

“Late Twist for Ancient Art Groupie.”

>>>> This little scribble was meant to be reasonably short, describing how an ancient old art groupie had found a simpler and less stressful way of painting. However, as soon as I touched the typewriter, with a little bit of energy in the system, and a bit of time on my hands, I knew I would enjoy writing down a few memories of my numerous trips away from home on water colour painting holidays. And with luck, a few of my friends and others who have followed a similar path might get something out of it as well.

>>>> I have done the same (written some half way amusing anecdotes) relating to my low level golfing life with some of my golfing chums and so far have not had a letter from a solicitor.

>>>> Apart from a year or two of evening classes at Morley College, in London, with Sarah Christian as teacher, my life as an 'art groupie' began in 1994. That's when Sarah suggested I go onwards and outwards and join the fast growing Leisure Industry which offered weekly courses in all kinds of activity all over the country and overseas. I began with a two week painting course at 'Water Colour Weeks at Woebly', on the Welsh Borders. This was run by the very 'schoolmasterish' Bob Kilvert, who represented his country, Wales, in the sport of Fencing. He was pretty strict and no one dared argue back.! He gave a very structured class, ideal for beginners in Water Colours, perfect for me.....(I always remember his drumming in "FRUMS and CORUMBER".....short for Fr. Ultramarine and Burnt Sienna for strong colours close up, and Cobalt Blue plus Raw Umber for softer colours in the distance..which has remained with me all my painting life..!) And I am still using the rigger and the No. 5 flat that I purchased on this course.

>>>> The second week we had Neil Meacher for Pen and Wash.....and from then on it was all over the place with all kinds of different teachers. However, for the first few years my painting courses accounted for only 2-3 weeks p.a. which was not that much, considering I never did any painting at home.

>>>> John Christian, near Okehampton, a retired Brigadier from The Paras, the softest and kindest big soul that you could ever meet, was one who played a big part in those early days. I always remember his driving about 10 of us pupils, piled high in the back of his Landrover, all clutching their luncheon boxes with one hand and the safety hand hold with the other, around the narrow bumpy roads surrounding the Devonshire moors. And when we reached our location, John always made sure we all walked around for at least half an hour before we started to paint, in order to take in the atmosphere and establish the main focal point (or main 'Ballerina) of what we were about to paint. (to this day I have always 'cased the joint', or gone hunting with my camera at every location. I 'shoot' any composition or possible focal point (sometimes these only show up for 5 seconds when the spotlight of the Sun lights them up) that hits my eye, but to this day I have never been able to paint 'atmosphere' !!). John always called the main focal point his "Margot Fonteyn", and the supporting focal point was always referred to as his "Rudolf Nureyev". John is a 'healer' and showed us all how we could bend a lot of sticks, just like Yuri Geller, when locating 'lay lines' and dowsing for water on his much loved moors.

>>>> Then a short week with the the sometimes maligned Ron Ranson and his famous Hake brush, who drummed in forever and more the basic rules of composition, tone, colour, soft edges/hard edges, verticals, diagonals and horizontals etc.. "We are designers and symbol makers" was one of his favourite quotes, and he always made sure we did a tonal sketch and did not clutter our painting up with too many objects. In my very first class with him, we all had to do a pencil tonal sketch. I thought mine was not too bad, until he sat down next to me, said nothing, took hold of my pencil, pressing down so hard the lead broke a couple of times, and showed me what real "tone" or darks were all about and how they helped to magnify whites. One of Ron's favourite words was 'counterchange', showing how contrasts in tone made any painting a lot more exciting. Despite these oft repeated words of wisdom, I myself and most other normal art groupies still find it hard to be properly bold with the darks.

>>>> Ron was also responsible for giving me one of my painting 'Eureka' moments in 2001 by introducing me to The Greek Islands. In particular, the tiny island of Lipsi. Any one who has been to the Greek Islands will have had the same feelings, of being knocked over by the depth of turquoises and deep blues in the sea and the powerful lights. We had to fly to Kos and then take a ferry that stopped off at Palamos and then Leros before reaching Lipsi, an Island that had no cars, motorbikes or television at the time. We hit Leros at sunset and I will never forget the scene as we entered the harbour. There were some old Roman (?) ruins growing out of the ground, right at the entrance of the harbour, whose shapes were beautifully accentuated by the soft golden lights and dark shadows brought on by the evening sun. Enough to send the pulse rate soaring of any wannabe artist.

