Tapestries of Color

Irish artist **Victor Richardson** weaves dazzling color and rich textures into glittering, jewel-like landscapes.

BY NIALL O'NEILL

TREES AND WATER HAVE LONG BEEN VICTOR RICHARDSON'S favorite subject for paintings, a compulsion that has taken him to the rivers and lakes near his home in County Cork, Ireland, as well as the Marais Poitevin in France, the canals of Venice and the Okeefenokee Swamp on the border of Georgia and Florida. In all these places, what captivates the artist—as seen in the shimmering pastel, *The Bridge at Eymet*, at left—is the play of light on vegetation, splashes of sunlight on tree bark, sparkling reflections on the water and the ripples created by a soft breeze. Like the Impressionists of the 19th century, the artist strives to capture the vibrations in the air, the changing light, the atmospheric effects. His painting, *Misty Morning, Tracton Wood*, on page 45, for example, was based on a photo taken on a winter morning as the mist was beginning to clear. "This little valley near my home in Cork can be quite magical in the right light, particularly early in the morning," Richardson says.

The Bridge at Eymet (30x40)

The Marais Poitevin (12x20)

The Art of Tranquility

Although one might expect Richardson to name Pointillist painters Georges Seurat (French, 1859-1891) or Paul Signac (French, 1863-1935) as major influences, he puts more weight on Impressionist masters. "Monet has had a great influence on my choice of subjects," Richardson says, "but I also owe much to artists in the American Impressionist school—William Langston Lathrop, John Henry Twachtman, Childe Hassam."

In fact, it's a quote by Lathrop (American, 1859-1938) that the artist cites as significant to his own way of thinking: "To move, or to be moved, is to live," Lathrop said. "The loveliest art, indeed everything that is beautiful in life, depends on love."

Richardson feels his goal, then, is to paint nature not as it is, but "such as I would wish her to be, as she ought to be." It's a vision that aligns with that of Henri Matisse (French, 1869-1954) who spoke of an "art of balance, of purity, of tranquillity, without a disquieting or preoccupying subject ... something akin to a good armchair that refreshes physical tiredness."

A Patchwork of Color

The Marais Poitevin is a watery lowland area inland of La Rochelle, France, and an ideal destination in the artist's search for subject matter. The landscape is crisscrossed by hundreds of little drainage canals, some only a few feet wide, and is affectionately known as "The Green Venice." Here, Richardson finds endless inspiration in the dappled mosaic of light filtering through stands of willows and poplars. It's a sylvan world, an echo of a lost past, which he captures in paintings such as *The Marais Poitevin* (above) and *The Green Venice* (at right).

"My method isn't at all scientific, but equally is it not dependant on chance," Richardson says. "For every color placed on the surface, I associate its opposite (cool on warm, warm on cold) in the form of scumbled touches, letting the underlying color peer through and create a play of light. On a green base, I can construct my foliage with the help of pinks and oranges. What looks questionable close-up works perfectly when viewed from a distance."

SEURAT: THE POINT IS LUSTER

Rather than Pointillism, Victor Richardson's approach to color application may be described best as divisionism, defined as the separation of colors into individual dots or patches which interact optically. The result is a vibrancy that calls to mind Georges Seurat. Considered the father of Pointillism, Seurat preferred another term, *chromoluminarism*, to describe his technique. Seurat's interest wasn't in true optical-mixing but rather in vibration, the idea that contrasting colors placed near each other would intensify the relationship between the colors while preserving their singular identity. What is actually achieved by Seurat's mature Pointillist technique isn't a greater intensity of color, but something different and more subtle, related to the "infinite gradation" that English art critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) referred to when he claimed that no color was really valuable unless it was gradated.

Seurat's dots produce an optical vibration technically known as "luster." According to William I. Homer, Seurat used an optical mixture not to intensify colors but to duplicate the qualities of transparency and luminosity in halftones and shadows so common in nature: "a shimmering union of color and chiaroscuro, warm and cool neutrals that are vibrant rather than inert."

