

FRANCIS HAMEL

PAINTINGS & DRAWINGS



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The Artist in his Studio Photograph Rory Carnegie

*“To have a sacred place is an absolute necessity for anybody today.
You must have a room or a certain hour of the day or so,
where you do not know who your friends are,
you don't know what you owe anybody or what they owe you.
This is a place where you can simply experience and
bring forth what you are and what you might be.”* Joseph Campbell

ROUSHAM

In early 2018, Francis Hamel asked me to write about him for this book, and I wondered for a while about how best to portray him. I decided to create a prose sketch in five parts, which still under-represents the many aspects of Hamel's work, but at least hints towards his variety as an artist. I have known Francis Hamel, or Frank, since I moved with my family to the village of Rousham in Oxfordshire. Frank has lived in Rousham for two decades with his wife Rachel Hamel-Cooke, an interior designer, and their two children, Luke and Emerald. During these years, Frank has created a monumental series of paintings of the park and gardens at Rousham, including beautiful portraits of certain trees, or the River Cherwell as it ambles through the grounds, or the village in different

seasons. Like Cézanne, Monet, or Morandi, Frank often returns to particular subjects, conveying them in different seasons and atmospheres of light. Rousham is one of the recurring subjects of Frank's work and also the place I most closely associate with him.

It is Spring in Rousham as I begin. The skies are clear blue, the first leaves are delicate and quite luminous. Rousham is a 17th-century manor house with a famous garden, designed by William Kent and superbly restored by the present-day owners, Charles and Angela Cottrell-Dormer. It is one of the most extraordinary and mysterious places in the world. You arrive along an avenue of lime trees, rooks cawing above. There is a park where herds of

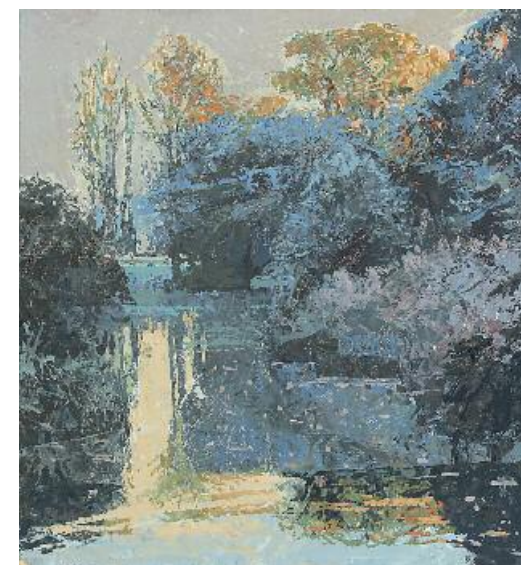
longhorn cattle roam, with neat white stripes on their backs. Sometimes calves sprint across the fields, so swiftly that they resemble dogs. Beyond, Tackley Wood stands on a low hill. Clouds move above the crenellations of the main house. The formal gardens stand partly at the top of a hill and are comprised of an elegant bowling green, predating William Kent, and a yew tunnel. There is a ha-ha, separating a field of cows from the immaculate lawn.

At Scheemaker's statue of a lion savaging a horse the gardens slope downhill towards the Cherwell. Here, Kent's design emerges: winding paths, issuing through lambent glades, under the variegated greens of yew, laurel, beech and oak. The Praeneste - with its seven arches and grisaille benches - overlooks the slow-moving, sinuous river. The Watery Walk draws the visitor past the Octagon Pond and towards the Temple of Echo.

Frank first came to Rousham as a child. The chaplain of his prep school was called Henry Thorold - "a figure straight from Trollope, who taught RE very badly, but was an enthusiastic architectural historian and wrote for the Shell Guides." Thorold used to "cram his 1954 Bentley with Summer Fields boys and take us on visits to churches and country houses. That was how I first saw Rousham." In 1998,