>>>> The Greek Island experience was so strong that I returned to Lipsi for 5 more years. Each time for a 2 week period in late September. Each time with nothing to do but paint, swim and enjoy the evenings watching the sun set with a big glass of beer, talking the talk with the rest of the gang...especially in the first couple of years, when the cost of the beer was tied to the Greek Drachma...!!!...also etched in my memory of those first three years with Ron on Lipsi Island, usually with a large gang of about 25 pupils, were two great lady (German) characters who had Ron absolutely under their thumb. Hilda and Christiana were their names. Immediately after the war, aged 19, they both had the guts to cycle together (Tandem) all the way down from Germany to the Mediterranean on an adventure holiday...that gives some idea as to their strength of character...and on my first visit, on the very first get together of the class, in front of every body, they stood up and quoted verbatim Churchill's famous monologue about how he overcame the terror of a large white sheet of watercolour paper when he discovered the use of a large brush...!..and for the next 2 weeks, where ever we were stationed on the tiny Island of Lipsi, when we heard the great cry of...Ronnn...coming from over the nearest hill top, we knew it was either Hilda or Christiana demanding immediate attention from their tutor....who, as a very generous person with a penchant for ladies, would always oblige.

>>>> From 2000 onwards, the weeks devoted to going away on these water Colour painting holidays increased to about 5 or 6 per year, the main reason being, apart from Lipsi Island, was that I had discovered Dedham Hall with its fantastic food and accommodation and excellent array of professional teachers and painters.

>>>> There was also, in those early Millennium years, two other slightly different water colour teaching experiences. One was signing on for a years 'Foundation Course' with the highly intelligent and mercurial Trevor Waugh, where the painting lessons, always entertaining, could sometimes spill over into psychiatric sessions, as he was always keen to dig into the deepest recesses of our artistic souls. The course consisted of 12 days, one Saturday every month, during which he covered just about everything...all mediums, all styles, all artistic expressions, etc, and even a day at The British Museum in London. He set us homework to do and was never afraid to open himself up, weaknesses and strengths, to us, his pupils. One account I will always remember is his description of the total fear he had felt when being dragged unwillingly to the edge of a cliff when on an absailing expedition, followed by yet more fear mixed with unbelievable excitement and elation as he began his free fall to the ground...which is the feeling a lot of us can get when in a 'make or break' point of a painting, when the brush is moving faster than the brain and you don't really know what is going on. And how when these moments work out, and become close to what was in the mind's eye, the soul can be transported above the stars.

The course was based at Windrush, in middle west England, (close to the home of another well known artist and teacher, James Fletcher Watson),so it meant I had a near 3 hour drive from London on one Saturday every month. This drive was made a lot more enjoyable as I had discovered a boutique hotel (The Inn for all Seasons) nearby Trevor's studio that cooked the best breakfasts, quality and presentation, that I had ever experienced. Food was on my mind every mile of my outward journey, which somehow made the journey go faster. On my second journey west to visit to my breakfast haven, having parked the car I entered the hotel with great expectations and made for the loo for a wash and brush up before the big occasion, only to hear the kitchen door open and a furious chef screaming at me indicating in no uncertain terms that his hotel was not a public lavatory for car users...!!....luckily, when I told him that for the last 3 hours I had been thinking of nothing else but the best breakfasts available in The West Country, he calmed down, eventually even telling me his secret of poaching the best eggs in town. Which secret stays with me to this day, as do some of Trevor's water colour teaching gems....."capture the lights and connect the darks", being one of my favourites.

