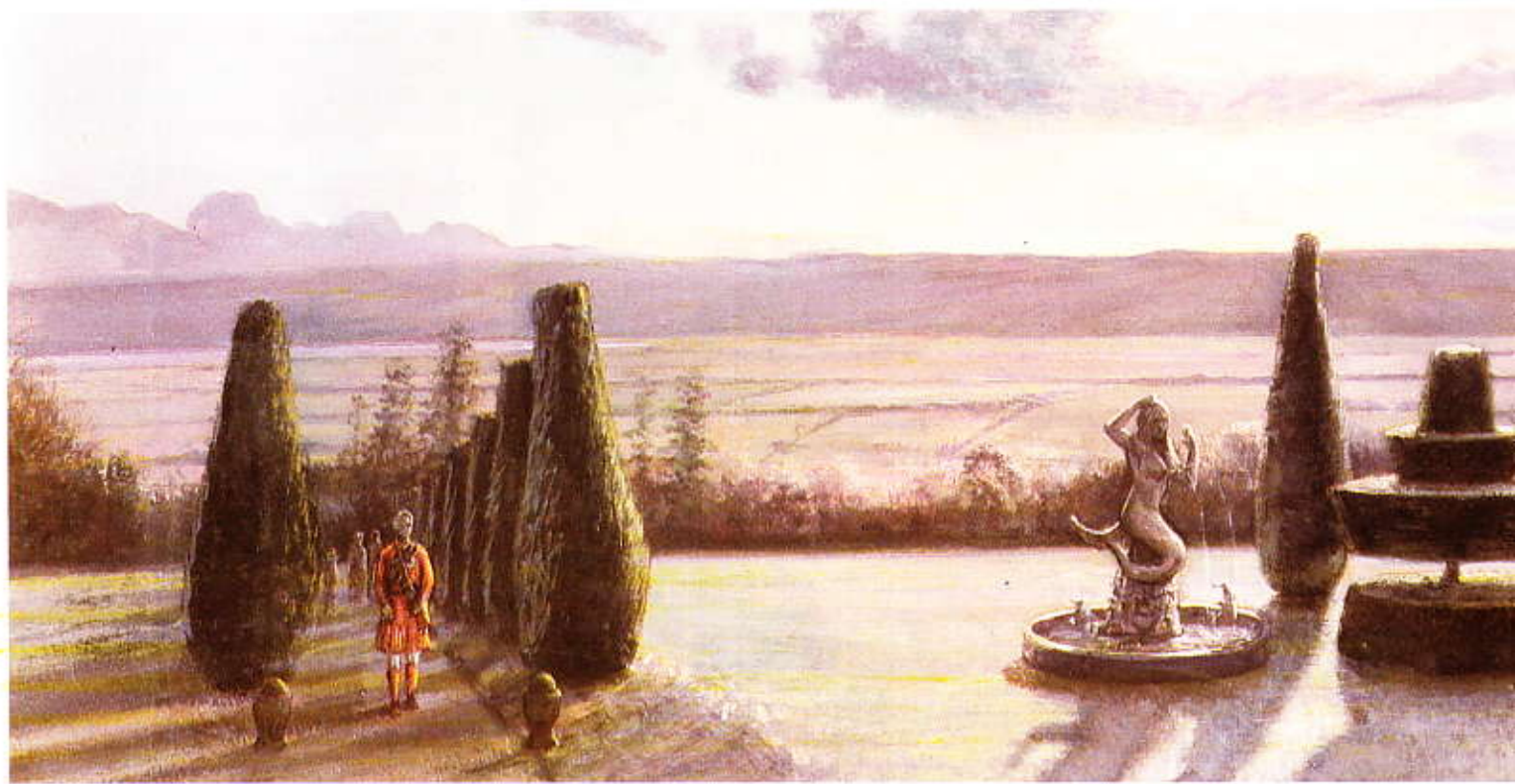


Three contemporary muralists talk to CLIO MITCHELL about their work, which includes everything from cats to dancing skeletons.

# ROOM WITH AN INTERIOR VIEW



**T**HE art of the modern muralist is all about illusion, but based on traditional skills of representation and *trompe l'oeil*. Murals have a long history in architectural decoration and can still bring—to country house and town house alike—an unrivalled opportunity to indulge in dreams or to revel in historical dramas. In a country house you can bring up a vision of your family's past; in a town house, dream that you are peering from the battlement of your Tuscan palace to the edge of an ancient hilltown.

One new talent in the field is Guy Lester, although his move into mural painting was

accidental—the necessary skills are no longer taught in art schools. After living on a barge in Burgundy for several years, selling paintings to passing river traffic, Mr Lester was invited to paint a mural to disguise a row of dustbins. A stickler for accuracy, he shared his barge with mountains of rubbish for several weeks, while he designed an intriguing panorama of slightly out-of-control litter, including a scavenging pig.

This was the first of many commissions, both in France and back in Britain, where he now lives with his artist wife and two children. 'Murals are fun because they're always one-offs, so you have to re-invent yourself each time. And I enjoy

working on a large scale,' he acknowledges.

They may be fun, but Mr Lester's murals also require a great deal of work. This is an art form where the patron has a major input, even when he or she has no clear vision of what is wanted. Part of the design process involves choosing a suitable style and subject from studying the patron's personality and home. 'I absorb the person, the place, the colours, sit in the space and see what comes.'