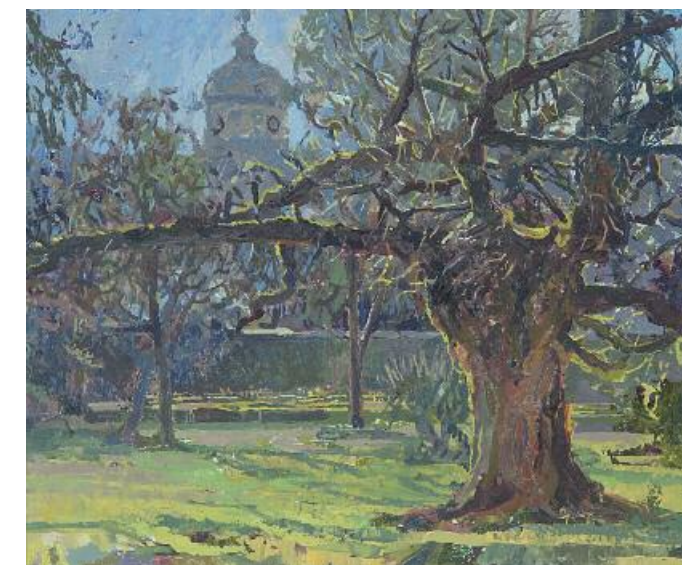
Frank returned to Rousham at the suggestion of his brother Jonathan, a gardener. In the intervening years, Frank had attended Marlborough College, where he was taught by Robin Child and the illustrator/engraver Simon Brett, and then studied at the Ruskin School of Fine Art and Drawing in Oxford. He had also worked in London painting murals for hotels, restaurants and private houses, as well as designing and decorating furniture. In 1992, after a stint in France he had an exhibition in London with his friend and fellow Ruskin student Yair Meshoulam.

Frank's second visit to Rousham was perfectly coincidental, perhaps even fated, because Angela Cottrell-Dormer was showing a prospective tenant around one of the cottages in the village. After the prospective tenant had viewed the house and disappeared, Frank and Angela fell into conversation. They discovered they were both painters and had both attended the Ruskin School. In one of those powerful and certain moments that often determine the course of a life, Frank said that if the prospective tenant didn't want to move in then he would rent the cottage instead. The prospective tenant obligingly played his part and decided not to take the house. Shortly afterwards, Frank and Rachel left London and moved to a small cottage in the centre of the village, with a



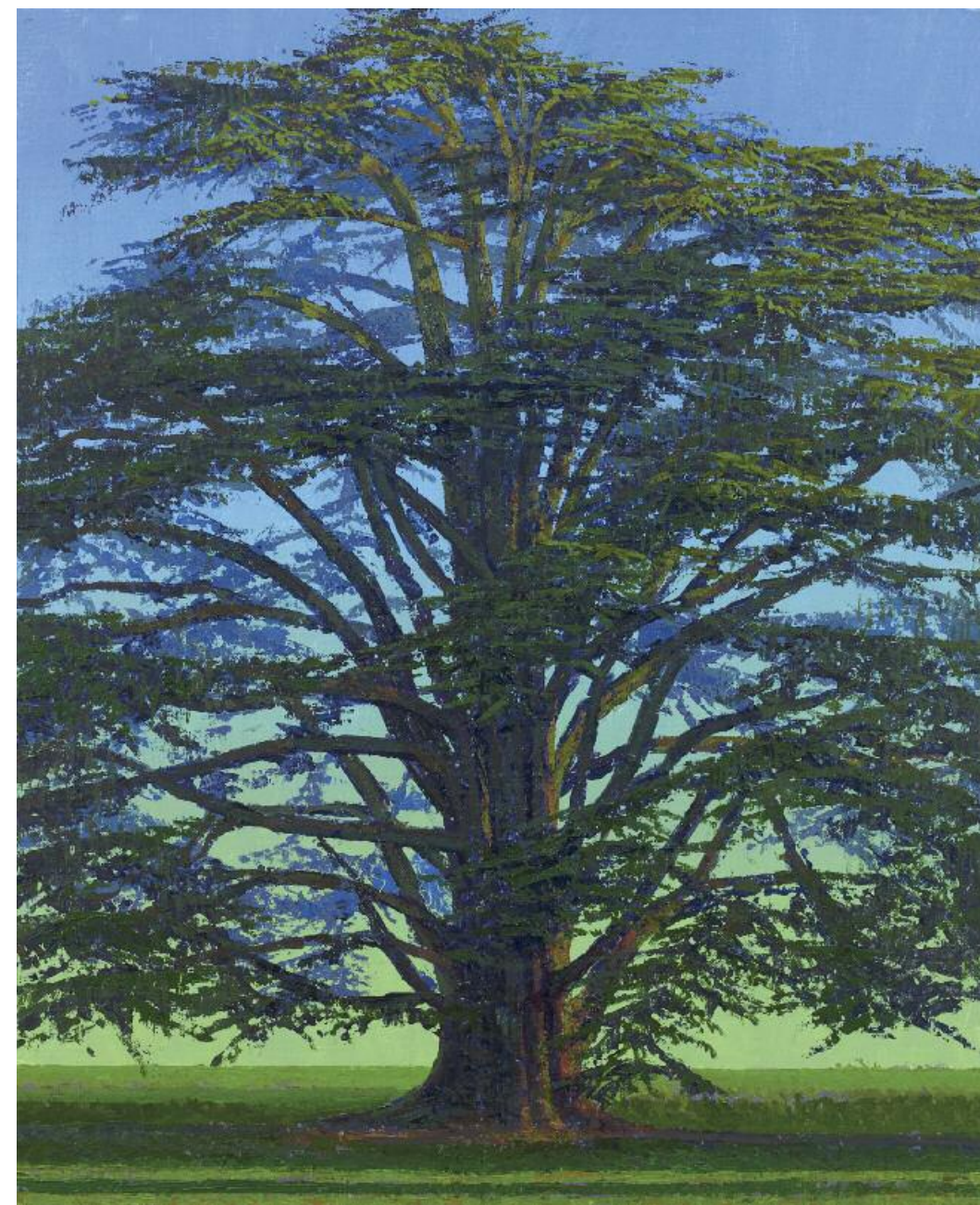
northwards view of the park, and a view across cow fields to the Cherwell on the other side. Later, they moved within the village to a converted laundry, resembling a stone longhouse, where they have lived ever since.

