get into the painting. It's quite intense. I get the underpainting sorted, and once it's locked, I know it's in there. I have paintings on the go – some get done quite fast and others hang around for some time.

Glowing colour

'My canvases are primed with acrylic gesso primer, a perfect ground to work on, and then I underpaint with the tonality – I like to have lots of colours. It's the foundation behind the context; the underpainting is still there, but the top of the painting — the subject matter — lies on top of that. With the buildings the underpainted colours allow a looseness to the building but the structure lies on top, so it suggests the strength of the building but allows the paint to come through. It's about



◀ *Allotments by the Sea*, oil on canvas, 20×22in (51×56cm).

'I love allotments; you get the juxtaposition of different people's identities. You might get a deckchair in there, or an old shed. It was nice before DIY stores began supplying cheap sheds, when they were made out of old doors.'



▲ *Sissinghurst Allotments*, oil on canvas, 24×22in (61×56cm)

the paint and the canvas, and after that comes the story of the subject I want to make the painting from. They are recognisable subjects, but if you really look, the pictures are about paint. They are about lines and tone all jostled together on the canvas.

'I nearly always start with an underpainted red sky because it gives a slight glow, and there may be some red still shining through the finished painting. Sometimes my underpainting relates to the final passage, sometimes the colour is complementary. Some colours need something underneath to bring out their strengths, particularly blues, and a rosy red keeps the sky vibrant. This also applies to gardens: sometimes the colour underneath

'The gold takes its chances under the flowers or green leaves'

informs the colour on top, sometimes it's a colour that I can cut back into, and sometimes it's a colour that will bring out the tone of the colour on top.

'My snow scenes hardly ever start out white and I would probably put a blue under the snow to lift it up. The snow paintings don't want that background of warmth, because they are cool.

'I have quite a bright palette, but there's always juxtaposition; there's always darkness. The dark colours, such

as indigo, push out the bright oranges and red. The combination produces vibrancy, and by putting the two together the orange is pulled out more strongly because it's surrounded by the darkness.

Gold leaf

'I'm thinking of doing drawings in ink and gold leaf. I love gold leaf. On oil paintings I lay sheets of gold leaf almost as part of the underpainting so the gold is lower down in the structure of the painting. To apply it I use Japan oil-based gold size; you put it on and allow it to become tacky and then lay the gold leaf on top.'

On an underpainting for a garden scene, Louis had laid a large area of



◀ *Cornish Light, Trebah*, oil and gold leaf on canvas, 16×18in (40.5×46cm).

Louis goes all over the country to find his gardens. 'I tend to go to gardens I know of, and revisit places I love, such as Trebah Gardens in Cornwall. It's a beautiful garden. I've been popping in for 30 years and just love being there. I wander around and start getting involved and thinking about paintings.'

'I don't use a huge range of colours, just those I know will work and will give me an intensity of colour'

of glass: an old window that Louis uses as a palette. At the end of each day he cleans off all the colours, and starts mixing again the next morning.

'I don't use a huge range of colours, just those I know will work and will give me an intensity of colour. Some don't retain their tonal integrity when mixed and I'm looking for a high key, so I need colours that don't become muddy. I use Roberson indigo substitute a lot because it makes a good dark with a degree of blue. I don't use blacks, so if I'm working towards an intense, dark colour I need to start with dark colours, and the indigo is a good base. Winsor green is also a good colour for me: it gives strength of colour to my work. Also Roberson cobalt blue, Winsor & Newton permanent rose, and cadmium yellow and Indian yellow for strength and intensity.

'For brushes I like Wrights of Lymm Signwriters' Brushes* because you can get a really good line with them and they are good for detail. I use the whole range, mainly rounds and flats. I also use Handover brushes and some synthetic brushes, but most of my brushes are sable and I buy several hundred pounds' worth of brushes every year. I use wedges and chisels, but not heavy, chunky brushes. The sables do wear out fast, but it's better to spend money on a brush that works than to buy a cheap brush that doesn't. You need a brush that makes a point, that will keep its shape and hold the paint, otherwise you are letting yourself down as a painter.

'My drawings of sheep and trees are done in Indian ink with a signwriter brush. I sometimes use a pen, but find them scratchy; a brush is softer and more fluid. I tend to use a reasonably

gold leaf on to what will become the sky and part of the garden. 'Then I will paint over it. But by the time I finish it, it may be that there will be hardly any gold leaf to be seen at all in the garden, or even the sky. The gold takes its chances under the flowers or green leaves, or I may lay a second layer of gold leaf in some areas, to make it thicker. On one painting I covered the whole canvas in gold leaf, and by the time I'd finished it you could hardly tell there was any gold leaf at all; just little hints, small glints — but that was fine; it was enough. It worked.'

Materials

Louis uses 12oz cotton duck canvas which he buys by the roll once a year from Russell and Chapple (www.russellandchapple.co.uk). 'It's got enough weight and is reasonably thick. I like the fact that the canvas will give a little as you drag the brush across it, so that the line becomes more fluid. I'll cut the canvas to fit, slot the stretchers together, stretch the canvas and then I'm off. My paintings are from 9 to 48in (23 to 122cm); sometimes larger but not often.'

His colours are always Artist quality: Roberson Artists' Oil Colour (from L Cornelissen & Son), Schmincke Mussini and Winsor & Newton. His colours are all mixed, and this is done on a sheet



▲ *Marking the Late Arrival of Spring*, Indian ink on paper, 16×14in (40.7×35.5cm)



▲ *The Magnolia Tree*, Indian ink, watercolour, gold leaf on paper, 15×15in (38×38cm)



heavy Saunders Waterford Not watercolour paper which, again, I buy by the roll. I soak the paper and stretch it on a board.'

The studio Louis uses has a huge, 16ft high, 32ft long, sloping north-facing corrugated plastic wall that lets in plenty of light. However, he does work under artificial light when necessary, with fluorescent overhead tubes and one lamp with a Daylight bulb. 'I used to be a purist and not work in artificial light, but the shows keep coming and I don't want to not be painting, so you turn the lights on, give yourself a few minutes to adapt and just carry on.' **TA**

▲ *New Harbour, Low Tide*, oil on canvas, 28×24in (71.2×61cm).

'I started out as an abstract painter, but I've become more detailed as a painter in the last few years. The figurative paintings I do have an abstract structure – that's how it works, to my mind. The red here on the boat gives a vibrancy to the painting because it is surrounded by the dark tones.'

* *Wrights of Lymm*, 01925 754368; www.stonehouses.co.uk supply signwriters' brushes and also gold leaf and size. Handover brushes are available by mail order, 0844 875 3381; www.handover.co.uk.

Louis Turpin's work can be seen at the Langham Gallery, London WC1, 0207 242 0010, www.langhamgallery.com; Bohun Gallery, Henley-on-Thames, 01491 576228, www.bohungallery.co.uk; The Fosse Gallery, Stow on the Wold, 01451 831319, fossegallery.com; and Rye Art Gallery, 01797 222433, www.ryeartgallery.co.uk.