

# The Daily Telegraph

## A New Draftsman's Contract

By Trevor Barnes

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Country house and garden painting is a rarefied pursuit. Trevor Barnes meets one of its most passionate (and mystical) practitioners - an Englishman with designs on America's architectural and horticultural heritage.

When the artist, Jonathan Myles-Lea, sets foot on South Carolina soil to work on his latest commission early in the new millennium he will be realising a long standing ambition; to deploy on classic American homes and gardens a talent honed on some of the finest country houses of England. "It's very exciting to work in America," he says, "Because I'll be tapping into a style that's been popular there since the 19th century. Aerial views of towns and cities, elevated prospects of plains, mountains, and forests were then the single most popular category in the mass of printed images that flooded the market."

But unlike those earlier images, his are no mass productions. Myles-Lea's technique is to immerse himself in a property for months on end before producing bespoke originals which capture the spirit of the place and the personality of the owner.

In his philosophy nothing happens by chance. In particular there are no accidents in garden design. "It is as if the personality of the owner is imprinted on the garden," he says, "And I'm trying to reflect that. The arrangement of paths and parterres, the positioning of trees and flowering plants all say something about the psyche of a person. The pattern making is unconscious and seems like simple decoration. But I have always known that something else lies behind this careful expression of aesthetic intelligence. It is the mind working at soul level. Logic is applied much later."

Heavy stuff for a garden painter. But then Jonathan Myles-Lea is no ordinary painter. He paints, yes, and with impeccable technique. But he does much more than that.

Words like magician, even shaman come to mind when describing his unique approach both to the natural landscape and to the many forms of artifice imposed upon it. As a result the paintings he produces are as much maps of the heart as garden studies, symbolic mementos of lives lived, mandalas of a private cosmos in miniature where nothing happens by chance.

Not that he saw things that way in 1992 at the outset of his artistic career when, with a History of Art and Architecture degree behind him, the then 23 year old moved to North Wales to help designer Cornelia Bayley restore her Jacobean mansion, Plas Teg. It was she who suggested, almost on a whim, that Myles-Lea paint the house. This he did - with a fluency and command which surprised them both. The finished painting became his portfolio and his calling card attracting almost overnight commissions from all over England for more of the same.

Four years later, when London fine art dealers, Sotheby's, mounted an exhibition of country house painting, this largely unknown young artist suddenly found himself catapulted into distinguished company. With his work displayed alongside that of Stubbs, Constable, and Turner, Jonathan Myles-Lea had been selected as the brightest new talent in a highly specialised field. His paintings of Plas Teg and of Trewane Manor in Cornwall sat comfortably alongside much earlier views of Highgrove and Petworth, Longleat and Chatsworth seamlessly yet distinctively continuing in a style of painting stretching back over four hundred years.

At about that time, the former director of London's prestigious Victoria and Albert Museum, Sir Roy Strong and his wife Julia Trevelyan Oman were putting the finishing touches to the latest project in their Herefordshire garden, 'The Laskett', "I have just completed my bleached lime avenue," wrote Sir Roy and, invoking the names of two 17th century Dutch artists famed for their paintings of English country seats, added- "where are my Kipp and Knyff to record it for posterity?"

It was all Myles-Lea needed. He wasted no time in contacting Sir Roy and secured a prestigious commission to paint 'The Laskett' on the occasion of Sir Roy's 60th birthday. The finished picture represents Myles-Lea's mature style. The aerial view flattens perspective and stylises the composition while a cartographical layout enables him to present the garden's underlying geometry normally missed at ground level.

That two dimensional quality is very English,- says Sir Roy, "From Elizabethan miniatures to William Morris, What appeals to me is his freshness, the naivete which I hope he doesn't lose."

In the painting four cartouches pick out selected detail and allow him to zoom in on a particular feature of note. "Roy's garden is so autobiographical," says Myles-Lea with the enthusiasm that characterises his boyish personality.

