

# Portrait of an Artist



The discipline of the army instilled in Hugo Grenville

the qualities he needed to succeed in painting.  
By Virginia Boston.

## What was the first image that left an impression?

I must have been about 10. I was halfway round the Louvre when I saw the most inspiring picture – *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) by Delacroix, with the ample-bosomed Liberty leaping onto the barricades. I loved history as a child and found the picture so exciting because it told a story, yet the shapes and colours were completely beguiling. It was then I realized that pictures spoke.

## Can you remember your first painting?

I went to an antediluvian prep school near Brighton and the only type of painting we were allowed to do was copying Spanish galleons. But when I went to public school I hated playing games and discovered the art room where I painted and sculpted. By 18, I realized this was what I'd love to do but it took me another 12 years to do it.

## How did you end up joining the army?

After going on the hippy trail in the mid-70's, I went for a job as a porter at Sotheby's. They told me I was too young and suggested I go to university or join the army. My parents had divorced and were very hard-up and as I didn't see how I could finance university I joined the army. I spent five rather strange years in Northern Ireland, Africa, Germany and then London where I enrolled at Chelsea School of Art. I was nicknamed Picasso by my brother officers – probably because he was the only artist they could think of.

## How has being a soldier informed your painting?

The army gave me two vital lifelines – the self-discipline to do art and the determination to keep

going. It made me tough. Painting is a very hard way of living, it's so financially insecure. I wasn't a natural military person – arranging flowers was more natural for me – but I survived it and enjoyed it. I did a massive amount of reading, and quite a bit of painting.

## What did you learn from your experiences as the official war artist in Bosnia?

I was there in the last year of the war when Nato was given permission to fight back and the things we saw were horrific – I will never forget the mass graves. The experience made me realize as an artist that art wasn't the right medium for me to use as a form of political or narrative expression. Previously my work had been very narrative, but being a war artist pushed me away from that so that now my paintings are much more meditative, contemplative and dreamlike; they don't tell stories, they present a way of seeing. It's all about

become disgusting or I've lost the sensitivity of colour harmony I was trying to achieve.

## What are the best and worst moments of your career?

The worst moment was five years ago when I'd reached a point in painting where I couldn't go forward. I burnt the best part of a year's work in an awful bonfire, then locked the studio door and wouldn't go in there for three months. I felt completely miserable, and believed my career was finished. The best moment was last August when two dealers from New York invited me to exhibit in the Wally Findlay Galleries (the show I am having this autumn). It was such a contrast to five years before.

## Who have been the greatest influences on you as an artist?

Many people say there is a big Matisse influence and I relish this debt. Then there are the English mystical painters such as Samuel Palmer with his landscapes, his extraordinary sense of colour and that strange moodiness. I started by being massively influenced by Walter Sickert and was a socialist realist painter, but every time I did a war painting it felt impossible to get away from Paul Nash's incredibly strong images of the First World War.

## If you could own one work of art what would it be?

It would be *La Lecture* (1906) by Matisse. He painted his daughter Marguerite sitting at the kitchen table reading. It has gorgeous colours and patterns and a huge sensitivity in the way he has handled the figure.

## Best practical tip?

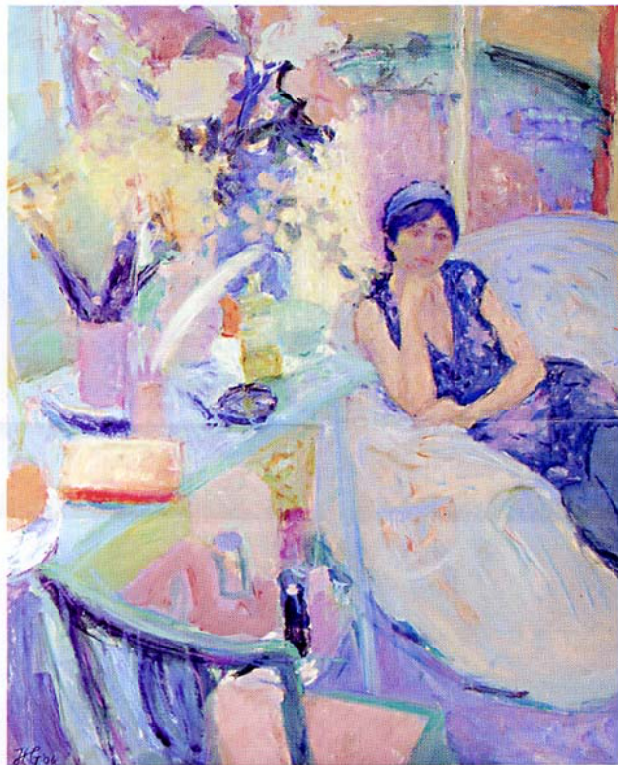
It would be Janis Joplin's advice: 'It is better to be good half the time than half as good all the time.' You have to commit yourself completely, emotionally and physically, to making art. You need to give yourself to it with absolute integrity and then something good may come out of it.

## Artist Biography

Hugo Grenville spent five years in the Coldstream Guards, and after a brief spell in advertising and art dealing he became a full-time painter in 1989. In 1996 he was the official war artist in Bosnia. He has had 11 one-man exhibitions, including seven at Messum's in London, and his work can be seen in collections in the UK, USA, France, Canada, Hong Kong and Australia. Contact him on 07747 758595.

Hugo's exhibition at the Wally Findlay Galleries, 124 East 57th Street, New York runs from 12 October-12 November.

Hugo is running *A Journey Into Paint*, a one-day-a-week painting course in London, starting September 2006. For further information, visit [www.hugogrenville.com](http://www.hugogrenville.com)



the internal world; I want to express tranquility in a world that is not tranquil.

## Describe your typical working day.

I'm in the studio at 8.30, then my sitter arrives. If I am starting a new idea it can take a whole day to set up the composition. Usually I work on three paintings a day – these are days of construction. Then there are days of destruction, where I stand out in the yard with a bucket of white spirit removing most of what I have done, because it's