



Wickwar is the backdrop to a new scenic painting studio

Moving to Stroud in February this year, James Rowse was soon on the lookout for studio space to house his scenic painting business. He settled on The Old Pottery estate on Station Road in Wickwar. We caught up with him to find out what scenic painting involves and what led him to the village.

Jason Titley Matt Bigwood

Sitting in the office at the back of the studio, I immediately know this is a creative space. From the tins of paint and pots of brushes, the splashes of colour on all the surfaces from projects past, to the smell of turps and fresh coffee. Actually, the coffee maybe not so creative, but always gratefully received.

I started by asking James if Wickwar wasn't a bit too far from home for a studio. He explained; "To be honest, it's great. I get a 25 minute drive, de-stressing across the Cotswolds - well, who could ask for more?" I wondered what had prompted the move West. "Part of it was to move nearer to my Mum, but also quite a few of my students were based in Bristol. Mainly it's such a beautiful part of the world to live, and the pace of life is so different to London."

James moved into the studio space in June, and so far has taught two courses. I asked if teaching is something he has always done. He tells me; "Teaching courses started in about 2009. I had set up my first big studio in Kent (which was about five thousand square feet) and I was painting big operas and West End shows. I hit a quiet spell, and at that time had an assistant



who needed training up a bit. I used the slack time to take her through a few painting techniques and put out feelers to see if anyone else might be interested in joining in. So the first course had four students. It worked really well and I continued to run one course a year. After a few years I launched a range of weekend courses focusing on specific areas of scenic painting. The Brick Finishes weekend was followed by Stone, Wood, Metal and Distressing & Ageing. These proved very popular and at that point I started to focus on courses rather than production work.

James now runs courses throughout the year. He says; "I'm still planning exactly what's going to be happening next year. At the moment there are three different course lengths - there are cloth painting weeks, and a two-week finishes course that focuses just on scenic painting. This is aimed mainly at people who want to work in the film and TV industry and music festivals. There is another two-week course which is half scenic painting and one backdrop project. Finally, there is a five-week course, covering the whole gamut of scenic painting and scenic art."

I asked James about working on The Old Pottery estate. He explained; "I love it here. It's a great community of people. There is a long history of making pottery on this site. In fact, this part of the building used to be where they decorated the ceramics. Now there is a diverse group of businesses here. My immediate neighbours are a pop-up cinema business and a bespoke kitchen fabricator. Across the way there's "Trashman Treasures", a recruitment company, wine importers and others. Everyone gets on really well.

We moved on to the subject of painting, and I asked James to explain what scenic painting actually is. "Scenery is built out of wood, metal, plastic and cloth. Scenic painters transform these surfaces into stone walls, rusting ships, ornate palaces and everything in between. Working from a brief by the production designer we work alongside other groups of craftspeople, like prop makers carpenters and steel fabricators. Over my thirty plus year career I've worked with a huge range of clients on many different projects. From fine art installations to rock concerts, operas to sitcoms, with countless West End shows and a Harry Potter film along the way."

James did a fine art degree in Reading with the ambition of creating and selling his own works. He elaborates; "I thought I was going to sell paintings, putting the skills I'd learned into practise, but it's not an easy way to make a living. When I discovered scenic painting, it really appealed and an awful lot of ducks seemed to line up in a row. Since then I've found scenic painting and scenic art to offer a rewarding working life. I may come back to painting landscapes someday, and now we live on the edge of Selsley Common, I am perfectly placed to do so." →

Above: Elizabeth Dakin working on her piece based on An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life by Harmen Steenwyck.

Below: Hannah Ghotbi-Ravandi working on a replication of a piece by Jusepe de Ribera.





James has had some pretty impressive clients over the years, including Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London. He says; "It's a fantastic space to paint in as it's already a painted space. The stage itself is covered in Elizabethan decorative painting. Digital artwork doesn't fit in, so its a great place for scenic artists to work. I've created many hand painted backdrops for the theatre. The Midnight Bell is a more recent project for Matthew Bourne's "New Adventures" ballet company. I've been working with Lez Brotherston, a designer with a fantastic reputation." The Midnight Bell will tour the country, starting next month in Cheltenham. "I was also asked to paint a portrait of Prince Charming for the new Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, Cinderella. Again, a lovely job. This image was based on an old master painting of Napoleon on a rearing horse.

When the pandemic arrived the whole entertainment industry closed down, I asked James if it is now recovering as things slowly get back to normal; "It remains to be seen how things will pan out in the long term, but right now there is lots going on. Film and TV companies are busy and every theatre is trying to get new shows up and running. One of the things that did happen through the lockdown was the creation of a new association of scenic artists called ASAM. Their Facebook page is full of requests for painters to join one project or another. There is lots of activity going on at the moment which is great to see. I get a huge amount of satisfaction seeing my students get started in the industry, get established, become influential, and in one case even set up their own company and employ the next generation of scenics from my courses." 📺

For more information visit www.scenicpainters.com

Left: Jonny Shaw working on an old master cloth project.

Below: Prince Charming's portrait for the new Lloyd Webber musical, Cinderella that opened in London recently.



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