



MASTERCLASS

A plein-air love affair

Peter Brown's spontaneous and lively scenes are painted from life, with oil as his medium of choice. Susie Hodge investigates what makes him tick

Peter Brown fell in love with the city of Bath whilst studying an art foundation course and now he is a familiar sight painting on the city's streets. He works in other cities, too, including London, Oxford, Cambridge, Cardiff, Chichester and Henley-on-Thames. Using charcoal, oil and pastel, he works directly in the open air, sometimes in the foulest of weathers, rarely retreating to the studio.

Out in all weathers

Known for working directly *en plein air* throughout the year, in all weathers, he is affectionately nicknamed 'Pete the Street'. His work is lively and vibrant, just like his

personality. Although he had a couple of temporary jobs as a younger man, the atmosphere, architecture and the light and shade of the city of Bath inspired him to paint. And so, he admits, his career began on the streets as he attempted to sell his paintings there. 'I had drawn charcoals of Bath and decided to tout them round to a couple of local galleries. I was pretty much told they were unsaleable and, being young and arrogant, I assumed they were wrong and decided to sell the pictures myself, setting them out on the pavements of Bath. I had a confrontation with the council and eventually managed to get a licence put in place for artists to do this in the city. It

still took three months of seven days a week through that first winter before I sold anything. I remember the first sale – £45 – it was amazing. In the first year I just managed to cover my rent and bills, and that was it.

Big breaks

'My next big breaks were elections to art societies and Peter Khufeld coming across me on the streets of Bath. Peter introduced me to Bill Patterson; both are wonderful artists and I owe them a great deal.'

Although he used to use a lot of charcoal, these days Peter works mainly in oils on canvas, or on small MDF boards.

◀ **Superdry Window, Regent Street**, oil on canvas, 30×35in (76×89cm).

I remember seeing that Cheapside painting by Ken Howard looking into a plate glass window. It's brilliant and paintings like that open your eyes to loads of possibilities. I wonder if I'd have spotted this view had I not seen Ken's. I doubt it.'

▶ **Jermyn Street**, oil on canvas, 30×15in (76×38cm).

'I'd arrived in London after a three-hour drive to find I'd left all my gear in Bath, so had to restock. The art shop did not have my favourite quick-drying medium, so I painted with linseed oil for the first time. I struggled, but really enjoyed the malleability, particular when painting the marble pillars on the left.'

He says he has never worked at developing a style. 'In my work I try to get better at seeing and putting marks down, remembering all the time that I'm trying to produce interesting paintings!' Clearly possessing a natural 'eye' and an inherent understanding of knowing how to create compelling compositions, Peter is nonetheless self-effacing: 'I see a view, select a board or canvas and, with minimal sketching out, I simply start to chuck paint on it' (If only we could all 'chuck paint on' like that!) But his comments serve to show that his skill is intrinsic and comes as second nature to him, and his work evolves as he paints. 'It's all dictated by what happens to the scene in front of me as I paint,' he says.

Working from life

Vehemently against the use of photographic references, Peter works from life 95 per cent of the time. 'The other five per cent is squaring-up of oil sketches that I think have enough information to work with.' Does he go looking specifically for sites, or does he come across them unexpectedly? 'I drive and I wander. Sometimes I see potential images everywhere and sometimes I really struggle. I don't know what I'm looking for, but when I see it, I know it. Sometimes I see it, paint it and then wish I never had! I love streets and interesting spaces. Sometimes I like strong tonal contrasts and sometimes hardly any contrasts at all. But I always love fiddly details! When creating compositions, I try to stay as true as possible to what I'm seeing, but sometimes I'll leave out, say, a large lamppost that's dissecting my view.

Timing and technique

'I work in two- to three-hour sessions, unless the light is very even all day. Then I return to the same spot at the same time of day to carry on with that particular





▼ **Hattie and Ella, Bed Time**, oil on board, 12×24in (30.5×61cm).

'I love this room, which these two always keep as a tip. I painted it over about three sittings. I caught an impression of Hattie's head on the pillow on the first go and decided not to over explain her. I tried to get Ella to pose but mainly had to wing it – she cannot sit still.'

