



An unexpected gift propels English watercolorist **Peter Thomas** to a new medium—and a new country.

BY NIAL O'NEILL

the *Accidental* pastelist

Cow Parsley Lane (20x26)



Clockwise from top left:

Dordogne Meadow, Morning (20x26)

View Across the Vineyards (20x26)

Straw Bales, Morning (6½x16½)

AN ERRANT CHRISTMAS GIFT MORE THAN 30 YEARS AGO changed the trajectory of artist Peter Thomas' life. In 1981, Thomas was a watercolorist, as well as an art and design teacher at his English alma mater, Uppingham School. At the time, he was also exploring a printmaking system he had developed with friends, using a silkscreen with oil pastels that printed like monoprints.

"I needed oil pastels, and my sister—she knew I was broke—gave me a wonderful box for Christmas, four layers of what she thought would be useful for my screenprinting," Thomas says. "When I opened the box, my face fell a little, because they were soft pastels and completely useless for my purposes. She offered to exchange the box, but I thought the pastels were so beautiful that I responded, 'No, don't change it. I think I'd like to take it out to France and see what happens.'"

With soft pastels in hand, he left Britain for the Dordogne, a county in southwest France. "I decided not to end up a disappointed teacher who was frustrated about never really putting his dream to the test," Thomas says. "I had met teachers who were good at painting or music, but who got trapped by teaching, and I didn't want to be like

that when I reached 50. I wanted to have tried, and if I failed, I would go back to teaching. I was quite a good teacher, and it was a good job. When I came to France, I thought I'd give painting five years to see if it was going to work, but after the second year, I never really thought about teaching any further."

Once in France, Thomas began renovating an old barn and outhouses, transforming them into a house and studio. "The house was an old cowshed, but it had buildings around it which I bought later, and it developed gradually," he says. "While I was a teacher, I wished to own a place where I could concentrate on painting. I loved France, and, during my holidays in the southwest, I fell for this old stable. I didn't think I would stay this long, but it suits me. I feel at home here, even though I leave sometimes to paint other horizons."

On Becoming an Artist

Thomas was born in London in 1953 but only lived in the city three days; the family moved almost immediately to Warwickshire and later on to Sussex, where Thomas attended Uppingham School, a leading public school founded in the East Midlands in 1584. There he was greatly influenced



by two teachers: Joy Bently taught him sculpture and pottery, and well-known theatre designer Christopher Richardson taught him art and design. Design and sculpture were both very important to his artistic development at that stage.

Thomas went on to study sculpture and various printing techniques at Kingston College, graduating with a degree in art and design. "I did sculpture in London after my foundation course because

it was the broadest of the fine arts," he says. He found that the painting program at Kingston was fairly rigid, whereas the sculpture program was more broad-based. "I knew I could probably do lots of other things with it," he says. He eventually

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chose to focus his study on Land Art, “this rather ephemeral large-scale work in the landscape that fascinated me,” Thomas says. “But the works were impermanent. It was what was going on at the time, but when I came out of college, I realized I couldn’t make a living with it and that I liked drawing and painting in a more traditional way.”

As luck would have it, Thomas had a friend whose mother, Lorna Binns, was an accomplished

watercolor painter and a member of the Royal Watercolour Society and. “I was fortunate enough to go out and paint sitting next to her in places like Box Hill and Richmond Park,” says Thomas. “So, for nearly 10 years, I painted in watercolor.”

Having successfully completed the Art Teachers’ Certificate course at Brighton, he became Artist-in-Residence at Felsted School (another public school, founded in 1564 by Richard Rich) before returning

to Uppingham. There, he spent three years teaching art and design until 1981, the year he left Britain for an artist’s life in France.

On Working Near and Far

The beauty of the French countryside serves as Thomas’ chief source of inspiration. Although he’s worked in both watercolors and pastels, today he devotes himself almost entirely to pastel, working principally *en plein air*. For him, pastel is the ideal tool for working outdoors, as it allows him

ON PAPER AND PASTELS

Because Peter Thomas works almost exclusively on paper, he’s quite specific about his requirements.

“I like Canson,” he says. “I love the texture of paper, and I don’t want to lose that too much. I can go back to the paper with a firm brush; I often use a hogshead brush to actually lift the pastel right off.” Although many of his students prefer a pastel card as a support, Thomas insists on paper. “They usually hate it, but I actually still find I need paper. It’s a different way of working.”