>>>>> The other 'different painting occasion' was a one off short week of teaching deep in the boondocks of Norfolk. I mention 'one off' because I was always told that our named teacher, David Curtis, one of the country's top artists, just like his friend Trevor Chamberlain, never gave classes. I believe this one happened only because the owner of The Red House, where the course took place, was an up and coming professional artist himself and a friend of David Curtis.

>>>> So I made very sure of not missing out and found a B and B nearby, maybe even a day early. And the next morning I found myself sitting at one end of a very large breakfast table when a larger than life character, in every sense, plonked himself down directly opposite at the other end of the table. Well, maybe it could be termed as bonding at first sight !!!...not only had Dan (Dan Glen was his name, an ex Army/Police character with all the gregarious characteristics that go with that) booked himself on the same David Curtis course, but within minutes I realised that he himself was an 'art groupie' above all other art groupies. His list of different teachers, their styles, and the locations they had been to was never ending. And not only that, this man carried an art supply wholesale shop in the back of his large Mercedes Estate car. This shop came to my rescue the very next day, when it rained. As we had to paint outdoors, my water colours were no good and within minutes Dan had fixed me up with everything needed to do a small sized oil, which was just about feasible. By the end of breakfast, our stations in life (as if ordered by God, Who "made people high and lowly, and ordered their estate") had been fixed. He was installed as my art groupie master and I was his art groupie pupil. I also found myself as Dan's not very good art groupie navigator, as we used his car to drive us around during this 3 day course, and getting back to base after a late Pub dinner, I followed a car with a registration number beginning with ART, which I guessed belonged to our hostess and would so lead us back to The Red House. After 25 minutes chasing this car and getting nowhere, we realised the error of my ways. A tough evening for Dan, who also had one of his usual bouts of cramp to contend with on that midnight chase. We eventually made it home and luckily the Master was still talking to his Pupil the following morning. I did persuade Dan to try Dedham Hall, and he soon became quite a big cog in a little bubble of friends that centered around one of our favourite tutors, Alan Simpson, a superb maritime artist and man.

>>>> And what about that David Curtis course. Mainly a real treat to see one of the country's best painters at work, close up. And yes, I have all his secrets and techniques noted and photographed, just stopping short of a detailed time and motion study. But as we art groupies get to realise, David Curtis and all our various tutors are different people than ourselves, see things differently and have 40 years or so experience tucked under their belts. So it is best to watch closely, see how they do things and apply the things you learn to help you put what is in your own mind's eye onto your own bit of watercolour paper. Every creative person has his own version of what he wants to say, and the more you learn watching professionals so the easier it becomes to get out what is inside you, and the happier you will be.

>>>> (One last little bite about Lipsi, which was only a tiny Island, about 3 miles by 2. Back in the UK, shortly after my second visit, I saw a big photo in the National Newspapers which I could not fail to immediately recognise. It was of a sailing yacht parked on the Lipsi waterfront that I had walked by every single morning. The report was not about the yacht, but all to do with the head of the Greek November 19 Terrorist organisation, who apparently had been living happily in a big house on the hill in Lipsi for the previous 15 years.!)

>>>> One more 'Eureka' happening would follow in about 2010 when I first discovered The Lake District and a very entertaining art course under the guidance of what could easily have been described as 'that well known stage double act, starring Jenny Wheatley and Mike Chaplain', so in harmony were they when teaching and discussing their pupil's paintings. I remember at one 'Crit' they picked up a tiny 4" by 6" sketch done by one of the beginners in the class and spent the next 20 minutes passing it back and forward between themselves as each new idea came into their highly creative minds, as to all the artistic possibilities that this little sketch could lead to. Meanwhile, the totally bemused beginner sat there with a giant moonlike grin all over his face, happy to have his moment of artistic glory so early in life, but probably not in reality understanding one word that was spoken.! Alas, the highly entertaining double act is no more, but thankfully Jenny still cracks the whip and looks after us every year in this very painterly area of England, and keeps us busy with home work.

>>>> And talking of home work, because we are now up to date and just coming out of the lengthy lock down, I have to say, very thankfully, that I have been forced to do a lot more painting at home. Thank heavens for painting. It grinds the mind which is good for mental health, and all that mental wrestling makes you want to run screaming out of the house to the nearest park or into the nearest swimming pool to find the perfect antidote of simple non thinking physical exercise. In short, I thank painting for hopefully keeping me a bit further away from a visit to The Priory than I otherwise would be.

