



*View from the Studio, Winter*, oil on canvas, 18×48in (45.5×122cm)

# A room with a view

**Hugo Grenville discusses how a personal interpretation of a scene, in terms of composition, colour and technique, can be used to influence the mood of your painting**

I am never quite sure if my obsession with painting views through windows is a result of not being able to decide whether I am essentially a landscape painter, or a painter of domestic interiors, or whether in fact it does not owe its roots to an atavistic response to nature, and our complex but passionate relationship with it. As a species, mankind's involvement with nature has been both symbiotic and paradoxical: we need to love and understand it because it provides for us, but we are also fearful of it, and seek shelter from it, in case it unleashes its wrath upon us.

Artists have always been sensitive to this paradox, and have responded by depicting it in all its guises – compare the relentless fury of the elements in Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* with the ethereal wonder of a dawn in Turner's *Norham Castle, Sunrise*; Gericault makes us tremble, Turner invites us to renew our faith in the mysteries of creation. Turner's great influence was Claude Lorrain, and Claude's landscapes gather up the viewers and sweep us into an idealised interpretation of nature, elevating us to a

higher experience, imbuing us with a sense of wistfulness and longing for a perfect world. And it is this longing to be somewhere spiritually perfect, somewhere in between reality and dreaming where everyday objects are bathed in the light of hope and promise, that draws me to repeatedly contemplate the view from my studio windows.

## Interpreting the scene

As I begin to combine landscape elements with everyday domestic objects and rearrange them in a single composition, my perception of the view outside and the space within alters. The landscape becomes more intimate and less remote, whilst the interior objects and flowers seem to be invested with a greater liveliness and luminosity. By taking a deliberate step away from conventional perception, which tends to focus on absorbing either the view out of the window, or the interior setting, but not both simultaneously, I am able to see the subject afresh, to engage in a sense of rapture, to allow my feelings to rise to the surface. Light, colour, texture, shape

become the tools with which this experience can be expressed.

*View from the Studio, Winter* (above) is not a factual record of anything, but simply a poem that tries to express winter beauty through shape and colour. Having contemplated the subject, and having come to an idea about how it might be treated, the question arises as to how you convert an idea into a visual image?

## The mood

The first stage is to consider the mood that you want to depict, and then see how it can be expressed in terms of shape, line, colour, tone and mark making. Huge, gestural brushmarks will suggest something different from small, careful marks; a dark palette will conjure a different mood from a light palette; gentle, unsaturated colours evoke alternative feelings from strong primaries.

Here I sought a mood which was serene, contemplative, gentle and essentially optimistic. It was a fairly dull, still February day, but there seemed to be an echo of repressed light lurking beneath the fret. The more I observed its quality, the more I



*Flower Study with Lilies and Hydrangea*, oil on canvas, 32×30in (81.5×76cm)

## **‘Mankind’s involvement with nature has been both symbiotic and paradoxical: we need to love and understand it because it provides for us’**

felt that I needed to use an unsaturated yellow as the signature colour. These delicate yellow hues must not be upstaged by competing primary or saturated sub-primary hues, so I chose earth reds for the warmer colours, and greens for the cooler. The areas of the painting that appear blue are actually made by mixing cobalt green and turquoise with ultramarine violet and blue-grey, thereby achieving a sense of

blue without upsetting the balance of the yellow key.

The final ingredient required for my palette was an exotic pink, something that would appear warm when placed against the coolness of the winter wheat in the field outside, or cool when juxtaposed against the yellow sky and the line of poplars that march down the drive. I chose cobalt violet and rose doré antique madder, both of which are cool,

transparent pinks, quite beautiful if used in moderation, and in perfect pitch to the harmonies of yellows and yellowish greens.

### **Composition**

Having resolved the mood of the subject, the next task was to adjust the position of the objects so that they created a rhythm and sense of movement through the composition. I wanted the viewer’s eye to



## A ROOM WITH A VIEW



**Vase of Roses**, oil on canvas, 24×24in (61×61cm)

be drawn first into the landscape, and then to return to the arrangement of objects and flowers, so I knew that the line of poplars must end in a dark shape against the pale sky, thereby creating a strong tonal contrast that would compel the eye to move towards the middle distance. The height of the objects needed to rise and fall, and progress from right to left, whilst the flowers needed to flow from the left towards the right, reaching out towards the tall coffee pot that is silhouetted against the landscape, and all combining into a coherent pictorial design. The coffee pot which, like the jug, vases and bottles, was in reality a dark, solid shape against the view, had to be painted with a lightness of touch, with fairly transparent colour so that the canvas ground could glow through the brushmarks and enhance the sense of luminosity. Of course, both the objects on the windowsill and the flowers were far darker than the landscape, but this had to be manipulated for the sake of unity and mood, luminosity and colour.

