

# Cculture

## King of His Domain

British transplant Jonathan Myles-Lea has already painted the great estates of Europe. Now California beckons

PHOTOGRAPHED BY CORAL VON ZUMWALT

*La Brea View* was Jonathan Myles-Lea's first painting upon moving to Los Angeles.



Nearly eight months ago, the tall and lanky Jonathan Myles-Lea stepped off the plane at LAX, a Briton about to be replanted in the arid California basin. The internationally recognized landscape painter had already hit all the high points of his career: the Prince of Wales' Highgrove Gardens, Princess Salimah Aga Khan's Provençal abode, Oprah's Montecito refuge and elaborate compounds outside Moscow and Shanghai.

"I've done so many paintings for commission," the white-jeans-clad artist proclaims. "Will the client like it? You never really relax." So, in his comfy bungalow in Hollywood, surrounded by elegant Eames chairs, a wood-and-iron-wrapped table, and inlaid cabinets filled with curios of white and glass, 44-year-old Myles-Lea created only the second painting he's ever done just for pleasure as a professional artist.

The scene is typical L.A.: bleached sun penetrating down upon two palm trees, the whites extra-extra white, bold stripes and a cloudless blue sky. It's a new direction, but it's easy to spot threads of continuity from his previous oeuvre documenting great estates. Look at the flatness of the picture, the precision of the shapes, its graphic nature, the studied exactitude that emanates from the canvas. "I love geometry and straight lines," he says.

His scrupulous style is entirely self-taught. Myles-Lea never attended art school, never went on the art fair circuit; today he still doesn't have a gallery or dealer—not that that's affected his career, which continues to flourish purely by word of mouth. He began by teaching himself to paint by copying Hans Holbein the Younger, and then a chance encounter with the late artist Francis Bacon (1909-1992) in 1990 forever altered the course of his life.

At the time, Myles-Lea was working for Channel 4 in London as a television presenter and studying History of Art and Architecture at the University of London. His boss took him to the tiny—often described as squalid—drinking den called The Colony Room in Soho, famous for harboring drunken poets, writers and artists. Bacon was there. "My boss introduced me as an artist," Myles-Lea says, "and Bacon asked me what I was interested in, telling me, 'I'm inspired by evil.' My boss answered, 'Oh, that's not very nice, Francis,'" he says, laughing.

Repeat visits to The Colony Room often meant that Myles-Lea was privy to the wild binges of the artistic set. On one occasion, Bacon had just sold a painting to a Japanese bank, which meant Champagne for all, and the next thing Myles-Lea knew, he was waking up in Bacon's studio to the sound of scratching. "He was painting on an easel and copying >>



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Jonathan Myles-Lea in his Hollywood home. *La Brea View*. The completed portrait of the Lauder family. *Resnick Roof View*.







<< his own style from a postcard,” Myles-Lea says. Bacon told him he was a real artist and needed to resign from his job.

“He was like this father figure, saying this to me,” Myles-Lea recalls. “And I trusted him.”

After leaving television, Myles-Lea moved into the large, rambling, 12-bedroom estate Plas Teg in Wales, where the lady of the house asked him to paint the property,

which was stuffed to the brim with live exotic birds, huge dogs and kittens. As part of earning his keep, he helped feed the animals and led tours. “We didn’t have much money,” he remembers. “I call it ‘stately squalor’ because the parrots ate better than we did—kiwi fruits and walnuts—while we had powdered soup.” Eventually, his mother, also an artist, decided he’d spent long enough with the birds and the beasts and brought him home.

From there the commissions started pouring in. He posted an advertisement in *Country Life* in 1991 and received five phone calls the next morning. For his style of landscape painting, the process is agonizingly deliberate. He uses a 17th-century technique, beginning by creating handmade canvases made from wood wrapped in linen. Myles-Lea treats the canvas with several applications of homemade gesso (hot water, rabbit-skin glue granules and chalk dust). He uses Old Holland paints, a brand launched in 1664 and employed by old masters such as Vermeer.

To accurately distill the property, Myles-Lea meets with clients five or six times, creating what he calls “layers” from which to paint. The first comes from the traditional surveying notes, made after looking at ground plans, counting trees, confirming where the land ends and a pond begins. Then there are the layers of color, taken in by visiting the grounds at different times of the year.

Finally, the human interest element: What area does the family use the most? Where do the dogs like to sit? Where are the animals and birds on the property? He compiles photographs and sketches before launching into the über-detailed work. “Every painting kills me,” he says cheerfully. Every tree and every brick must be exact; the images are embedded with ciphers, symbols, coats of arms. It takes six to eight months to complete a single work.