Frank is a charismatic figure, with a shock of auburn hair and an alert, humorous expression. He is most usually seen in paint-splattered clothes, moving purposefully between his house and his studio. His father was a parson and his mother was an English teacher. Frank, the youngest of four sons, has the relaxed charm of someone who can fit in wherever he must; he is also conspicuously independent of



thought, driven by his own sense of purpose in the world. He is diligent and prolific, though he says this is because painting is a compulsion and he is restless when he cannot paint. He teaches drawing at the Ruskin School and speaks eloquently about his own process and the work of other artists. He is highly influenced by Italian Renaissance painters, especially Piero della Francesca. He also admires the work of Diebenkorn and Joan Mitchell as well as Pissarro and Cézanne; the latter in part because his paintings represent not merely the gaps in an observed landscape, the elements of shadow and luminosity, but also the gap that exists between the viewer and the painting itself. Cézanne's







For a painter whose art has been steeped for the past 30 years in the surroundings of William Kent's carefully planned landscapes at Rousham, it would be easy to see why the Italian landscape makes a natural next step for Hamel's world view. In fact, Hamel's love affair with the gardens and countryside of Italy happened well before he first set foot in Rousham. His visit as a student in 1983 brought the revelation that "the landscapes and backgrounds of Lorenzetti or Piero della Francesca were not utopian fantasies but lovingly recorded central Italian landscapes".

The landscape of central Italy has evolved over centuries, shaped by successive harvests, plantings and the odd tectonic upheaval. This was the only landscape known to the artists of the early renaissance and to all but a handful of adventurers, traders and mercenaries. It was not in any way absurd for the Holy Land to be portrayed by the hill villages, farmland and rolling hillside in which they lived. The painted landscape evolved further in drawings and canvases to a more perfect form which, with a neat circularity became the benchmark for designers in Italy and later, in England to construct their own idealised 'classical' landscapes, perfectly demonstrated by Kent at Rousham.

In 2005 Francis and Rachel bought a farmhouse near Camerino in Le Marche. Confined by sea to the east and the Appenines to the west, Francis was drawn to a region that "both through its history and its geography kept itself quite enclosed and separate from its more glamorous neighbours . . . the more cultivated Umbria and Tuscany." Their new home allowed Hamel three or four uninterrupted months to explore and learn more about his new environment. Setting up an easel and painting for several hours at a time had the additional benefit of quickly providing an easy introduction to his neighbours, curious to see a painter at work and delighted to see him enjoying their landscape.

