

# The successor to Stubbs and Constable

**B**EFORE I went to meet Jonathan Myles-Lea, he sent me previous articles about his pictures, several pages of answers to questions he anticipated I might want to ask him, and a note thanking me for my interest. Having had some experience of artists—I was director of a gallery for many years and, in an unguarded moment, even married a painter—it crossed my mind that Mr Myles-Lea might be somewhat self-absorbed and obsessive.

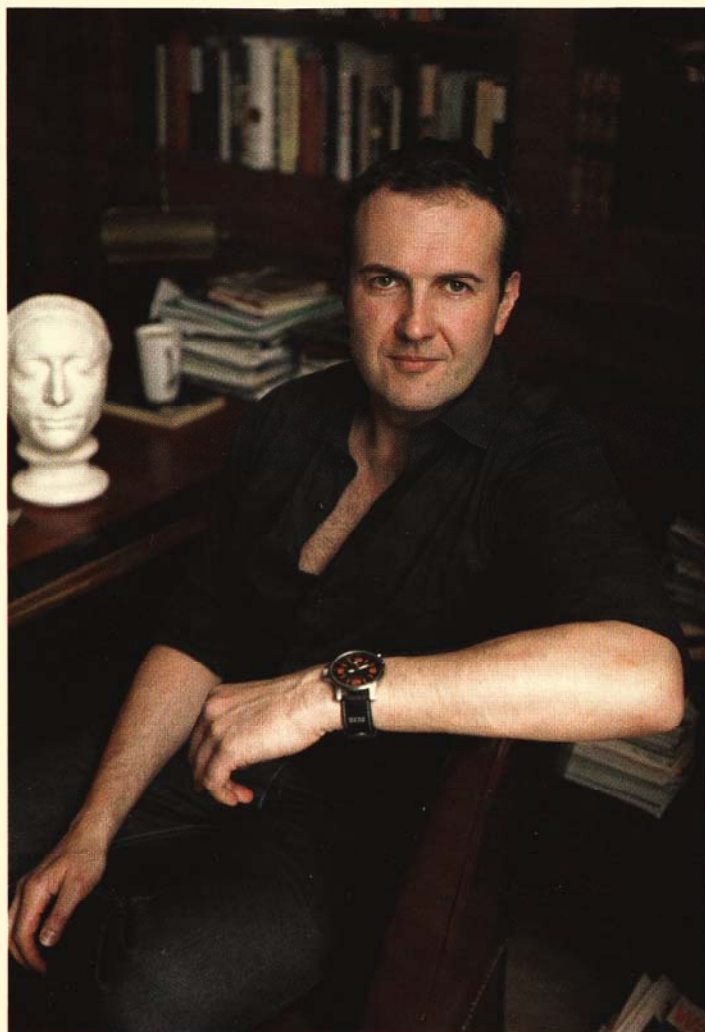
**‘My paintings of houses evoke and celebrate the people who live there’**

These were unkind thoughts. Ten minutes in his company demonstrated that his strongest personality trait is a desire to please. This is evident in his work, which one might describe as being the opposite of self-expressive. For Mr Myles-Lea specialises in producing meticulously detailed and highly stylised portraits of great houses and their owners.

Explaining his work, he's keen to emphasise that his 'pictures aren't just representations of a particular house and garden; they explore, evoke and celebrate the people who live there'.

This is borne out by the work itself. If you didn't know who had commissioned a series of pen-and-ink drawings of Highgrove, you might easily guess it from Mr Myles-Lea's renditions. For he has produced tasteful interpretations of classical illustrations—part John Robert Cozens, part Edward Ardizzone—that perfectly capture Prince Charles's character. His almost flamboyant canvas of *The Laskett* makes it abundantly clear who the owners are, as Sir Roy and Lady Strong actually feature in the picture.

Mr Myles-Lea does not rush. 'It takes me months to complete



Artist Jonathan Myles-Lea, whose clients include Prince Charles

each picture. I may spend weeks drawing plans of the property, measuring the distances, observing the light at different times of day. I even think about what the existing planting will look like in a few years. Although I take photographs, by the time I start painting, I know a house and garden so well I could almost produce the work from memory.'

He's a traditionalist when it comes to materials and technique—his paints are made for him to a 17th-century formula favoured by Vermeer, Van Ruysdael and Van Gogh. Although the finished works are of the moment, they make constant reference to more than five centuries of English country-house and landscape painting. Indeed, critics regularly suggest he's the natural successor

to such artists as Stubbs, Kipp and Gainsborough. Sotheby's included him in its exhibition 'The Artist and the Country House', hanging him beside Constable and Turner.

Mr Myles-Lea is flattered to be in such revered company, 'but I'm too concerned about whatever commission I am working on to let it go to my head'. I wonder whether his clients' fame awes him. After all, he ranks among his patrons Oprah Winfrey and Simon and Lady Victoria Leatham. 'Well, I'm interested in people, so it's fascinating to spend time with my clients, but basically, I'm there to do a job, and that's what I'm focused on.'

Mr Myles-Lea had no formal training. 'My degree is in history of art and architecture.

## On the record

Jonathan Myles-Lea is a landscape and portrait artist. He painted *COUNTRY LIFE's* fictional estate, Dream Acres

**Where is your favourite place in England?**  
Cuckmere Haven, Sussex

**What is your favourite building in Britain?**  
Parham House near Pulborough, West Sussex—a perfect Elizabethan house

**Who is your hero?**  
Architect Robert Smythson (about 1535–1614)

When I was 23, I was part of the team involved in the restoration of Plas Teg, a wonderful Jacobean mansion in Wales, and, one day, I thought to myself how enjoyable it would be to paint the house. That painting became my calling card, and, thanks to an advertisement in *COUNTRY LIFE*, I soon had plenty of commissions. For 17 years, I have been lucky enough to pursue my great passion.'

One of Mr Myles-Lea's most recent projects was to paint Dream Acres, the imaginary house and estate created by Arabella Lennox-Boyd for *COUNTRY LIFE*. I wondered how he had felt about painting something that didn't actually exist. 'The whole project was enormously satisfying. I've worked with Arabella before, so I knew a little about how she thinks. I am sure it was a help that I'm a fervent gardener myself.'

As I rise to leave, Mr Myles-Lea becomes concerned—rather endearingly—that he has dominated the conversation. Then, at the last moment, he presses a cardboard tube containing a signed, dedicated print into my hand. A pleasing artist, in every sense of the word.

*Jonathan Self*

**Next week** Eric Robson