The Green Venice (18x22)

HIS MATERIALS

As a surface, Richardson often opts for Sennelier's La Carte pastel card. "I find this tougher than pastel papers as it doesn't buckle or wrinkle," he says. "Sometimes I use primed watercolor paper, which affords me the opportunity to do really big pastels." He works with Rembrandt pastels and Schminckes. "The soft vibrancy," he says, "is ideal for scumbling color over the rough weave of the watercolor paper."

The Irish art critic Síle Connaughton Deeny observed that, "Like Signac, in [Richardson's] scenes featuring water, the impression of glittering natural sunlight is achieved through the placement of colored strokes to create a prismatic effect. His favoring of square dabs of paint, which create a mosaic effect, is also reminiscent of Signac's later work. But chief amongst the characteristics shared by Signac and Richardson is that of a fluidity, created by the gradation of colors, a natural passing from one color to another without the full-stop of mixing. It is the resultant juxtaposition of colors which makes them vibrate, and it is the vibration which renders them exuberant."

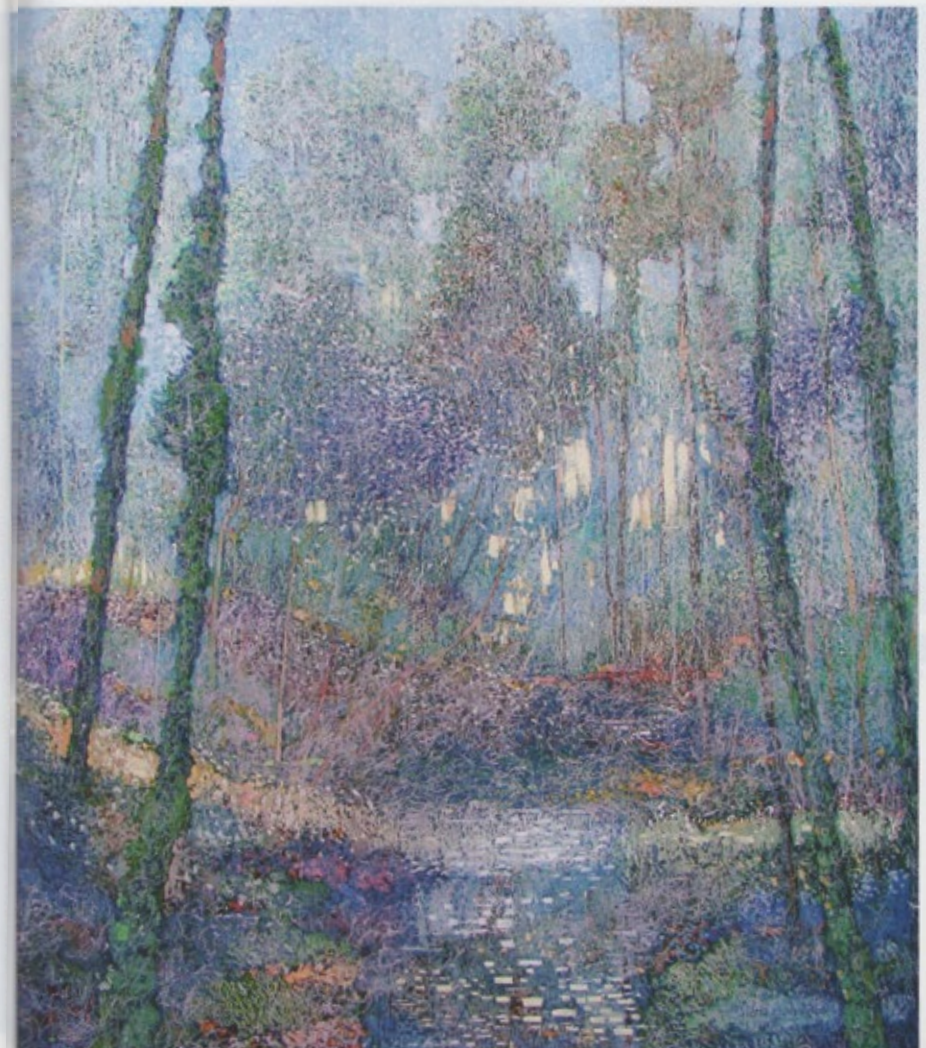
Becoming an Artist

When Richardson was 10 years old, a local artist took him on as an apprentice. Once a week he practiced the arcane art of grinding pigments with a pestle and mortar until fine enough to mix with an oil binder (the raw material came in blocks); he also learned how to stretch and prime canvas. "This experience was a good way to learn the practicalities of what's involved in the craft," Richardson says.