Often working from a high viewpoint, Frank's first paintings from Camerino delighted in the supple rhythms made by the hills stretching into the far distance. Yet underlying the view, as in all his paintings, is a profound appreciation of the structure beneath the surface. Drawing is always the first step and he uses it to feel his way across the contours of the hills as a sculptor carving a relief. His landscapes feel anchored to the terrain, measurable and navigable. With a predisposition to Piero, it is inevitable that Hamel's landscapes should lean slightly towards the idyllic, that he can take some small liberties for the sake of the

Previous pages:

**Cannero Riviera, Lago
Maggiore**

Oil on panel, 40 x 40 cms
(15¾ x 15¾ ins), 2012

St Erasmo Summer Evening

Oil on panel, 61 x 122 cms
(24 x 48 ins), 2008

This page:

St Erasmo Evening Sun

Oil on gesso, 25 x 30 cms
(9¾ x 12 ins), 2008

Overleaf:

Montelago in June

Oil on linen, 41 x 51 cms
(16 x 20 ins), 2008







- Previous pages:
- Magdalen Tower from the Botanical Gardens**
Oil on panel, 30 x 20.5 cms
(12 x 10 ins), 2002
- Cormarket in the Rain**
Oil on linen, 51 x 38 cms
(20 x 15 ins), 2012
- These pages:
- Trinity in Afternoon Sunshine**
Oil on panel, 28 x 36 cms
(11 x 14 ins), 2012
- Trinity**
Oil on panel, 42 x 32 cms
(16½ x 12½ ins), 2012
- The Bodleian**
Oil on linen, 23 x 19 cms
(9 x 8 ins), 2012



*“The Smell of
Greasepaint,
The Roar of the
Crowd”*

Here one minute gone the next. Such is the transience of performing a scene on stage or an act at the circus. Add to these passing moments the realisation that the only very variable source of light is on stage and you begin to appreciate why painting theatre rehearsals is pursued by just a few artists. Imagine sitting in the darkened stalls, rapidly drawing characters in a sketch book you can hardly see before the whole scene changes. You fervently hope that you have captured enough both on paper and in the mind’s eye to be able to work up a painting back in the studio. For a profession so dependent on light this has to be one of the ultimate challenges. During rehearsals the scene may of course be repeated numerous times, but each time with small changes required by the director, the choreographer or the artists themselves, knowing they can improve the way they react to a situation or move around the stage. Nothing stands still.

Until the late 1980s Francis had essentially been an outdoor artist painting mesmerising, majestic trees and beautiful gardens. As he told me, a visit to Gifford’s small, family run Circus changed all that, “It’s like a circus from a children’s book. Unlike the circuses I had seen in London in my twenties, Cirque du Soleil and Archaos, this was gentle, rural

and homespun but at the same time exotic. Smoking Cossack horseman rode around the cars parked in the field examining them from their painted saddles. Kenyan jugglers played with spell bound children, Russian strongmen exercised by their caravans, the sheer oddness of it all was the attraction. A company of jugglers, trapeze artists and spotted appaloosas amongst beautiful painted wagons and tents parked a few miles from where we lived - it was impossible to resist. The first time we went, I was with our two small children and Gifford’s seemed to be just what a circus was meant to be like.”



Opening page:

Circus Artist, (Sarah Duddy)

Oil on panel, 31 x 26 cms
(12 x 10 ins), 2007

Overleaf:

Circus at Dusk

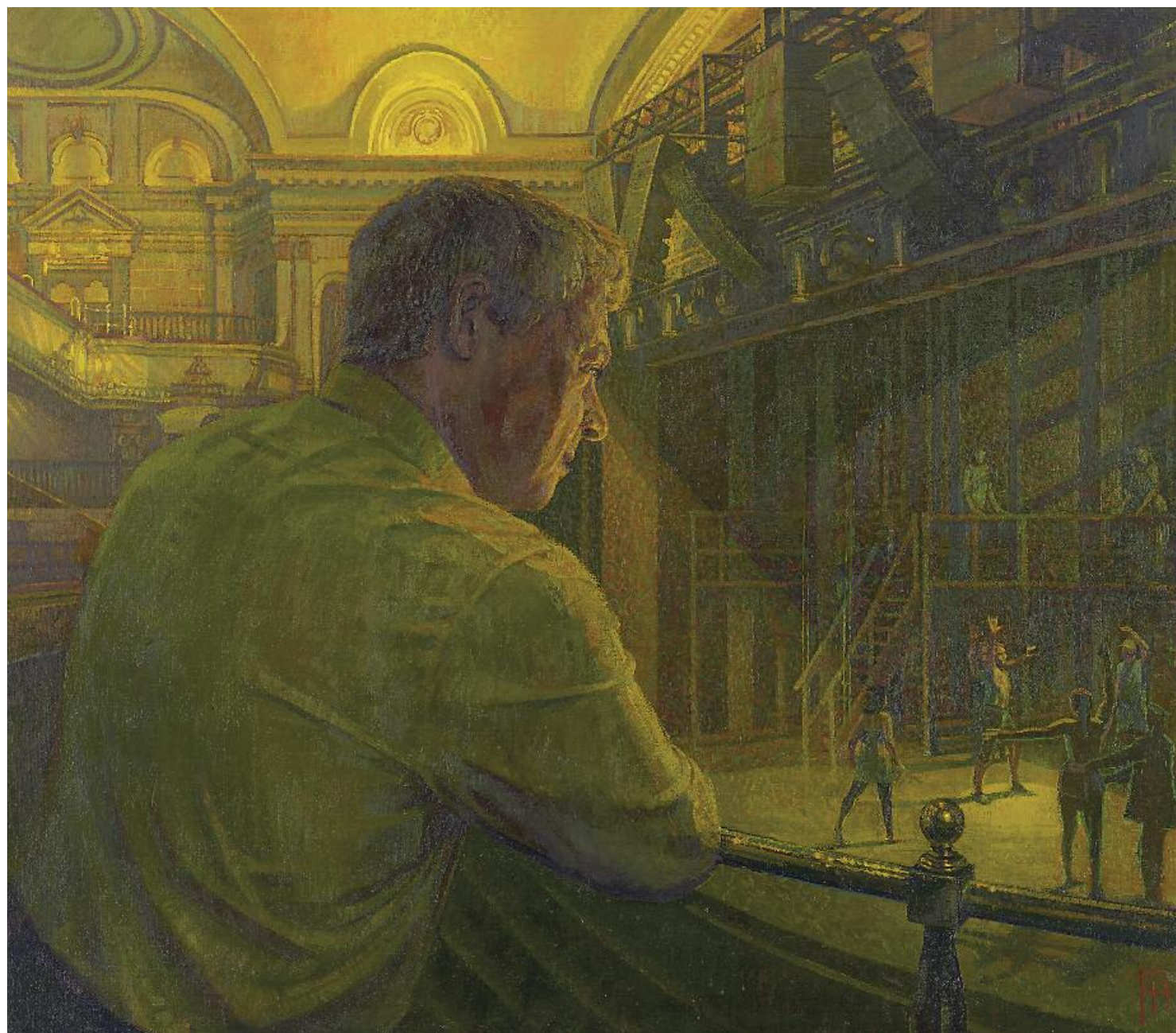
Oil on panel, 27 x 40 cms
(10½ x 15½ ins), 2007





Opening page:
Black Tulips and Euphorbia
 Oil on linen, 42 x 32 cms
 (16½ x 12½ ins), 2008
 These pages:
**Spring Flowers, Lilac and
 Boule de Neige**
 Oil on linen, 42 x 32 cms
 (16½ x 12½ ins), 2011
 Overleaf:
Hellebores
 Oil on gesso, 42 x 32 cms
 (16½ x 12½ ins), 2011
**Michaelmas Daisies and
 Echinacea**
 Oil on linen, 42 x 32 cms
 (16½ x 12½ ins), 2009





paintbrush metaphorically if not literally, that has not been the case: he has chosen the perfect painter for the subjects and allowed him free expression.

Francis Hamel has used the freedom of his commission to look at his subjects with a questioning curiosity. The surprise is how untheatrical these people are: there's no swish or swagger, no self-display or sense of self-importance. In that sense, it's not like looking at lawyers in one of the great halls of the Inns of Court or city merchants in one of the livery companies. What marks the faces in these portraits is thoughtfulness, many tinged with an air of melancholy. If there is a prevailing feeling that emerges - both from the painter and the subjects - it is self-doubt, an awareness that both parties know how difficult it is in any medium to make a piece of work that does justice to the infinite variety of human life.

