

Oxfordshire

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Marcus Hodge with Coco the English Pointer and Tess the black labrador in the lounge of his 400-year-old cottage at Appleton

Photographs:
Marc West

A sense of history

Artist Marcus Hodge roams the world for creative inspiration, but there is no place like home he tells
Denise Barkley

The comforts of home are the essential backdrop to artist Marcus Hodge's creative world. A sense of time, and passing through, inspires Marcus both personally and in his work – a sense intensified by living in a 400 year-old South Oxfordshire cottage.

When he moved to the timber-gabled, thatched property in the village of Appleton eight years ago with his wife Alex, a teacher, and their two children Clara, now 17, and Freddie, 15, Marcus found that sense of history spelt out to him, quite literally, when he decided to remove the living room carpet.

"I knew there had to be flagstones beneath, so I pulled it up and found hundreds of copies of *The Oxford Times*, yellowed with age," said Marcus, 48, who is currently putting together a solo exhibition of equine and landscape paintings and sculptures at the Osborne Studio Gallery in London from October 22 to November 8.

"We had fun reading them, and looking at houses priced at £20,000! Then I spent weeks scraping away the black bitumen beneath until

I got through to the original flagstones – the guy I bought the house from was amazed. He lived here for 20 years and never looked beneath the carpet!"

Marcus's dream would be to press a button and be transported back 400 years to see who lived in his house then, and what their life was like. He pointed out a series of lines burned into wood round the inglenook fireplace.

"Apparently people did this to ward off evil – to stop the devil coming down the chimney!" Marcus explained.

"I value that sense of continuity, via the fabric of the building and via furniture and possessions passed down through generations of our family, and of course paintings too."

He shows me a corner of the staircase where one of his own paintings, of Freddie as a baby, is displayed alongside a picture by his artist father Spencer Hodge, and a contemporary piece of artwork by Freddie himself, a portrait of Apple founder Steve Jobs made up of 2,700 tiny Apple logos.

"This was all done by hand when Freddie was only 11," explained Marcus. "Each one had to be cut out by hand and stuck down, but it looks amazing. He has done another one of the

Queen made from tiny crowns.”

Marcus clearly loves his home and living in Appleton which he describes as an “amazing village with a great sense of community”.

However, liberal amounts of travel fuel Marcus’s creative juices and inspire his artwork. Horses are a favourite subject, both in oil on canvas and as sculptures, as well as bold abstract landscapes. He has travelled extensively and recently has been particularly inspired by India, Dubai and Scotland.

He said: “I love surface and texture, and I want to convey the spirit of the object or place. I painted the enormous rocks and timeless landscape of Glen Nevis in the Scottish Highlands – I hope that I have captured the atmosphere and the stillness.”

The collection of work for his solo exhibition later this month is in stark contrast to what he calls his ‘day job’, as a highly-respected portrait painter – but he was 25 before he realised his true vocation. He studied for a degree in economics and business studies but went off to travel, working on a stud farm in Kentucky, in an ice cream parlour in LA, and as a steward on multi million-pound yachts in Monaco.

“I started doing a bit of drawing, and my father finally pointed out that I was just drifting and that there was an amazing painter in Palma, called Joaquin Torrents Llado, who ran a little studio, and why not study under a maestro? He suggested I go there for a year, learn Spanish and do some painting.

“So that is what I did, and I fell in love with painting and I stayed there for five years learning, and then teaching, and then I came back to Britain and decided to see if I could make a living from it.

“In the end, you get to a tipping point and think hell, just go for it. I have been in regular work as a portrait painter ever since, even during the recession when it seemed the portrait business went through the roof!”

The move from Oxford to Appleton has certainly been creatively inspirational for Marcus, who rises around 6am to get several hours work under his belt before taking his daily constitutional – usually on his bike – into the city centre for coffee, chat and a browse of the papers and books in Blackwells.

“I work six hours and then go and see some people – otherwise I would go mad if I sat here on my own all day,” he laughed. “Then I come back and work some more. I never know where the day goes.”

His studio is in an outbuilding in the rambling one-and-a-half acre cottage garden, where he watches the birds on the feeders he has hung in the trees, listens to the birdsong, and often sees deer that wander through from the woods.

“Recently, when I have been debating what exciting location I can I go to next, I have realised I have all the inspiration I need right here under my nose,” he grinned.

“This year it has been less about travel and more about getting on with work for my exhibition, which tends to concentrate the mind. So I have been in the studio working hard.

“A while ago I had a Spanish friend visiting and I told her that, if we were lucky, we might see some deer in the garden. In the middle of the afternoon we saw a male in full antlers with his doe, and a tiny fawn. My friend could not believe it, and then suddenly two fox cubs came gambolling out of the grass. I had never seen a fox before, and I have never seen one since – it was absolutely amazing.”



Above, Marcus works on an equine sculpture. Right, the artist’s garden studio



Marcus treasures his family – this is a cast of his daughter Clara’s hand taken when she she was 11

Marcus loves animals, and has two dogs – an English pointer called Coco and a black labrador called Tess.

There are also cats, including Fluke once “a starving, mangy stray” that his wife and daughter found wandering near the Kassam stadium in Oxford, who is now a sleek, well-fed pet.

Pursuing his interest in equine art, Marcus spoke of the massive horse fairs he has been to in the Rajasthan desert.

“I have painted and sculpted Marwari horses, which are recognisable by their curved ears, and have seen up to 30,000 of them being bought and sold at the horse fairs. There can be the same number of camels too, and a

sea of tents. I went to one last year and in five days I saw only three other European people. It is quite surreal, like a film set.”

But, at present, Marcus has a busy schedule getting his artwork completed for the London exhibition. Home is where the heart is, but for how long is anybody’s guess.

He grinned: “My father is going off to India again soon to see the Dalai Lama, so I might decide to go too . . .”

■ For more information about Marcus Hodge’s exhibition at the Osborne Studio Gallery, October 22-November 8. Visit the website www.osjg.uk.com or call 020 7235 9667