Thomas notes, “When you work on paper, you need very specific things,” he continues. “You don’t want pastels to be too soft, so I tend to rely on the firmer brands. Rembrandts are my basic box. I like my sticks to be harder because I put on lots of layers—three to four layers of color.” If he needs more color, he’ll look to some other offerings, such as Schmincke or Daler-Rowney. “It’s nice to have them toward the end when I want to put some color on top,” he says.

to obtain both rich colors and textures, and to capture with precision the effects of changing light and the colors of the seasons.

He frequently revisits favorite haunts with an inexhaustible passion for the irresistible details of the countryside: rolls of hay in the meadows, reflections in a river or pool, hedges covered with wildflowers. “My artistic practice is tightly linked to the love I have for nature,” Thomas says. “I can roam the countryside for days and weeks and discover a new viewpoint, and return to the same locations at the same times without tiring of them. Once *in situ*, I am in a virtual trance. Time passes without my noticing it.”

Although well established in France, Thomas likes to travel and finds scenic inspiration in the Antilles islands, Patagonia, Brazil, Zanzibar and North Africa. More recently he has been captivated by Andalusia in southern Spain, where he retires to a spartan existence to paint the beauty of the hills, the fertile plains and the arid back country.

“I’m very fortunate to have a small place there, and I can go away and paint a bit in winter,” Thomas says. “The Mediterranean vegetation, the aridity of the countryside, and the conjugation of mountains and sea have renewed my inspiration. At the moment, thanks to an exhibition in Seville, I am happy to be able to show to the Spanish public what their land gives me to paint.”



The Lily Pond in Autumn (top; 20x26)

Detail of the Lily Pond (10x12½)

On Inspiration

Over the years, Thomas has painted the French countryside with an affectionate eye and a fresh vision. The artist enjoys a fascination with Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699-1779), but it's in his indefatigable passion for painting outdoors that he

pays homage to his plein air predecessors Alfred Sisley (1839-1899); Jean-Baptiste Camille Corot (1796-1875); Camille Pissarro (1830-1903); Claude Monet (1840-1926); J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851); and especially John Sell Cotman (1782-1842).

"There are so many influences really, and I like to go to a lot of exhibitions," Thomas says. "I suppose originally it was people like Monet [who inspired me], because I really love the Impressionists and the idea of working outside. I work a little bit more in the studio now, but I still find I love being out for a couple of hours. There's something you capture there which you don't in the studio."

Thomas says that because he's been working outdoors for nearly 30 years, he can use photographs better now than he would have at the beginning of his career. "Now," he says, "they're used, rather than copied, as an aid to finishing off. I've discovered that you actually can get such a lot of help from photography that it would be foolish to ignore it, but I still would rather be outdoors. You can't ignore new possibilities—I wonder what Monet would have done!"

Yet there's something to be said about moving indoors for a final perspective. "Sometimes a



painting is completely finished outside, but I always put it on an easel for a while, because there can be slight errors that I haven't seen, and they need a little adjustment," Thomas says. "I usually put the painting near where I'm eating so I can see the errors subliminally; after a while I suddenly see things—three or four tiny little touches of color that put the whole picture right. It's the magic of things falling into place."

On Self-Development

Thomas appreciates how his work continues to evolve. "My friends have looked at my pictures for over 30 years and see all sorts of developments," he says. "As an artist, you don't see them so clearly yourself. Sometimes you think 'I'm not advancing at all' but, in fact, when I see old pictures I know that I have. I look at them sometimes in people's houses, and I want to get them out of the frames. But things do change. If anything, I've become more colorful."

In watercolor painting, he says, an artist can tend to be "into the neutrals—the grays and the greens and the very muted. Muted in watercolor seems to be important, and now having gone

through that in pastel, I think I'm beginning to chance a bit more color." And if his artistic life up to now is any indication, when the artist takes chances, it tends to pay off. 🎨

NIALL O'NEILL is a pastel artist and freelance writer who divides his time between Ireland and France. His particular interest in pastel led him to start writing the blog "Artists in Pastel" (www.artistsinpastel.com). He's represented by The Little Gallery, Saint Emilion, France.

Evening Meadow (20x26)



Peter Thomas (www.peterthomaspastels.com) has built an international career as a fine artist, participating in numerous exhibitions in Aquitaine, Paris and London. Many distinctions have come his way including, in 2001, the award of Master Pastellist of France, just one year after his election as a member of the Société des Pastellistes de France. Six of his pastels were selected for the Salon des Beaux-Arts in the Grand Palais, Paris, in 1987. He

also showed his work for the first time at the Glyndebourne Opera Festival that year. In 2007 he was one of the main speakers at the first European Congress of Pastellists at Paris. In 2009 he had a major solo exhibition in Seville in the Galerie Haurie and was guest artist at the Summer Exhibition of Pastels at St-Florent-le-Vieil.