His training came to a halt in high school, however. Living in Belfast in Northern Ireland during the period known as "The Troubles" was a grim experience for Richardson (a group of people was killed just outside his home), and he eventually moved to County Cork in 1974. With the exception of some time spent in England and France, this has been his home for nearly 40 years.

Instead of attending an art college as he might have done, Richardson's study was self-guided from then on. He's convinced, however, that this turn of events has been important to his artistic development, as he studied without inhibitions or preconceptions, learning from the works of the masters, and from his own discoveries.

Though he initially worked in oils, in a fairly traditional manner, in 1980 Richardson received a box of pastels as a gift. The medium changed his approach and contributed to the development of a distinctive style. "I wasn't too sure what to do with these 'pieces of chalk,' but I quickly realized that they offered the possibility of drawing and painting at the same time," he says. "And with immediate results."



Provence, the Lavender Field (opposite page, far left; 18x10)

Water Garden Fota (opposite page; 18x10)

Victor Richardson's enchanting pastel, ***Misty Morning, Tracton Wood*** (at left; 24x18), was based on a photo taken on a winter morning he calls "magical" in a wood near the Irish city of Cork. "It's a great place to walk at anytime," he says, "but best of all when the pub at the end of the trail is open."

Southern Living

Richardson's first break as a professional artist occurred in November 1981 when he strolled into the Solomon Gallery in Dublin with some pictures under his arm. "You're not supposed to do that," he says. "Galleries hate it, but the owner told me to come back in an hour. I must have caught her on a good day." When he did return, she accepted his work into the gallery's Christmas show.

In January, the same gallery owner phoned him with another proposition: A painter had just pulled out of a solo show, and she wondered if he would like to fill the spot. He would have only eight weeks to prepare. "Sometimes, timing is everything," Richardson says. "With youthful bravado, I agreed. It was the beginning of a relationship that lasted a quarter of a century until she retired from the business."

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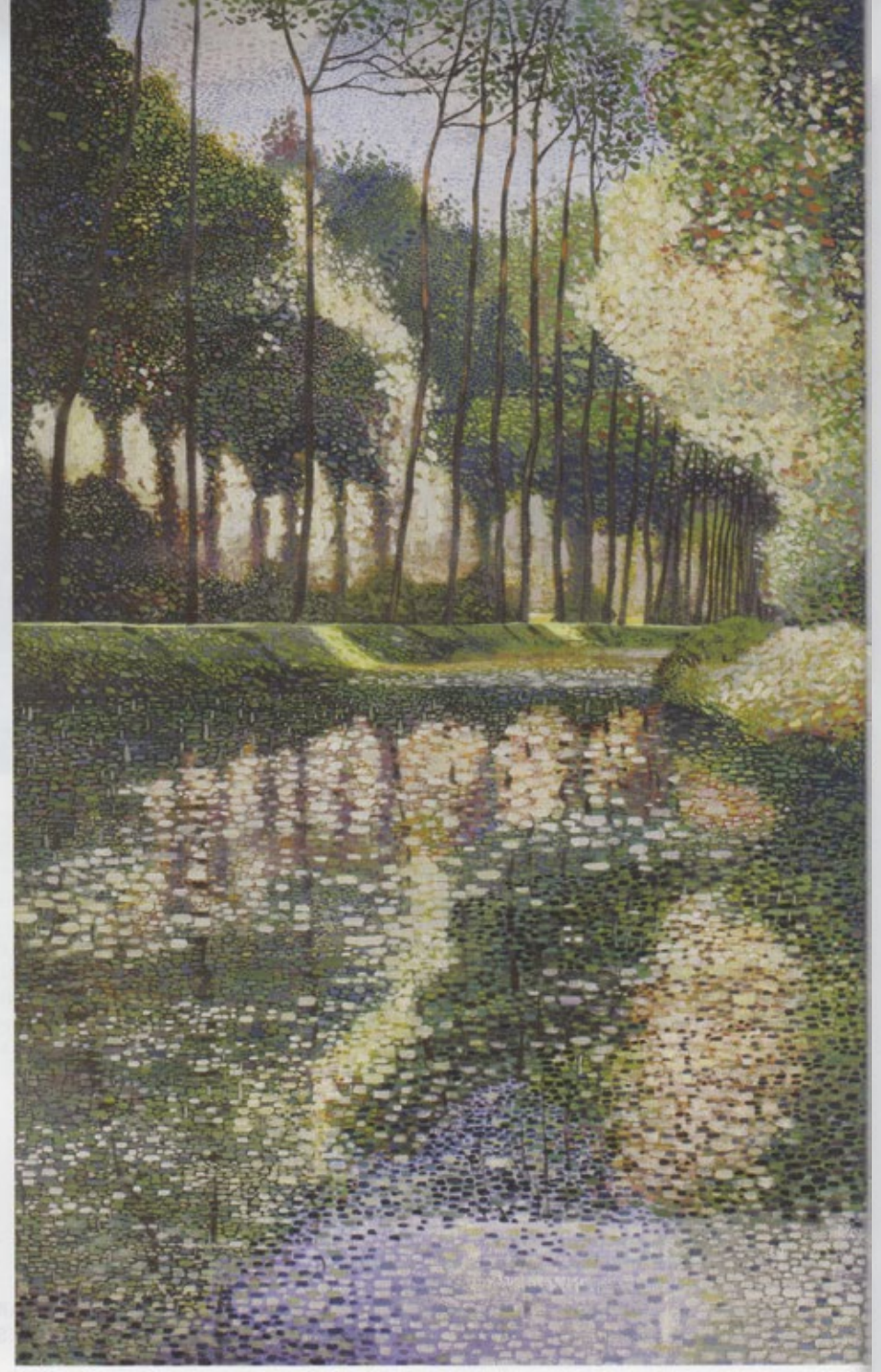