Myles-Lea also expanded into portraiture in a most unusual fashion: with a commission to paint the queen. He was working on a commission at Burghley House in 1997, when the owner asked him if he knew anybody who painted portraits. “I said I’d think about it, and she answered, ‘It’s a shame, because I’m looking for someone to paint the queen.’”

When he was driving home, “I remembered the conversation, and I called her back, quickly. ‘Have I just turned down the opportunity to paint the queen?’ She said, ‘Yes, I think you have.’”

A couple of days later, the royal office organized a sitting at St. James’s Palace. Myles-Lea asked Her Majesty to wear the Order of the Garter robes, which were originally designed in

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FROM TOP *The Rectory, Litton Cheney, United Kingdom. The artist at work. The Sundial Garden, Highgrove House. Burghley House in Stamford, England, the home of William Cecil, Lord Burghley and Lord High Treasurer to Queen Elizabeth I, and built between 1555 and 1587.*



## FANCY FOOTWORK

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holding his arm in a deep red cast—an injury he incurred while trying to avoid a biker on the street in Florence). Though the sensibility of the collection unveiled at the Annenberg Center was a modern one, small throwbacks that echoed the brand's star-studded DNA were woven throughout (while Ferragamo eventually returned to Italy, his relationship to the movie industry was cemented). "You think about the big change in Hollywood and the rise of actors and celebrity—Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo—that's the reason I wanted to have this lingerie factor," explains Gionetti. "For me it's the very sophistication of Hollywood—the idea of sensuality, of neutrals, of beautiful craftsmanship like handmade embroidery." To house the boudoir-inspired eveningwear was a Ferragamo pop-up store, with one-of-a-kind accessories—from graphic Lucite clutches to an enviably strappy python wedge. "The ideas really came from the archive, but were reinvented in a modern way," notes the designer. "Sometimes using very 1930s materials—plexiglass, this kind of transparent and translucent effect. It's part of Salvatore Ferragamo, but never nostalgic—very cool, very modern, linking the past with the future."

"I really feel that the Ferragamo consumer is in the L.A. style," he continues. "It's much more about the preciousness of the time that you spend being very healthy, being very sporty, very relaxed—but always very elegant." •

## KING OF HIS DOMAIN

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the 16th century, because the painting was to be placed in Drapers' Hall (part of an old guild founded nearly 600 years ago), and across from one of his early influences: a Holbein portrait of Henry the VIII, who had donated the land to the guild. "I asked her if she could stand by the window [for better light]," he says. "And she said, 'Oh, no, I can't stand by the window.' I asked her why and she said, 'The last time I did that, a taxi driver looked up and saw me and crashed.'"

Today, portraits are just another portion of Myles-Lea's creative output, which also includes photography. He recently painted Evelyn Lauder, and shortly after, Evelyn's son's wife contacted him about doing their family in Palo Alto. That portrait, finished just last September, places the group in a classical frieze composition, with the mother gazing at the daughter (a great-granddaughter of Estée Lauder's), the daughter gazing at her father, the son at his mother. The painting whispers with life, and of conversation, of pride and love and complicated relationships. But that's not the only reason he's here in California. It's time for a change.

Currently, Myles-Lea is delightfully traveling all over L.A., capturing his thoughts on the Hollywood sign, James Turrell at LACMA, and Joshua Tree National Park in his blog. While the Paint Dries, and exploring an entirely new direction: working on modern paintings of charismatic buildings in Palm Springs and Los Angeles. "This is my favorite place," he says definitively. "I can't seem to go to sleep because I'm so excited. It's the light. It

changes the color of things and makes it so vivid it has a psychological effect on me. I feel so energized."

And as for all those beautifully detailed garden paintings? "I don't want to repeat myself, but the Getty Villa would be quite fun, or the White House," Myles-Lea muses, with a twinkle in his eye. •

## SECRET GARDEN

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"The carefully sculpted plants, now numbering around 1,500, suggest to me the forms they might take," says the designer. "The entire exercise is very fluid and spontaneous, with a great deal of accident, surprise, experimentation and randomness."

He planted the box and then hand-carved the plants into a maze of undulating, cloud-like forms.

"The shapes are so mysterious and original," says Shapiro. The clipped box project was the basis for what has become and remains his obsession.