▲ **Christmas Trees for Sale, Marylebone High Street**, oil on board, 8×10in (20.5×25.5cm).

'This view just jumped out at me. I was off to paint something else but set up quickly and tried to capture the light in the Christmas tree, netting and all.'

painting. Big canvases can take four, five or six sessions, small boards often take just one. I have no particular order of working when creating a painting, although I do try to consider what would be best to put down first on meeting areas of colour and tone.'

Does he return to the same palette, or does he restrict his colours? 'I use way too





▲ **Setting Sun, Albert Bridge**, oil on board, 8×24in (20.5×61cm).

'I painted this in three sittings. I was driving out of London along the embankment, stressed that I was leaving a bucket-full of sun when I spotted this. I knew I would have very little time and that the first sitting would not look good, and it would be tricky returning at the same time of day with the same tide and the trees in the same state of foliage. In fact I'm not sure all those criteria were fulfilled but the first sitting gave me most of the information I needed.'

many colours! I have them to save time. For instance, I bought an off-white the other day, Old Holland warm grey, I think. Ridiculous – I could make it in a second, but I love it.'

Time saving is obviously important for him when out painting in adverse weather conditions, but what about techniques? 'I try not to use "techniques" specifically. I probably do, but nothing I'm conscious of. Similarly, if something goes wrong with a painting there is no set procedure – I usually rag or scrape it, walk away, take a deep breath and sort it out. I hate giving up. It makes me very grumpy.'

Part of Peter's natural ability is an inborn understanding of how to portray perspective. He says: 'I have it in my head. Sometimes it does go wrong; I do have this habit of creating deep pavements, which means that some of my figures can become very willowy and tall.'

So who inspires him? 'The likes of Ken Howard, Tom Coates and Peter Greenham, the sketches of Constable and Corot, and a wonderful painter called Christopher Chamberlain (1918–84). The Tate have a couple of his works, they're immense.'

Competitions and exhibitions

'I'm addicted to competitions; I hate rejection, but that doesn't deter me. I still remember the feeling when all three of



Elephant at Clock Tower, Udaipur, India, oil on canvas, 64×52in (162.5×132cm).

