

On a **grand** scale



I paint almost completely from life. I never use photographic reference but occasionally I will paint from oil sketch studies when I need to. For instance in my last exhibition at the Victoria Art Gallery in Bath I wanted a large, imposing canvas for the end wall and I worked from tiny 6×12in (12×30.5cm) oil sketches of sunsets to create a sunset over Bath of 52×108in (132×274.5cm). I wanted it to remain fairly abstract but even then I had to keep returning to site to do small sketches to work out how the land lay.

Scale and composition

Finding a subject can, for me, be the hardest thing in painting – I need something real to work from. The only method I have to find subject matter is to move: drive to a new bit of coast, sort out a trip to India or simply leave the house. I wander, for hours sometimes. I have had days when nothing has grabbed me, but not many, as I reckon it's better to paint something than nothing. Very often I have a scale in my head when I'm looking, ie a small panel or a large canvas – painting on larger canvases makes the process much more considered and deliberate. I can work on canvases up to 40×50in (101.5×127cm) on site but at that size they turn into very effective sails in wind, and it can be hard to work.

For my current show at Messum's I decided to concentrate on larger works. One of the paintings is *Tower Bridge* (right). I set out from Bath with 'Tower Bridge' and 'big' in my head. The size of the canvas was dictated by the vastness of the bridge up close, the

Plein-air painter **Peter Brown** completes almost all his paintings in front of the subject. He tells of the challenges, the satisfaction and his method of working on site with large canvases



▲ *Tower Bridge*, oil on canvas, 48×36in (122×91.5cm).

To paint at this size I was constantly shortening and lengthening the legs of the easel and had to put the toolbox on the back to hold it in the wind. This took four sittings of three hours with a changing tide

► *The City from More London*, oil on canvas, 30×35in (76×90cm).

This took four or five sittings of two to three hours. I returned at the same time each day so light was not a problem but the tide changes by an hour each day so you have to be aware that the water level is not the same, nor is the associated perspective

weight of the Portland stone and the long reflections in the muddy water below – the biggest canvas I had with me was 48×36in (122×91.5cm). It was an interesting space to paint. That is always a big thing for me. The battle of converting 3D to 2D is one of the big challenges so spaces that tickle me are important. This gives me something to get my teeth into.

I love working on small boards, which can be 10×8in (25.5×20.5cm) to 12×16in (30.5×40.6cm). They are usually 2–6mm thick MDF primed with three coats of acrylic gesso. I lay on an oil ground that can be from light grey/umber to a fairly dark Payne's grey/blue.

The word composition always used to send shivers down my spine but now I approach it as I have learned to approach all my painting: you know when it's right and you know when it's wrong. Don't question it. My whole career has been trial and error – I spent years missing the tops off spires. My mate Karl gave me a viewfinder the other day but I fear using it, I think it will make me paint paintings I would not normally paint. I am very wary of rules.

Colour

I guess the same goes for colour. In my head I am simply seeing and putting paint on canvas, and sometimes the colour is close to reality but more often I am interpreting it. I struggle with green and have to make myself paint it duller than I'd like to. My palette is fairly earthy and grey but within that I'm making the decisions that all artists make. It's all about comparison: bluer, redder, colder, warmer, etc – I have a cold brown (brown madder) and a warm one (transparent oxide), for instance. The other decision when mixing is that of opacity: cerulean blue and yellow ochre have more body than, say, alizarin. I used to have Prussian blue and English/Venetian red on my palette, but I notice I have neither now, which is right. I'd need both or neither as I see them as opposites in terms of opacity and colour – both are very strong colours and you can knock one down with the other. ▶



▲ *Saint Paul's, Afternoon*, oil on canvas, 35×30in (90×76cm).

Painting the buses requires patience, particularly side-on. Slow traffic helps but you literally have to do it bit by bit, making sure you are looking at the same model each time. It's a real challenge but I am determined not to use a photo for reference

DEMONSTRATION: Bath Abbey



Bizarrely I have never painted Bath Abbey although I have always wanted to paint it from up close – this makes you paint big



Materials

I cannot do without Roberson's glaze medium. It decreases drying time, adds fluidity and gives the paint a gloss when it's dry. My brushes are long filbert hog hair, from No.2 to 2in wide, and synthetic rounds, Nos. 2-4, for fiddly bits (Pro Arte and some Daler-Rowney Graduate ones with longer shafts).

These all go in a box easel and a tool

box along with 200ml tubes of paint, rags (I love rags), two palette knives, turpentine and two small nylon palettes that I mix on. If I'm working big I'll take a large T-square with me.

I use artist-quality oils from various manufacturers. All 16 colours are laid out on the easel palette. The earths and blues go at the top: yellow ochre, raw umber, transparent oxide red lake,

▲ STAGE ONE

I wanted to make sure I got it all in so made some basic measurements. I decided to put a figure in early on as I have a tendency to make the foreground too deep, and this helps to keep the scale right. I finished the sitting by slapping on the sky, as it helps me assess the shapes and sizes – I find it easier to assess solid blocks rather than delineated areas – so I can look afresh the next day

◀ STAGE TWO

The sun was out so I started to put some of the lighter tones in on the façades, the tone of the canvas served as the shaded areas for the moment.

I included elements as I saw them, chopping and changing and moving around the canvas as much as possible in order to see things as freshly and objectively as possible. The great thing about working on site is you can really look into the shadows and see the reflected light within. In fact the tones were close to the bits in sunlight

ultramarine blue, cerulean blue and Payne's grey. The bottom row has all the brighter colours: rose pink, cadmium red deep, cadmium red, cadmium orange, cadmium yellow, lemon yellow, viridian, permanent sap green (that's my illegal one) and quinacridone magenta. In the middle I put two big blobs of titanium white. **TA**

Peter's current exhibition, *En Route London to Paris*, is at Messum's, 8 Cork Street, London, W1S 3LJ until November 15.

www.messums.com; telephone 020 7437 5545. Further information about Pete is available from his website: www.petethestreet.com.

► STAGE THREE

I added some greens, making sure I had broadly covered all the canvas. Note the foreground figure is still there

▼ FINISHED PAINTING

Bath Abbey, oil on canvas, 30×35in (76×89cm).

Luckily there was more sun than was forecast and I did more than I would have. It was nice to catch the back of a bus. I painted into wet on the road and grass. I tend to chuck down a guess at a colour first to cover it then work into the wet, correcting it, which gives the paint fluidity. I was to return again, maybe twice. The drawing was not right and I added more figures and cars to help describe the space and give it a bit more bustle. The figure in the foreground has disappeared: by the last sitting I'd forgotten what it was like and did not feel confident enough to finish it off

Peter will be conducting a The Artist Holiday to Arles for some plein-air painting from May 2 to 11. For full details, please see page 67.