Sometimes a patron asks for aspects of the history of the location or the family to be incorporated into the design. Mr Lester takes this research seriously. For a recent commission for Fingask Castle in





**Creatures in the hall:** a monkey and a siamese cat in separate arches face each other on the walls either side of a corridor as painted by Ashley Rye. **On the left, the monkey is backed by open countryside; on the right, the cat sits in front of an imagined complex of Tuscan buildings and landscape.** (Below) **Moving topiary:** Guy Lester cheerfully admits to rearranging garden elements to his own design in murals for Fingask Castle in Perthshire. **On the left is Bonnie Prince Charlie arriving to stay in 1745 (before Culloden). On the right is Sir Stuart Threipland, his physician, with his guardian angel. The angel refers to an incident at the Battle of Culloden, where Sir Stuart managed to avoid harm from a group of Redcoats**



Perthshire, for the Murray-Threipland family. Mr Lester has completed a sequence of views of Fingask with moments from the family's history. One panel recalls an incident when an ancestor was killed by the Redcoats while putting on his boots, at the same time as his wife was giving birth.

To cheer up the scene a bit, Mr Lester depicted the man as a skeleton and added a skeletal dog peeing on the sofa—by way of a doggy overreaction to the presence of the Redcoats' bulldog. 'One doesn't want to be boring,' the artist remarks. He also confesses to moving a lot of the castle's topiary about in this series of paintings, to make it fit better into his own designs.

Another commission shows how the past and present can be cleverly mixed. The owner of a private chapel in Saumur, France wanted murals reflecting the life of a local martyr, the 6th-century St Radégund. So Mr Lester devoured the three available books on the subject, as well as scouring the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, to come up with six key episodes to fit the space—from Radégund's marriage to a local king (with the mural's patron in the guise of the officiating bishop) to a nun furtively escaping over a wall (a reference to the exceedingly strict order to which St Radégund's convent belonged). The patron's sons are also portrayed as two rogues near a barrel

of wine, symbolising a miracle in which the saint created endless wine, as well as the patron's own vineyards.

'I announce that I own the room while I'm painting,' Mr Lester explains. 'People must knock before coming in. I don't like to be watched at work. But I do invite them in at certain stages, because I need their feedback, and sometimes they have very good ideas.' Working in people's homes presents certain hazards: 'I live in fear of treading Prussian blue into a priceless Chinese silk carpet,' he admits.

The fact that murals have to be painted *in situ* has led to certain complications for muralist Ashley Rye, too. He has been



When the current owners of Fingask were expecting the birth of their son two years ago, they put an advertisement in the *Dundee Courier* for a perambulator. As a result, they acquired the one in the picture (right), which came from a 90-year-old sailor from Dundee, who replied. Mr Lester's depiction of Fingask, loosely based on an old photograph, is framed above the chimneypiece (below left), and shown in detail below right. The statues are depictions of characters from Burns



known to have to dive to the bottom of a swimming-pool to retrieve his work tools. His partner, Vivienne Francis, has found herself having to paint while standing on a scaffolding tower 30ft high.

Like Mr Lester, Mr Rye and Miss Francis enjoy the large scale of mural painting. Mr Rye, who studied illustration at the Royal Academy, stumbled on the delights of 'expanding outwards' through a chance commission to do a *trompe l'oeil* garden mural—and never looked back. Another early mural project began as some Italian Renaissance angels and clouds in a bathroom but, stoked by his growing enthusiasm, 'it gradually contaminated the rest of the

house'. The owner, fortunately, did not mind.

Miss Francis started out by painting children's furniture, but the desire to expand from the 'endless butterflies, bunny rabbits and dragons' led her to accept commissions painting whole nurseries, and a wide range of other mural work, including a ceiling in the palace of the Sultan of Brunei.

The two have been painting as a team for the past two years. This works well, as their styles are compatible, and they can blend seamlessly. The division of labour also works well: Mr Rye particularly loves painting architecture, perspective, geometrical elements and human figures; Miss

Francis prefers 'more sensual subjects—landscapes, seascapes, plants and animals'.

Like Mr Lester, they rely largely on intuition about the owner's tastes and personality when preparing a design, as well as drawing inspiration from the shape of the room and the atmosphere of the location. Original ideas, often bounced off each other, tend to change under the impact of the surroundings. 'I don't think I've ever had a totally clear plan at the start,' Mr Rye says. 'It tends to evolve as I go along.'

Sometimes, however, the client has his or her own ideas about what should be represented, which can lead to some diverse and even curious subjects. One of Mr Rye's clients,





Ashley Rye's portrait shutters for a Wimbledon house are painted in oils and trimmed with gold leaf. They depict various people in Italian Renaissance style



(Above) **Bad dog:** the scene based on family history in 1715 in which an ancestor died just before his wife, Lady Threipland, gave birth to a son, Stuart, who became the physician Sir Stuart Threipland. (Right) **Gods of the bath:** in a Wimbledon bathroom, Ashley Rye's *trompe l'oeil* Roman figures stand above a marblised base



for example, had her heart set on enlivening her loo with an entire medieval military-camp scene. This was really not practicable in such a small space, but he did oblige with a suit of armour, together with the client's coat of arms and some medieval canopies, and even a patch of medieval garden.

Miss Francis and Mr Rye are not as draconian as Mr Lester about banning their clients from casual visits to the work-in-progress, 'although most clients do not interfere anyway'. Very occasionally, there can be problems, however. Mr Rye recalls one commission where the two halves of the client couple had strong—and conflicting—views about what they wanted the

mural to look like. 'They ended up having such an argument that I just left quietly.'

These mural artists take great pleasure in their work, especially where the subject is Baroque, Classical or Islamic in character, with plenty of ornament and detail. Portraits, both human and animal, especially dogs, are a common request. Such motifs may not be at the cutting edge of contemporary art, but they are the essence of the art and craft of painting.

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Photographs: Simon Jauncey, Sylvaine Poitou.