>>>> In fact, during the lockdown I even managed to complete 8 enormous 5' by 3.5' paintings, the first one using the few hairs that were left on the No.5 flat that I had purchased 25 years earlier from Bob Kilvert.! I used this brush because I was terrified of water running down on a near vertical piece of paper, as I was one who had always used big flat brushes with lots of water on a totally flat surface all his painting life. Painting these big ones did become easier and less stressful as I became more confident with using bigger brushes on a vertical surface. I also got used to leaving the painting standing on its specially made easel in the spare bedroom so that I could attack it again only when I found myself in the mood to do so.

>>>> It may well have been some kind of a reaction from this year or so of painting 'large' that contributed to what is referred to in the title as 'the late twist' in an art groupies life. Or just the fact that as you get older and have less energy, you find it easier to break the rules if that will make your painting life less stressful.

>>>> So what is this late twist...well, all golfers have 'new swing thoughts' and a lot of us have New Years Resolutions. So why can't artists wake up one morning and decide to do things differently. I know us art groupies do think a lot about their painting techniques between their art courses. My thoughts are usually based around how to put down fewer painting marks and much stronger painting marks. Always much easier said than done. 'Less is more', just like in golf. The easier you swing the golf club, the better the results. But again, for some reason, very hard to do.

>>>> So very recently, since I am now doing more painting at home, I made a concentrated effort to do this. I took one reasonably decent composition and tried doing it again and again, getting stronger and simpler each time. And what I ended up with was "Lines".

>>>> Yes, Lines..!....lines in a painting, which ever since I started on this journey always seemed to be viewed as a "no no". Especially lines in a water colour painting. And yet, if you ask any teacher are lines allowed, most will say yes, on the basis that there are no rules in art. Anything goes. But still, to this day, I have seen very few of my diligent art groupie friends put lines around the things they are trying to paint.

>>>> Which has of course influenced me. And yet I am a person that for some reason or another, has always wanted to put lines into a painting. The only time I have felt safe to put in lines is when it is already too late. When the painting is in a bit of a mess and the only way to make sense out of it is to pull it together with lines or put it under a shower.

>>>> So I ask myself why would I have this urge to put lines in, and my only logical reason is that lines will make it easier for people to understand the story I am trying to tell with my painting. And hopefully, for most of us groupies that have any 'art' or creativity in our souls, we should be trying to say something pleasant. Namely, to portray a scene or composition that is easy to understand and will leave the viewer with a pleasant or happy feeling.

>>>> And if lines can help us do this, then why are they seemingly the bad boys in the class..??..and all I can think of is that people who have to use lines in a painting are viewed as lacking in the 'craftsmanship' of painting. They do not have sufficient skills in the all around task of putting the paint down on paper to pass their message on with true painterly skills alone.

>>>> And yet, and yet....we see great impressionist painters putting dark lines around their apples and pears in their 'still life' paintings, and we see Picasso putting huge dark lines when painting women "with bashed up faces and tits going in the wrong direction".....(words from the father of a friend of mine. This man was an early Texas oil man, who took his family every year on the obligatory European Culture Tour. He met Picasso, managed to do him a favour and so was invited in return by Picasso to go into his studio to choose and be given a couple of paintings. This very honest Texan politely turned the offer down and told his son the reason why.!)

>>>> Well, at least this little tangent on lines has raised another question. The difference between 'art' and 'craft'.

>>>> A lot of people have a lot of art or creativity in their souls and yet do not have the skills to get their stories out. This applies to any activity right across the board. The most obvious example is telling a joke. Some people have the funniest stories locked up in their heads and yet are embarrassing to listen to because they cannot put one word in front of another. While another person with the gift and confidence of verbal articulation can do the full reverse. Make people laugh with the flimsiest story line. So, straight back to the art groupie, because it is he that this story is about.

