

Home is where the heart is



We may not all have grand country houses, but **Guy Lester** has the knack of painting them all as if they were stately homes in beautiful estates. Words: William Delmont

Dotted around the lush green countryside of the British Isles are homes of all kinds. Homes of different styles and shapes set in a variety of surroundings. Many homes there may be, but people to capture them in all their splendour there are not. Enter Guy Lester.

Lester has spent the majority of his career devoting his time to portraits of English country homes. For the past 13 years he has worked virtually exclusively on commissions, his art comprising a continual

PREVIOUS PAGE *Untitled Portrait of House, near Newbury (detail), oil on canvas, 86x64cm* **BELOW** *Untitled Portrait of House, Scottish Borders, oil on canvas, 81x60cm* **INSET** Guy Lester at work *en plein air*

representation of England's aesthetic heritage.

Lester began working passionately on portraying man-made structures during his early years as an artist. It was whilst painting the façade of one of his college faculty buildings that he became aware of the three-dimensional capabilities of the canvas.

"I suddenly realised that the dimensions of the building give one a very good starting point to work with, allowing far greater levels of depth and texture henceforth," he says. "That was a defining moment for me."

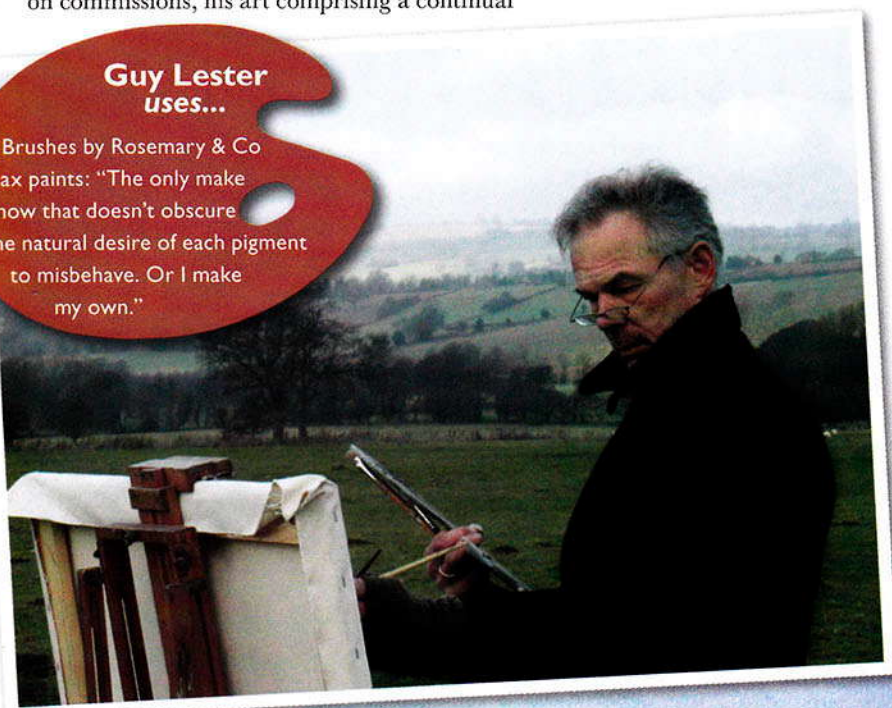
He modestly claims he was not naturally gifted as a painter of houses. "Part of the reason I got into it was to set myself the challenge of getting into something I was not particularly good at."

As an art college graduate with an immense love of the outdoors – particularly of trees – painting country manors, houses and cottages was the next logical step. "I particularly like the difference of texture between the solid – cement, brick and stone – and the fluid – grass, foliage and the sky." In fact, talking to him, one gets the distinct impression that it is these surrounding components that inspire him the most. It seems as if buildings are merely a conduit to aid him in depicting what he truly loves to paint: nature.

With no previous architectural experience, Lester puts his profession entirely down to art and his love of

Guy Lester uses...

- Brushes by Rosemary & Co
- Sax paints: "The only make I know that doesn't obscure the natural desire of each pigment to misbehave. Or I make my own."



the outdoors. Whatever technical aspects one might expect Lester to take note of in order to ensure accuracy are casually swept aside. Protractors and rulers are abandoned in favour of brush handles and finger-measurements. "A simple way of ensuring everything is to scale is to merely keep your eye on the subject as a whole. Don't get too caught up in focusing on one particular area – that's when things become terribly lopsided."

Lester says he has a tendency to get "carried away" whilst painting on location, so takes loads of photographs of his subject that he later uses to "tighten up" his image and ensure accuracy.

Although he is somewhat restricted by producing what his commissioners wish – and also by the confines of the structure being portrayed – Lester does not feel constrained. In 99 percent of cases he is, within reason, allowed *carte blanche* on his representation of the surrounding landscape. Here he is free to let his creative juices flow on what one might deem the less notable aspects of a house's charm. Things like animals, clouds, flowing water, windswept bushes and trees – anything that gives the setting life. "When painting buildings it is very easy to fall into the trap of portraying a stuck moment," warns Lester, and he avoids this by adding subtle embellishments here and there that serve to bring the surrounding landscape and the house itself to life.

When it comes to painting someone's home, a lot of factors can be brought into play to considerably change the feel of the finished product – positioning being probably the most obvious. The distance and angle at which Lester decides to position himself will ultimately play a big role in making the house look domineering over its surroundings (as with a close-up – lots of bricks and less surrounding) or merely a subtle, almost indigenous inclusion in the landscape



ABOVE *Autumnal Portrait of House*, oil on canvas, 76x51cm **BELOW** *Untitled portrait of house*, oil on canvas, 76x64cm


(as an extreme long shot might illustrate). There is seldom any conflict of opinion between himself and the owner as "although each building has its own unique requirement, it's usually pretty obvious which spot is *the spot*."

The season, too, is key. Here, though, is an aspect of his work over which Lester has little influence, with the vast majority of people preferring to have their

"Although each building has its own unique requirement, it's obvious which is *the spot*"

homes captured in the midst of summer's shiny splendour. "I'm rather stuck in one season," he laments, professing a love for autumn. One can

easily see why: a clear sky is no doubt less exciting to paint than a turbulent one; and the autumnal mixture of yellows and browns probably more evocative than the idyllic green of summer. For someone who is fascinated with how each building fits in with its surrounds, autumn does seem the perfect season.

Working almost entirely on commission-based projects and making provision for little else aside from houses, Lester continues to be the 'go-to man' for anyone wanting a classy representation of their estate. The artist who jokingly refers to himself as a "specialist in 50th and 60th birthday presents" is clearly a lot more than just a person one hires to paint their house. His attention to the tiniest detail ensures each brick he paints is depicted accurately; yet his flair ensures that no two lawns are ever the same. 



Guy Lester studied painting at Camberwell Art School before spending time in France travelling the canals and painting whatever he found inspiring. As well as painting houses and landscapes, he is also an accomplished painter of *trompe-l'oeil* murals. Since 1996 he has worked almost exclusively on commissions, occasionally exhibiting his work in Shropshire and Powys. Contact him on guylester@riplets.fsnet.co.uk