"He'll have some steps, say, to mark a friendship with Cecil Beaten, or an urn at the end of an allee to mark winning the Shakespeare Prize for literature. Everything is a cue for him to talk about some aspect of his life."

Conversation is a vital part of the creative process. After pacing the garden and making detailed measurements of every lawn and hedge, border, bush, path, and tree Myles-Lea will stroll through the property in the company of its owner listening to the personal stories that the garden has produced. "I paint with great dedication and loving attention," he says, "In fact the pictures become dedications rather than productions. I am remunerated for my efforts but the exchange is more sophisticated than that. I concentrate on commissions from individuals whose personality is visibly imprinted on the land they occupy.'

It is easy to think that Myles-Lea, like his artistic predecessors, is merely trading on his clients' vanity- on their desire to show off their wealth and possessions to the world. But that is to miss the point. A garden endures while its owners pass away. What beauty they enjoy is ultimately on loan. The understandable and entirely civilised impulse to commission a record of a place which has witnessed births- deaths, and marriages, meetings and partings, happiness and heartache is what really lies behind it all. Sir Roy echoes the sentiment, I think possibly the thing I'm proudest of is the garden my wife and I have created. I hope it will survive but so many gardens don't. This painting is a record that will live on."

With the Strong commission the word soon spread and Myles-Lea is now in increasing demand in England and Holland where he is praised for his traditional technique and his modernist eye. The year 2000 sees a new departure across the Atlantic where he now feels ready to turn his hand to the glories of the American house and garden - traditional and modern.

His work takes him to the most splendid places normally hidden from public view. "I see so many things that ordinarily people don't," he says - "It takes my breath away. I get to meet lovely people who tell me about their lives and honour me with a glimpse of their private world."

During a two or three day stay he will walk every square inch of the garden, making detailed sketches for later incorporation into a line drawing which is submitted for the client's approval. Then, at home in his London studio, he gets down to the painting proper.

It is here that the magic begins...

And as with all magic It begins with a ritual. "I lay out my colours on the palette in the same way every time- with the same amount of turpentine in each dish, and the same folded white napkins by each colour" he says. Although photographs and sketches are never far away he relies predominantly on his memory invoking, as it were, the spirit of the place with which he has by now formed an intimate relationship. "By the time I sit down to paint" he says, "I can see every single detail in my mind and the trick is to reproduce It on the board in front of me. It's the absolute opposite of abstract painting. There's no accident in the final piece. Every detail has been worked over."

More magic follows; "I feel I'm summoning something, calling up an image which is somehow already there. When I'm painting I'm transported back to the garden. I can smell the flowers and feel the breeze on my face. And I hope that relationship comes across when it's time to hand over the work". Hand over time is usually three months later when Myles-Lea is exhausted. "I put my soul into it," he says and you sense no overstatement.

But even then the painting is not complete. It requires a frame which he makes up with the same dedicated attention to detail. Molded timber is treated with precise applications of chalk dust-rabbit skin glue, red primer, gilt, black lacquer and antique wax to produce a frame whose richly textured simplicity acts as an organic enclosure round the finished picture. Like a hedge round a garden, you might say.

The pictures are grand yet engagingly domestic at the same time. Sir Roy's cats, for example, and his green Wellington boots sit happily alongside formal topographical compositions. A Dutch client wanted him to paint in all the people who had contributed to the garden over the years. Look closely, too, and you will see, Hitchcock-like, a miniature of the artist himself at work- In the unique transaction that occurs between Myles-Lea and his "clients" (he does not like the word) much more than money changes hands. Intimacies shared, secrets exchanged, and emotions revealed will find themselves subtly translated into oils. The responsibility he feels is enormous and contributes to the mental and emotional fatigue that engulfs him at the end of a commission.

But he soon revives. And now, with energy levels topped up, his bags are packed for Charleston, the first of many stops, he hopes, on a great American journey in which chance and accident are all part of life's unseen (occasionally visible) grand design.

Trevor Barnes, London, 1999