>>>> Which is the most important of the two. The art or the craft. The answer is obvious. You have to start with 'the art' or that thing in their creative soul that they want to tell people about. We all have to have something we want to say. That is the start point. After that, you have to develop the skills to get your message out. By now, we old art groupies should know all about that, which is why John Christian's early advice to spend time looking for "your Ballerina" was so important. You have to find a scene or composition or focal point that gets you excited. That is the most important part of the game. The second part, the skill of craftsmanship, is clearly a result of the first part. You wouldn't bother to go through the process of overcoming fear and living in hope which begins as soon as we start unfolding our easels. And then begin to employ all your energies, courage and skills to get your ballerina out onto the paper roughly in the way you envisioned it in your mind's eye.

>>>> And now we re-engage with that word "lines"...and you all know what I am going to say....if lines can help you say what you want to say, then they are physically and morally justified in being used....as can anything else be used.....(One of my teachers had one of his pupils enrolled into the august body of The Royal Academy by producing an artwork made entirely out of elephant dung..!!...who cares...one hopes he had a pleasant story to tell.....?).....but I will stick with lines, for the time being, at least until another 'swing thought' (for golfers), or painting style comes to me in my dreams.

>>>> So, going back to the start point.....most of us art groupies should count ourselves lucky, because we are all a little bit creative. We can recognise things that we like which makes us want to tell others about it. 'We' try and do it visually. Other creative people might express what is inside them differently, such as by singing a song, making music or writing a poem.

As long as we can see that song, or story, in our mind's eye, we are already winners. That process comes from within. After that, we can set about the more physical act of craftsmanship, or how to put the paint down, which comes from without.

And some do that better than others. Who cares. The real lucky ones are the 'magicians' who can put the whole process into reverse. Their craftsmanship is so good that they can turn a bad story into such a good painting that will make us all want to burst into song...!!...caramba...makes you want to cry...!!...and if that is the case, does the craftsmanship of the hand 'trump' the artistry of the soul...???...I will leave that in the balance....

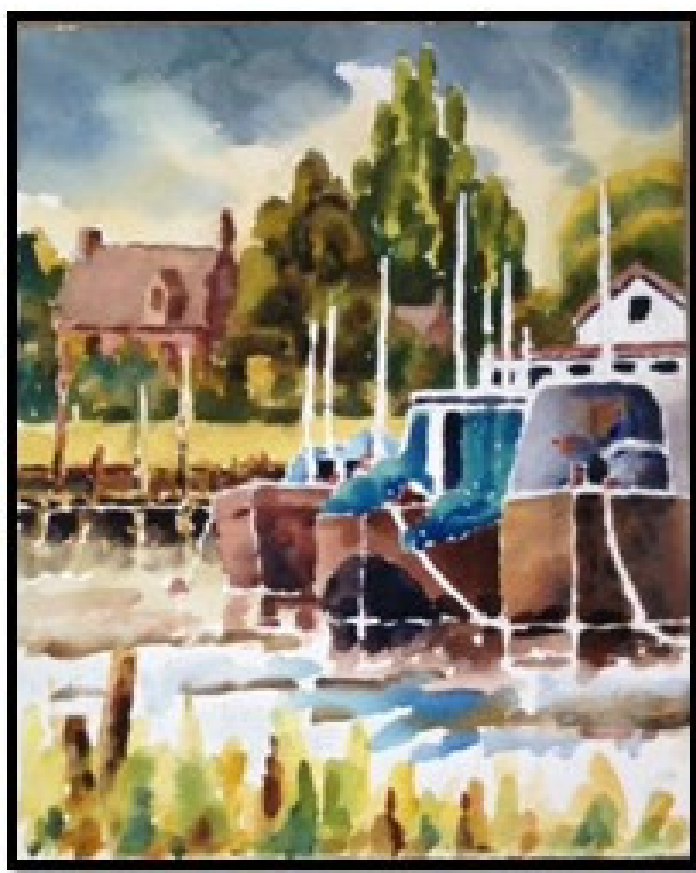
But even that, in the overall context, should be a mere nothingness to any true art groupie. As long as we, at whatever level, have the courage to join the game and engage in battle with a sheet of white paper to get our story out, win or lose, we all come out a little richer inside. We have all been able to add a little bit more to our balance of "invisible wealth".