### Brushmarks

This need to reinterpret tonal values became a theme in all the interior/exterior pictures. In *Flower Study with Lilies and Hydrangea* (page 33), the arrangement of flowers is treated as though the exterior

## 'As Francis Bacon said, "the idea and the technique are inseparable."'

ambient light has somehow filled the room, so that the shapes of the wall behind the still life are lit in the same way as the wheat field viewed through the window. The off-white ground plays a crucial role here; by allowing a lot of it to show through the surface it has the effect of lightening the whole composition, and allowing the brushmarks to breathe. If you look carefully at the reproduction, you should be able to see the brushmarks and the gaps between them where the ground is revealed, often where a shape or a colour changes, such as in the surface of the flower vase. You can also see the preliminary drawing, made with crayon and articulated in some detail, so that once I began to paint I could apply the brushmarks with speed and simplicity, confident of the position of each shape.

### Shape, colour and texture

You can observe similar drawing marks in *Summer through the Window* (right), where

the composition is weighted more towards the interior space, but which nevertheless imposes the same challenges on the artist. How do you combine a room set with a landscape, bearing in mind that a conventional reading of the tonal values will make it almost impossible? The answer lies, I believe, in Maurice Denis' famous mantra: 'A picture, before it is a nude, a warhorse, or any other anecdote, is a flat surface arranged with colours in a certain order'. In other words, any picture is first and foremost an abstract design, before it has any narrative subject. It is about shape, colour, texture and line, ideas that communicate at an almost sub-conscious level, and the precise manner in which they are arranged, in order to best express, what we feel. In *Summer through the Window* the arrangement of brushmarks, patterns and shifts of colour are as much part of my response to the subject as the shapes and symbols that describe the particular objects. The palette is predominantly pink and blue with harmonies in degraded oranges and touches of warm green, but no yellow. In this space between reality and surreality or dreamscape, there lingers a sense of wistfulness and memory. The picture describes a mood, a feeling, rather than an actual moment in time, and every mark that is made must be part of that overall idea.

Perhaps that ambiguity about painterly identity, which I mentioned in my introduction, is evident here in the equal importance given to both the inside and the outside. The close tones, the related colours and the linear rhythms that connect the constituent parts help to express a state of mind, an emotional idea, rather than a narrative subject.

### Upbeat

The same is the case with *The Vase of Roses* (above left), but here the mood is less ambiguous and more upbeat. Although both paintings are composed with mostly the same objects and an almost identical view, our attention is claimed by the interior. The vase of flowers becomes a darker shape against the landscape than it does in the other two paintings, and the design of the fabric covering the table, dominated by a black coffee cup, provides a strong foreground motif that has the effect of pushing the landscape a little further away.

By discussing these four paintings, each made in the same space, and looking out onto the same view, I have tried to demonstrate that the real subject of a picture is in fact the artist's emotional response to his environment. As artists,





**Summer through the Window**, oil on canvas, 42×34in (106.5×86.5cm)

we are able to see things differently, to re-invent through our imagination, and to offer up a personal and heartfelt interpretation. I hope I have shown how we are able to manipulate the mood of the picture by orchestrating colour, by re-composing the individual elements in

such a way as to harness them to the overall idea, and by allowing the actual technique we use (the brushmarks, the quality of the paint surface) to become an integral part of expressing what we feel. As Francis Bacon said, 'the idea and the technique are inseparable.'

Hugo Grenville teaches every September at the Studio Hugo Grenville Summer School in Suffolk. For details please view his website at [www.hugogrenville.com](http://www.hugogrenville.com), or phone Lisa Freeman on 07764500397.

Hugo Grenville is represented by Wally Findlay Galleries International in New York and Palm Beach. His next exhibition opens at the Medici Gallery in London on September 4, 2012.