

The streets of Bath are busy with ambulances, street cleaners, police, traffic wardens – and an artist.

Peter Brown admits that he can't curb his passion for painting. Pavement life and the every-day street scene are his addiction. He is a man who knows every nook and cranny of the city he has painted for more than 20 years.

Pete the Street, as he is known, moves among the street furniture, the phone boxes, even watching as the traffic lights change their colour, red, amber and green; all have potential to appear on the canvas that captures the city's heartbeat.

He has an international reputation, but carries it lightly, admitting that as a teenage art student his ambition was to get an HGV licence, and take to the road in a very different manner. He and his easel and silvery tin of oil paints and brushes make a compact workforce, easily merging into the street scene while he is on the move, whether in Bath, Edinburgh, India or, more recently, Barcelona.

And this man of the street was naturally drawn to depict the streets of London after the riots. He arrived the day after a weekend of disturbances, when the sound of police horses could still be heard on neighbouring roads.

"I have to say I was inspired by what I saw," he says. "You got a real taste of what the community spirit there is like. Although of course it had been a pretty horrible situation you could see that the community really was quite strong and wanted to rebuild it and it was great to be there."

He also loves Victorian seaside towns. "And discovering communities with little shops. I am painting Widcombe [part of Bath] at the moment, where there is a little parade of shops with a lovely atmosphere. I go round and I can't help record. I don't think, 'is someone going to buy this?' Last time it snowed I went a bit mental, because I wanted to get all of it, and you can't, you only have a limited amount of time."

He enjoys the city when it is veiled by mist and invigorated by rain, capturing railings, worn steps, canal banks and the thoroughfares that draw in the world.

Water reflects the light, bringing drab surfaces to life, but Peter also loves the dark. "I am a miserable bugger, very English," he smiles.

He starts by homing in on detail, and says: "I can paint for about an hour in the rain, and get as much as I can of the idea." A large oil sketch will take two to three hours to complete.

Peter and his wife, Lisa, have five children, and children's laughter fills their house. Life at home must be as engaging as the streets outside, his happy family framing his success.

In his studio the light falls on his prolific output. Who knows where the Bath stone walls will bring warmth in the future? His work is in collections including the National Library of Wales and the RAC Club, as well as Bath's Victoria Art Gallery and Holburne Museum.

On November 20 an exhibition of 150 of his oil sketches opens in London, his ninth solo show to be held at Messum's Cork Street gallery. Next year the Victoria Art Gallery will hold a major exhibition of his work.

"The exhibition in November will be my biggest one yet," he says. "It has been two years in the making and includes a lot of the south coast and London."

Peter admits that he is not always left to carry out his contemplative work in peace, saying wryly: "Sometimes in Trafalgar Square a painter can feel less welcome than the pigeons". The variety of activities that take place, including the square's popularity as a film backdrop, can lead to artists being asked to move to the sidelines.

In the 1990s while painting in Queen's Square, Bath, one business contacted police to have Peter removed from the pavement outside its office, without making any initial attempt to let him know it was not happy to have an artist working nearby.

In India it was very different. People crowded round, full of curiosity: "A very different experience. I really enjoyed," he says. "The streets are very narrow, yet you can set up anywhere and so much is going on. A moped went by carrying six people."

Peter came back from India with more than 40 completed paintings, the bright light of Udaipur radiating from the white walls, the heat and bustle palpable.

In his book, *My Indian Travels*, published by Messum Fine Art, he recalls how he was once painting outside a small workshop. "The wife of the man was delighted to have me right on the doorstep. There were absolutely no territorial concerns here. It made me think back to Queen's Square. Here the subjects of my painting came and went, the grandfather and grandson chatting on the doorstep, the cow that pushed me out of its way, much to the amusement of two giggling girls in the window above. The street seller with the blue coat."

Peter grew up in Oare, near Newbury, and first came to Bath in 1986 to study for a Diploma in Art Foundation Studies at Bath College of Higher Education, where David Atkinson was head of the foundation course, and David Cobb his painting tutor.

Recently, while painting in London's Highbury Fields, he heard a voice call his name and turned to see Atkinson. "I hadn't seen him since 1986!" he says. "I put him in the painting."

Although Peter enjoyed painting as a teenager he says: "I was the worst in the class at A level, and there were only five of us. I got on the foundation course, but my ambition was to get an HGV licence and take to the road. I didn't think I was going to make any money from painting."

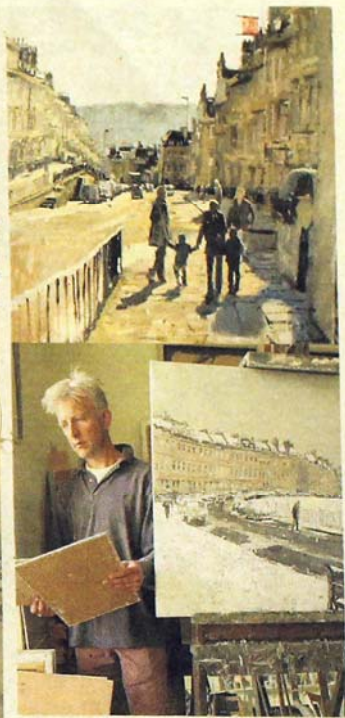
Nonetheless he won a commendation in painting as well as his diploma at Bath, and went on to take a BA (Hons) in fine art at Manchester Polytechnic. He returned to the city in 1995, and although he admits he first found the experience of painting in public unnerving he soon began to enjoy the human contact, and if passers-by want to engage him in conversation that is fine.

"Talking with people isn't a problem because sometimes you need a pause, sometimes you can't see the wood for the trees."

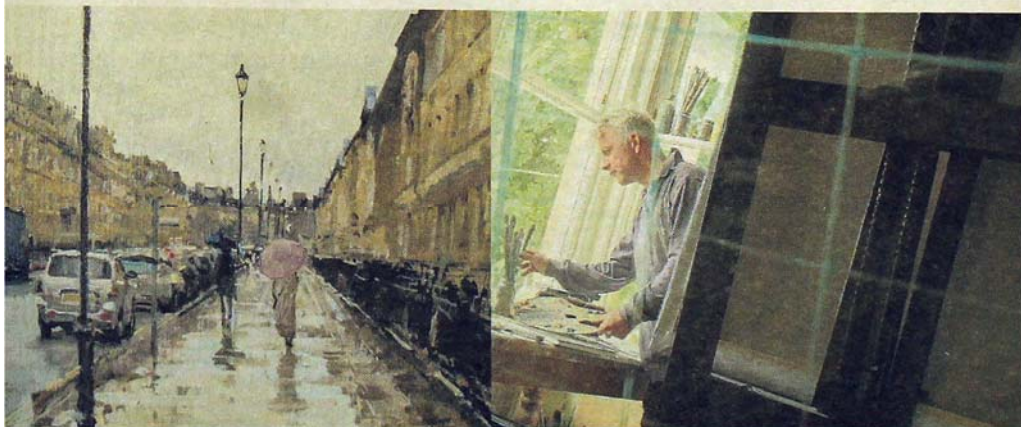
Today, whatever the weather, he is likely to be back on the street, in Bath or elsewhere. "To get better I need to work, and that's what we all want to do. I just plod on," he says.

For more information about Peter's art, including books and catalogues of his work visit www.peterbrownneac.com





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