We have not shirked from the battle or 'sat on the bench'. And even better than that, we all have a story to tell....and that, young reader, allows us to become true, professional 'art groupies', because one thing we know we can all do well is the ability to "Talk the Talk".....

NOW, WHILE I REMEMBER WHAT THIS WHOLE STORY IS ABOUT, I BETTER SHOW YOU WHAT I MEAN BY "LINES".



1



2

PAINTINGS 1, 2.....Painting 1 was a rough painting done a few years ago on cartridge paper. It shows some old barges tied up in St. Osephs which I thought made a reasonable composition. So I set about trying to make this painting simpler and stronger.

(The next 5 paintings were all done on watercolour paper, roughly 13" by 16".)

As you can see, painting 2 shows hardly any difference from painting No. 1 as far as strength and impact is concerned, so I decided to bring my lines into play. The lines are done using Ultramarine and Alizarin Crimson, plus a bit of mud. The width can be varied. (You have to make sure they are well dried before you paint over or around them.)

Paintings 3 and 4 show the effect. They certainly come out stronger and crisper, which is the effect I was after, even if they veer towards “stylised art”.



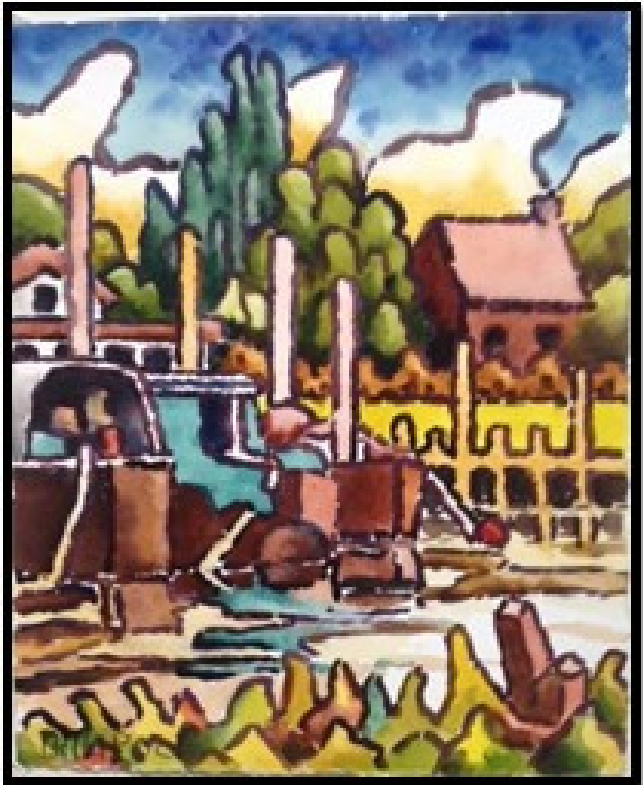
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4



5



6

PAINTINGS 5 and 6 show the effect with monochrome and then taking things much further, heading towards 'abstract'. One thing I noticed was that lines made it easier for me to think of colour...I think my colour became stronger in these experimental paintings and the ones that followed when I spent a couple of weeks at Dedham Hall.

ANOTHER COMMENT....HOW WILL "Lines" affect the main rules we are told to follow when creating a painting.

-- Lines will accentuate the composition. Obviously, if the composition is good, the lines themselves will tend to be pleasing rather than not pleasing. The composition will be stronger and easier to understand. (..I guess that means you better have a reasonably good composition to begin with..!!)

-- Lines will accentuate 'tone', or the contrast between lights and darks.

-- Lines will do the same thing for colours....in fact lines will accentuate just about everything resulting in all your paintings being stronger, crisper, more vibrant and more 'in your face'.....if that is what you want.

Unfortunately, for us Watercolour painters, the application of "lines" around everything does drive a massive stake straight through the spirit and soul of what I believe traditional water colour painting is all about, which is softness and transparency brought on by the play of water and pigment on white paper, creating, amongst other things, my much loved 'soft edges'.....!