Shapiro conceived the clipped mounds and sculptures and does all the shaping and shearing by hand with specialized Japanese shears and clippers. Heavy-duty American versions go into action for rough work. More are added every year, and his skill at creating new effects reflects his passion. Well-worn Japanese leather gloves attest to Shapiro's attacks on woody branches and rampant and unruly twigs.

"It is a work in progress, always being refined and altered somewhat," says Shapiro. "With these shears, the sculptural possibilities are endless, very precise and rapid. Gratification is instant."

Over the last few years, Shapiro has written his autobiography in leaves, covering every square foot of the free space, planting rare specimen trees and creating vast and wavy vistas in every direction, like a flock of green sheep roaming his land.

The evergreen garden, tranquil and shaded, changes subtly from season to season. A burst of light green new growth and the beauty of mauve wisteria and blue jacaranda blossoms herald the spring. Colorful fallen leaves indicate the last days of autumn.

Juniper trees form a background of green curtain. Boston ivy covers the walls of the studio, where the designer crafts new collections and meets clients.

Shapiro planted Eugenia to secure the tall property-line hedges. An impenetrable perimeter of trees, hedges and foliage entirely obscures the house and landscape garden from the exterior.

He also planted exceptional trees and shrubs, including Italian cypress, *Ficus nitida*, king and queen palms, fragrant Pittosporum, *Schefflera actinophylla*, *Podocarpus henkelii* (with its elegant slender leaves), as well as jacaranda, Norfolk pine and *Rhapis excelsa* (a dramatic fan palm).

Shapiro's pool house (just 20 feet wide) is an exact copy of the portico at Palladio's Villa Chiericati outside Vicenza. He discovered the 16th-century architect's original construction drawings in a book from his private library.

Shapiro executed the plans in weather-resistant wood and then eroded and covered the surfaces with plaster, lime and varied pigments to simulate ancient stone and to give the portico and the entire scene an authentic antique appearance.

He uses weather-faded furnishings that appear old and worn and well used. The pool

house is the perfect hideaway for festive apéritifs in the evening, as a bucolic setting for a quiet summer lunch, or even as the stage set for an early supper on a winter evening with the fire blazing and darkness settling over the trees.

"I was steeped in post-war conceptual art for over 35 years, and as a working sculptor, I sensed that something other than mere landscaping was taking place," he says. "It was at this juncture that I began to realize that for me, this entire exercise had very little to do with gardens. Somewhere along the way, I had forgotten that I was installing plants. Instead, I was in a dream state, creating art populated not only by individual sculptural forms but rather a fully integrated whole, with Buxus as the medium."

Shapiro says that his lifelong immersion in the world of art had taught him to see everything as art, or at least as the fodder for art. It's silent here in his verdant domain. Undisturbed, he can work for hours, his artistic instincts and imagination taking over. For him, it's sculpture, creation, expression.

"My garden, it is now obvious, is my art project, endlessly captivating and inspiring," he says.

The primary objective—that of total creativity and isolation—has been achieved. *Richard Shapiro's Studiolo line of furniture is sold in showrooms around the country or at the Los Angeles studio by appointment, 310-275-6700; studiolo.com.* •

## LASTING IMPRESSIONS

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Crawford is quick to admit the house, recently featured in *Architectural Digest*, isn't the most practical, but the weather is "always awesome," and she insists that's not what the house was built for: "You could never live there full time, because it's completely open, but because it's a vacation house...it can be more of a fantasy."

It's evident that much has changed since her days on the runway, but Crawford remains passionate about modeling. "I'm much more comfortable in front of a camera now than I was when I was 20...unfortunately, I might not look as good!" she laughs. "But in some ways, I feel I have more to offer." Given her burgeoning mini-empire, that statement doesn't only apply to her modeling career. Nine years ago, Crawford started Meaningful Beauty, a skincare line, with a Parisian cosmetic surgeon she met through a friend, and she has been actively involved in each step of the business ever since. "I felt like it was my job as a model to take care of my skin," she explains of her love for the project. She uses the day cream with SPF 20 religiously, and her fervor for protecting her skin has resonated with her children. "It's second nature to them," she says proudly, but hesitates when she reflects on her own skincare regimen. "I really stopped over-sunning myself early, after a bad sunburn...still, there was the 18 years before that where I was frying in our backyard in Illinois!"

The other arm of her thriving brand is Cindy Crawford Home, a furniture collection that began as a collaboration with Rooms To Go, after her former Brentwood home was featured in *Elle Decor*. Refreshingly, Crawford views her business successes as shared entities: "I know what's right for me and my brand," she says confidently, but she credits the long-term loyal team she has built