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## The Red House: A Colourist's Dream

Five years ago, the garden of his old Suffolk house was a wilderness. Now Hugo Grenville has transformed it into an idyllic backdrop for his artistic masterclasses

By Fiona MacLeod



A living landscape: Hugo Grenville's picture shows an approaching storm in the Waveney Valley, Suffolk

Photographs of the Red House, taken five years ago when it was bought by Sophie and Hugo Grenville, tell a sad story. The once-elegant red-brick house in the village of Mendham in Suffolk had been neglected for many years and was nearing a state of ruin. Surrounded by tumbledown outhouses and a pond masquerading as a mud puddle, the house, which looks like a miniature Georgian manor and dates back to the 1650s, and its garden, presented an overwhelming challenge to its new owners.

"When we arrived," says Hugo Grenville, "the house had been empty for 10 years and the garden was just a wilderness - two acres of chest-high nettles, brambles and thistles, and an impressive collection of rusting agricultural machinery and old huts. Impenetrable thickets of brambles had come right up the steps to the front of the house so that it was impossible even to open the doors. It was just like a scene from *Sleeping Beauty*."

Although Hugo and his wife Sophie are not the sort to be easily daunted, Hugo admits that initially he sank into a deep depression. "I was immobilised with horror, really. Every Saturday we went out with our saws and our spades and made absolutely no impression on the garden whatsoever. It took me about three years just to work out where everything was going to go."

Five years on, the Red House and its walled wilderness has been turned into a beautiful and original home, though the transformation of the garden has not been a conventional one. Hugo is an artist by profession, and not a gardener, "but I thought if I were a painter and couldn't do my own garden, there was something wrong somewhere. So I began by treating the garden as though it were a canvas - looking at it and deciding what elements were needed where. I kept on looking at it often from the first floor, and gradually it all fell into place."

Hugo's vision was to turn the garden into an extension of the house by dividing it up into three rooms made up of cobbled paths, pleached limes and long, curving beds set against the walls. There is also an organic vegetable garden, growing everything from carrots and spinach to potatoes and artichokes, and a separate herb garden. "Luckily, we're working on light, alluvial soil here, which is brilliant for a gardener who doesn't like gardening."

Hugo admits. "It's light enough to work even after heavy rain. We've had just four days of sun now and it's friable in your hand. I'm no great plantsman - my philosophy has been to buy it cheap and grow it high - but if I saw something I liked in a garden centre, I bought six of them and stuffed them in a corner, so I got rioting blocks of colour. I'm a non-gardener's gardener, I suppose. I treat the whole thing exactly as I do my paintings."

Hugo's garden and his painting skills have now been united in a new venture: the Red House is opening its doors during the summer months to become a painting school. Hugo, who exhibits at the David Messum Gallery in London, will take three of the eight courses on offer, concentrating on painting in oil. "I find doing some teaching incredibly stimulating and rewarding. It takes me out of my internal world." He has taught painting for the last 10 years and is an inspiring and entertaining teacher, being very knowledgeable about art history, and his conversation is studded with interesting nuggets of information that invite discussion.

Hugo describes himself as essentially a colourist - his palette is bright and jaunty, lemon yellow, violet, mauve and pale blue are colours that appear regularly in the paintings propped up for me to look at around the walls of the studio. There are landscapes of the varied Suffolk region, from the water meadows round Bungay to the beach at Southwold. Cornwall, France and Venice also feature.

His other preoccupation is with intimate, domestic scenes, mainly figures in the interior of the Red House. "For me, the truth lies in trying to find the spirit of a particular scene. You walk into a room and see the light moving around the different objects. You see the stillness of the room and there is something beguiling and otherworldly about it."

The interior of the Red House, which has provided the backdrop for most of these pictures, has been painted in "Georgian" shades - duck-egg blue and pale green, set off by some more startling contemporary touches reflecting both Grenvilles' passion for colour. The drawing-room has violet shutters with contrasting blue panels, which are bold and effective. Floors are polished and covered with Persian rugs, and the walls are crammed with pictures and photographs.

The village of Mendham, in Suffolk, birthplace of the horse painter Munnings and the subject of several of his paintings, is situated in the Waveney Valley, an area that is characterised by its beautiful water meadows and unspoilt villages. It is an interesting place both to visit and to paint, within easy reach of Aldeburgh, with its spectacular salt marshes and the old Victorian

seaside towns of Southwold and Walberswick, favourite subjects for many artists, including Philip Wilson Steer and Stanley Spencer.

Courses at the Red House will not be residential, but there is good local accommodation in surrounding villages. Lunch, however, will be provided, using organic vegetables from the garden wherever possible, and when the weather is good, there will be picnics in the walled garden.

The countryside and the garden surrounding the Red House Studios add gloss to a painting school with a serious purpose. Hugo feels that it is important for an artist to become accomplished at the skills of painting and drawing even if he or she then moves on from figurative to abstract work, and teaching in this essential area is exactly what he aims to provide. He points out that the art schools are no longer concentrating on these skills. "Even the Slade has now stopped having life-drawing classes."

The art schools may have given up, but the Grenvilles are carrying on the tradition - with the added bonus that students will not only learn something useful, but also spend four days in a beautiful place, too.