.... but then again, in "Art", anything goes.....and we live in a free country, and you can change your moods any time you want, and that means you can go back to 'no lines' and plenty of soft edges any time you want. What I think I have achieved for myself with this meandering piece of writing, going backwards and forwards, is that for me, if I feel like lines, then I am jolly well going to put them in from the beginning, rather than wait until it becomes 'shower time'.

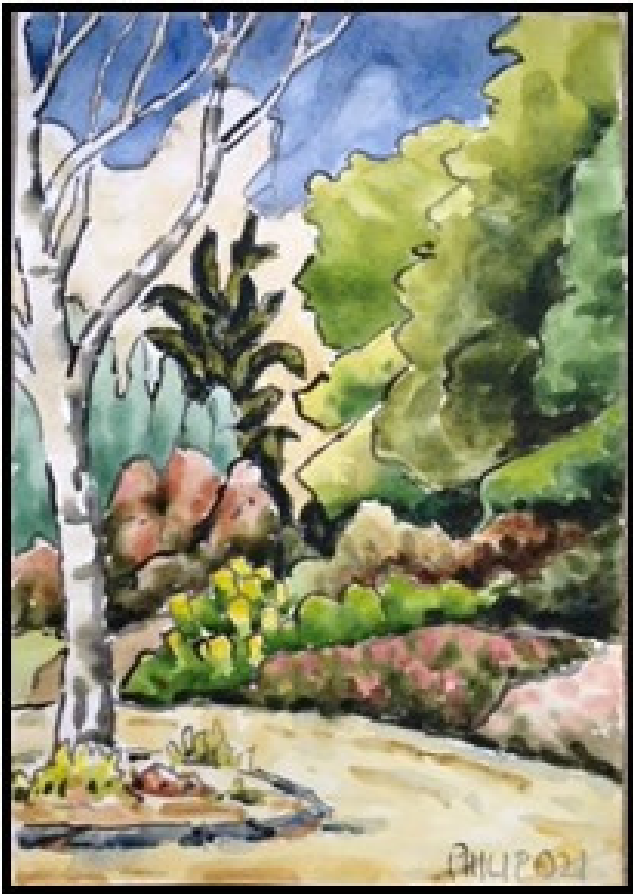
SOME OTHER PAINTINGS DONE IN AND AROUND DEDHAM, WITH "LINES".