It's true that the spectrum is narrow - these are mostly old, mostly white, mostly men (myself included) - but it seems to me that these faces defy

Opening page:
Stephen Fry,
Oil on linen, 43 x 33 cms
(17 x 13 ins), 2016
Opposite:
Sir Cameron Mackintosh

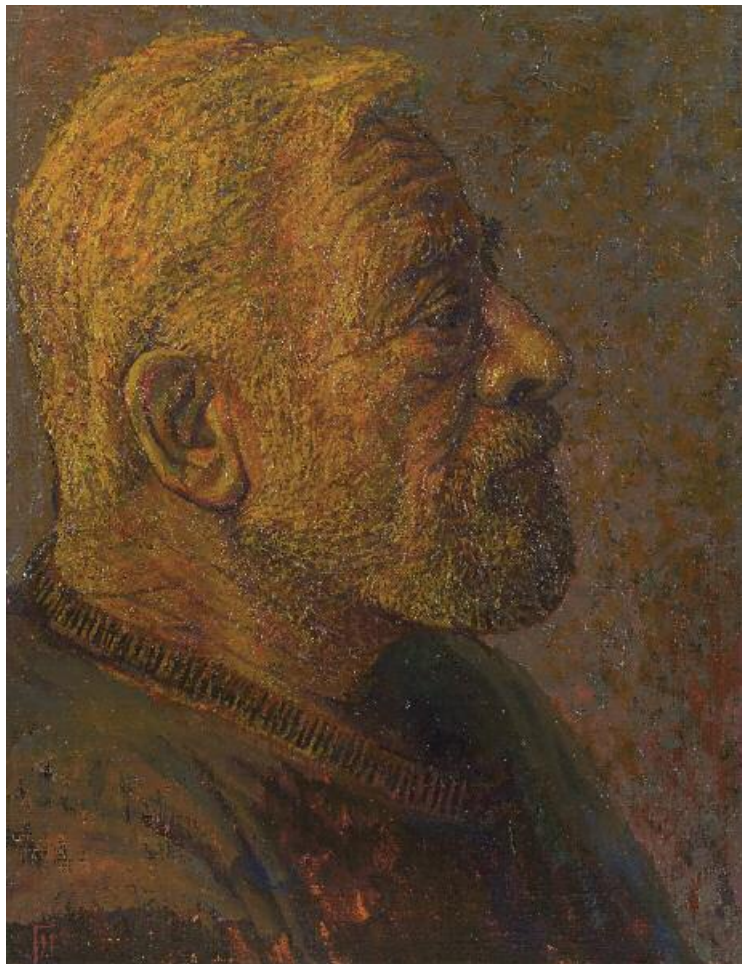
in the Victoria Palace
Theatre watching
rehearsals for Hamilton
Oil on linen, 81 x 91 cms
(32 x 36 ins), 2018



FH painting Deborah Warner in his studio Photograph Rory Carnegie

the convenient stereotype of theatre people, meaning that they don't appear sentimental or vain or superficial or essentially unserious. In fact, looking at the portraits of Arthur Miller, Stephen Sondheim, Michael Frayn and Tom Stoppard, it's hard not to construe that you're looking at individuals who have achieved something considerable and lasting: they've changed the specific gravity of our language.

"We're actors - we're the opposite of people" says the Player in *Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead*, but when you look at the paintings of Simon Russell Beale and Ian McKellen they seem the opposite of actors: guarded and private. In the predominantly male world, the paintings of the women stand out, perhaps idealised: the director



This page:

Stephen Sondheim

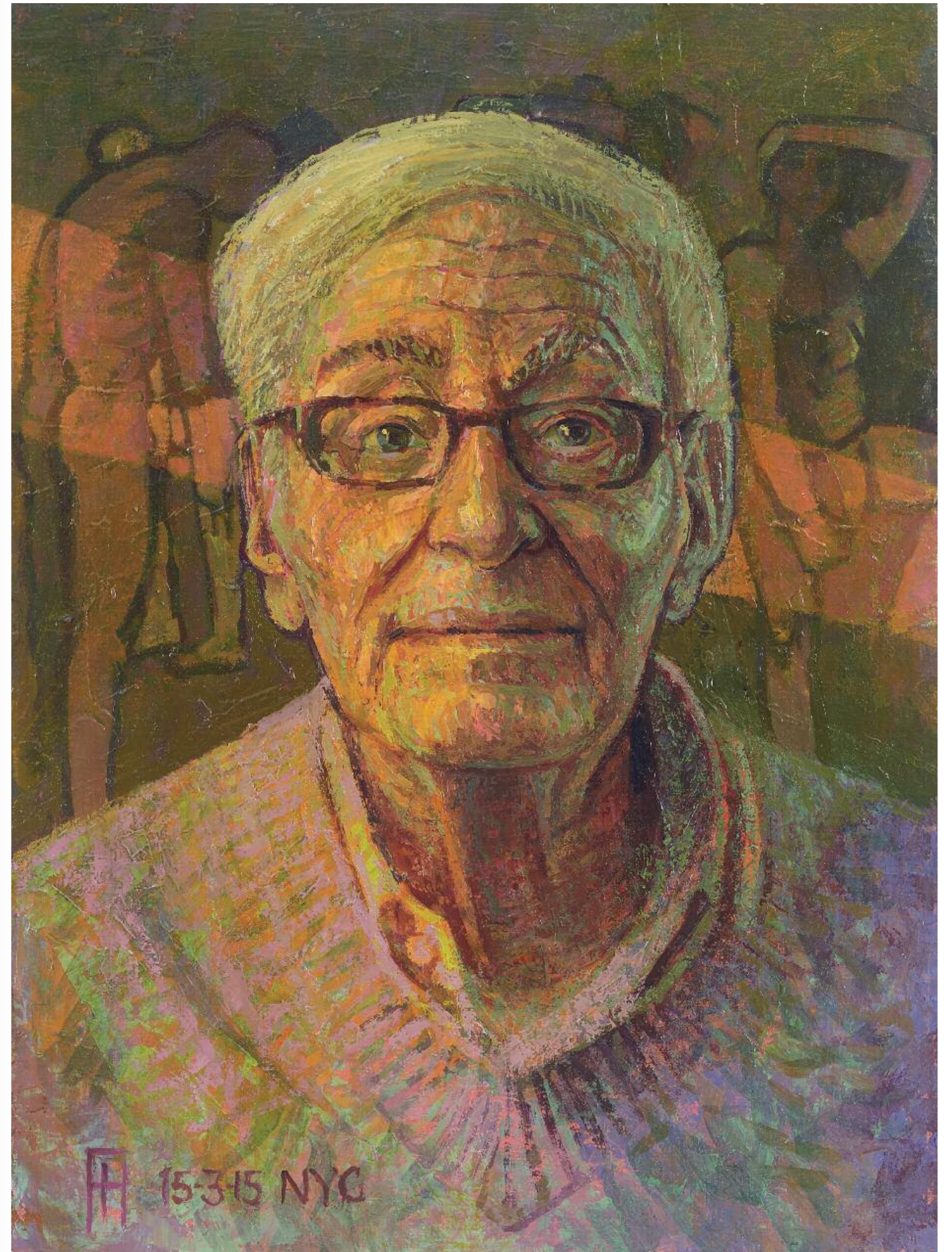
Oil on linen, 43 x 33 cms
(17 x 13 ins), 2015

Opposite:

Sir Peter Shaffer CBE

Oil on linen, 43 x 33 cms
(17 x 13 ins), 2018

I spent two days with Peter Shaffer in his riverside apartment in New York in early 2015. We were surrounded by superb Keith Vaughan paintings, one of which crept into the background of the portrait.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to . . .

My older brothers Stephen, Jonathan and Richard who destroyed any illusion my parents may ever have had that influencing or determining the paths of their offspring was even a possibility.

My dear parents Christopher and Mary, who gave us the love and security we needed to be reckless and then looked on in amazement, horror and perhaps some satisfaction.

Early supporters . . . David Dell, Alison Norman, Shigetoshi Okamoto, Felicity Meshoulam, the Fall family, (Brian and Delmar, Meredith, Mel and Kate), Julian Watson and David Cheng.



FH in Zambia with Duncan Shangah Photograph Luke Hamel-Cooke
Opposite: FH at Giffords Circus Photograph Steve Russell

Cameron Mackintosh who has, for nearly thirty years provided unwavering loyalty, friendship and support, he has provided an enormous variety of artistic challenges some conceived by me, mostly conceived by him.

Five friends have agreed to write accompaniments to the visual offerings enclosed in this volume, Joanna Kavenna, Colin Harrison, Niall Ferguson, Richard Eyre and Rosy Runciman.

John Martin has represented me more or less unflinchingly for nearly thirty years. He has never attempted to influence the content or direction of my work he has been both friend, promoter and provider of wise counsel throughout that time.





FRANCIS
HAMEL

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