

In the Picture

Dermot Cavanagh

In this issue we step into the studio of Irish artist Dermot Cavanagh as he talks about his artistic journey

Funny how things turn out: if I hadn't been ill as a young lad, I might never have taken up painting.

I was seven years old and confined to the house through illness for long periods of time. To relieve my boredom, mum bought me a box of watercolours and I tried painting what I could see from the windows of my country home. I was hooked and my lifelong passion for landscape painting had started. Soon the sickness that had plagued my early years disappeared, leaving only a great hunger and desire to learn to paint.

I lived in the heart of the Irish countryside and had many great scenes to paint locally. Initially I often got frustrated trying to find the right techniques to capture the scene properly, but the problems I encountered only spurred me on. With practice my confidence began to grow and I developed skills through trial and error.



△ Collectors corner in Dermot's studio

◁ At work in his studio

favourite - prints of his paintings were everywhere at that time.

Through my teenage years my enthusiasm continued to grow and art was my favourite subject at school; I spent my pocket money on materials and

With no art tutors to show me what to do and limited access to how-to books, I started to study and decipher the techniques used by the Old Masters and other famous artists from prints on tea trays, biscuit tins and place mats we had at home. John Constable was my

my spare time practising. In the summer of 1976, aged 16, I left school to get a job. I became an apprentice electrician but continued painting in my spare time; when my training course took me to live in Belfast for two years, I started visiting art galleries and first saw original paintings up close. Now I could feel the texture, smell the paint and marvel at the exquisite techniques used. This inspired me to continue painting and I soon became an accomplished amateur.

I married my wife Maria in June 1985 and we spent our honeymoon touring the wild and majestically beautiful south west of Ireland. Maria later admitted that during that time she wondered just what she'd married: "All this man seemed interested in was the scenery, the mountains and what would lie in store around the next bend in the road".

After a few years I was becoming known less as the local electrician and more as 'the local artist'. In 1989 I was approached, out of the blue, by the vice-principal of the local technical college and asked if I would be interested in teaching evening art classes. At first I was reluctant to get involved because I had no teaching experience, but Maria persuaded me to give it a go, and it proved to be a major turning point in my life and career. I soon discovered I had a simple, straightforward talent for communicating my techniques to others.

Within two years I was running painting courses from home, I provided the tuition and Maria provided lunch. Eventually courses were in such demand that we either needed more space or a new home! I set up a studio and started running courses at a local National Trust property, The Argyry. This concept soon developed into painting holidays in Ireland and abroad.



◁ The view from Dermot's studio

▽ 'Favour Royal Church'





△ 'The Harbour Bar Downings'



△ 'Rossguill, Donegal'

My BBC TV series 'Awash With Colour' came about because of the way I conducted my painting courses. I tried to ensure my learn-to-paint sessions were entertaining, informative and inspirational and were laced with local interest and anecdotal stories; the holidays and weekend courses often included guided tours and special evening excursions. I made contact with a BBC television producer who liked the idea enough to commission a run of 74 episodes over a five-year period for BBC2.

'Awash With Colour' captured the imagination of the public, and during the series I taught a host of national and international celebrities to paint the Irish landscape, from Suzanne Dando and Barry McGuigan - who claimed before his class that he was to painting what an ashtray was to a motorbike - to Charlie Dimmock, Valerie Singleton, John Craven and Gloria Hunniford.

I am currently working on a concept for a new BBC series, and I continue to conduct demonstrations to art clubs and societies. I hold regular painting courses throughout Britain, and also organise painting holidays in Ireland and abroad. After more than twenty years as an art tutor I still get a buzz from it, I find teaching a great way of learning. At my workshops I apply the belief that anyone with an interest can be taught to paint. People always say practice makes perfect but at my classes and demos I will show you what you need to practise to make your progress easier.

My studio at home is a large roof conversion, a fantastic open plan space with views over a landscape of rolling hills and a polo pitch to the back. I am generally a pretty tidy person, but if it wasn't for the fact that I hold regular workshops in my studio it would probably be in a constant state of chaos!

Although it is primarily a working studio, it doubles as a gallery and perspective buyers are welcome to come in and browse as there are many framed paintings displayed on the walls. I do love to get outdoors and paint in the local area as much as possible and for that reason there are lots of half-finished paintings awaiting completion - this being Ireland, it's not entirely unknown for one to get caught in a shower!

At certain times of the year, especially in the run up to Christmas, there are quite a few commissions to do. Painting commissions is not always enjoyable but it is challenging and I have always had the ability to rise to one of those. My many years of experience have also taught me to work quickly so when put under pressure with a commission I can always deliver.

Today I work mainly in watercolour and use a very limited pallet of colours, only a few brushes and a couple of types of watercolour paper, although it was not always like that. One end of the studio has been turned into my office and a collector's corner. In the 44 years since I took up painting I have dabbled in almost every piece of painting kit ever invented and taken thousands of photos for painting references with different cameras over many years. In the collectors corner I have my favourite painting equipment and cameras from past years.
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△ A workshop lunch in the studio



△ Teaching in the open air



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 about
ART
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- Birmingham, Winchester
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- Watford & Warrington

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