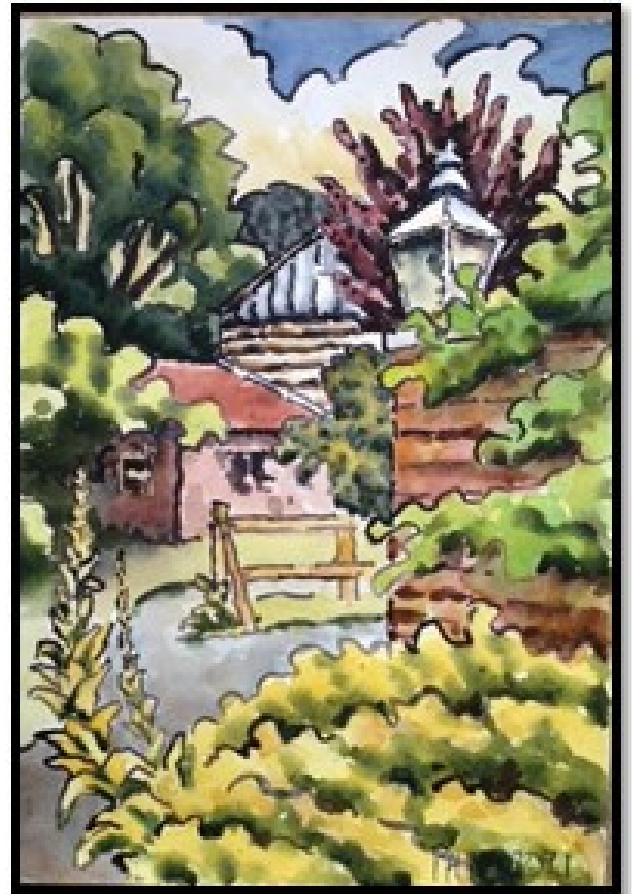


8

PAINTINGS 7 and 8 are very simple compositions which came out pleasing to my eye, especially "Manningtree Road", comprising of simplified fields and trees. In this and all others I think the lines around the clouds, while being terribly incorrect, adds a bit of bounce to the paintings. Painting 8 is an easily recognisable scene at Pin Mill. The clouds here I hope add something to the RHS of the painting which otherwise has very little.

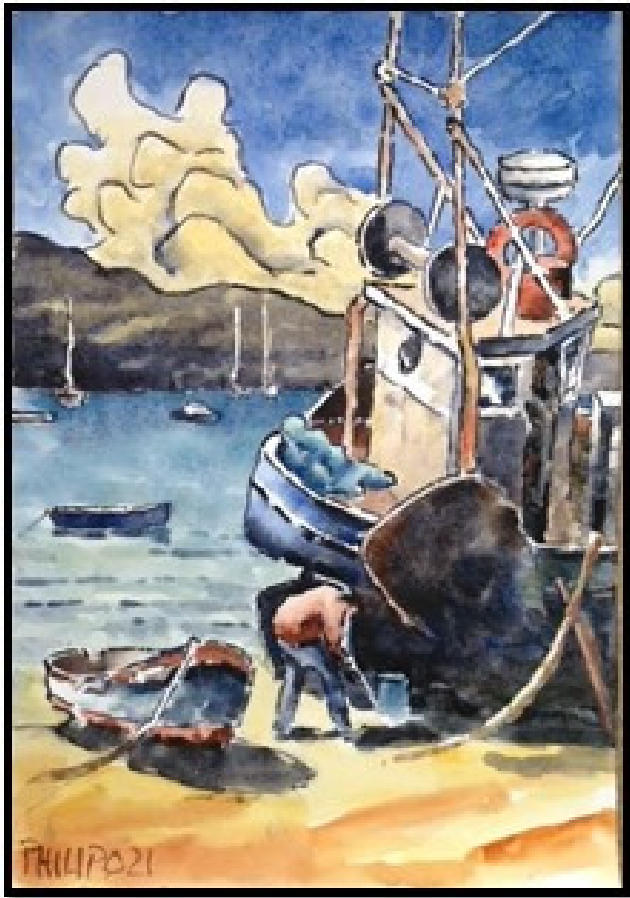


9



10

PAINTINGS 9 and 10 are garden scenes which I find very difficult to do, so I try to use my lines to accentuate the main chunks of shape and colour which originally caught my eye. Beth Chatto's Gravel garden is on the left, and the Lantern on the Wall is in the grounds of Dedham Hall.



11



12

PAINTINGS 11 and 12 are real "roughies", or strong half paintings that I got into trouble with. The left hand one originally had a very thin horizon line, so I had to increase the height of the hills and make more play with the clouds. It needed a bit more verticality to balance with the fishing boat...it still does. In the right hand one I got into trouble with the drum near the bottom right. I needed something to balance the boat in the top left position. Both so rough and strong that they are best seen in a dark room at five full paces...!!



13



14

Paintings 13 and 14 above are familiar scenes from Dedham. 13 shows the Mill Pond, where I swim and 14 shows a typical rowing boat on the river Stour. Paintings 15 and 16 below are also familiar scenes for Dedham Hall regulars. They are both 'full imperial' size, 22" by 30". They are both quite arresting when you see them in the real, especially picture 15, where the outer field is so strong that I nearly made the main focal point (...or 'ballerina', the great big fishing trawler,) disappear...!.....picture 16 has perhaps too much going on but there is some kind of crispness brought about by dark lines against white spaces.



15



16



17



18

Two scenes from the Lake District.
17. Lake Derwentwater. A view from the
ferry boat, late October. 18. View looking
back down the perilous road to Watendlath
Both Full Imperial.