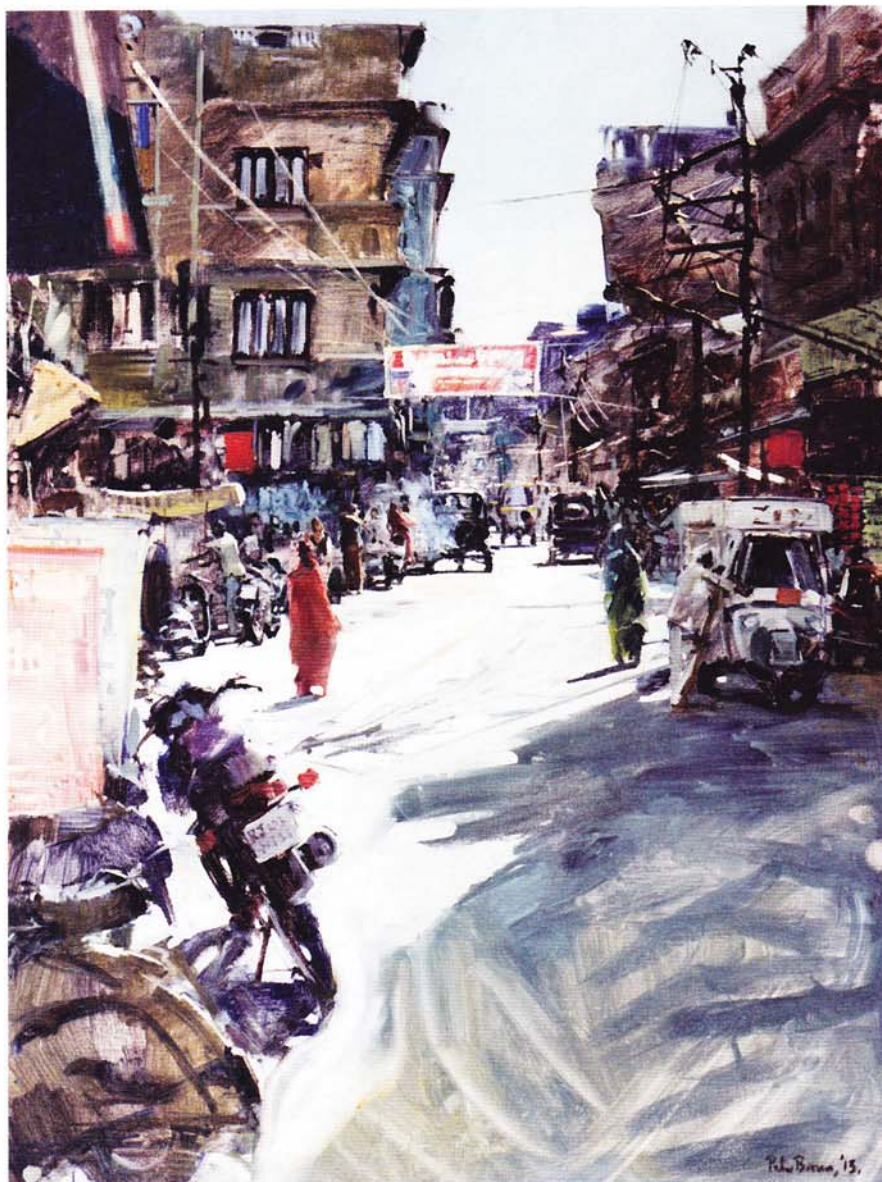
'This is one of the very few studio works I have done. The studies I brought back from India were packed full of detail and information and I was still so fired up with the subject that I squared up a couple. I was keen to keep the energy of the original oil sketches so, finding my brushes too small, I used rags and medium.'



The River, Blackpool Sands, Devon, oil, 8×8in (20.5×20.5cm).

'I'd just completed a larger oil of the same scene but it still tickled me and I wanted to capture it slightly later in the afternoon in a more rapid impression.'

my entries were accepted for the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition – I danced round the house for five minutes! And I love putting together exhibitions. It's the best bit and is a huge drive for me. My next show at Messum's will be oil sketches of my travels across the south of Britain, and some from France and Spain, with a bit of India in there too! I'm also working towards a Bath exhibition in February to March 2014. This will be mainly paintings of Bath and its surroundings from throughout the year.' TA



Afternoon, Jagdish Road, Udaipur, India, oil on canvas, 48×36 (122×91.5cm).

'This was the other Indian sketch I blew up. I did a lot of ragging on this to avoid filling in large areas with small brushstrokes.'

Peter Brown

studied in Bath and Manchester, obtaining a Fine Art degree from Manchester Metropolitan University. He has received many awards at various national exhibitions and is a member of The New English Art Club, the Pastel Society, the Royal Institute of Oil Painters, the Royal Society of Portrait Painters, Bath Society of Artists and is also an honorary member of the Royal Society of British Artists. In May 2002 he took part in a radio programme, *A Picture of Bath*, which led to him taking part in the BBC1 series *Inside Out*, where he painted his favourite view of Bath. In 2006 he was invited to be the first Artist in Residence at The Savoy Hotel, London.

Peter sells his work exclusively through his agent, Messum's, 8 Cork Street, London W1, telephone 020 7437 5545, www.messums.com, info@messums.com, where his latest exhibition is from November 20 to December 24, and Victoria Art Gallery, Bridge Street, Bath, telephone 01225 477233, www.victoriagal.org.uk, where he will be exhibiting in February and March, 2014. He also took part in a group show at the Tryon Gallery in Bury Street, London SW1, featuring paintings from his visit with other artists to Udaipur in Rajasthan, India, early in 2013.

For further information on Peter's work:

www.petethestreet.com

Peter is leading a reader holiday to Havana from February 24 to March 11, 2014. See page 2 for details or email art@spencerscott.co.uk.

www.spencerscotttravel.com