Nantes Canal (18x12)

Kennet and Avon Canal (opposite; 18x24)

Ten years later, in another case of serendipity, Jack Richards, an American artist and teacher vacationing in Ireland, saw Richardson's work in a Cork gallery and invited him to take a space in the City Market Arts Center in Savannah, Ga. Although he couldn't go permanently, the artist lived there for a few months. "I was blown away by Savannah," Richardson says. "It was absolutely seductive. I'd never been to America, nor to the Deep South. I'd never seen color like that; the swamps were amazing—all this Spanish moss hanging down, the play of light on the water." He returned for a show every year for 15 years.

The Colorist Tradition

Some admirers of Richardson's work see hints of Gustav Klimt (Austrian, 1862-1918), who's best known for figural works such as *The Kiss*, but who also painted similarly bejeweled landscapes. "I discovered Klimt's landscapes thanks to a client," Richardson says. "He saw a similarity in our approach and showed me a book of reproductions. I was intrigued: We seemed to have the same perception of landscape. Without knowing it, and a century apart, I had the same idea of using little touches to underline the forms of vegetation and to play with the temperatures of color in order to arrive at strong, vibrant and pure colors."

With such an affinity for color, it's no wonder his work produces these associations, but Richardson has cultivated his own distinctive style. Without any formal color theory underpinning his work, he takes an approach that's self-taught and instinctive, but one that demonstrates an understanding of the manner in which colors react with one another. He's a born colorist, in other words, who has found the means, by trial and effort, to conquer the paradox that faces all artists: to personalize one's vision and still make it universal. ■

NIALL O'NEILL, of County Cork, in Ireland, is a pastel artist and freelance writer. His artwork was recently exhibited at the Salon International du Pastel, and is represented by Little Gallery in St. Emilion, France.

Victor Richardson (www.victorrichardson.com) was born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1952 and moved to County Cork in 1974. His work is represented in the United States by the James Gallery in Pittsburgh; in England, by The Barbara Stanley Gallery in London and the Fosse Gallery in Stow-on-the-Wold; and in Ireland by Jorgensen Fine Art in Dublin. The artist works in both pastels and oils, and sometimes works quite large: He once painted a piece for a large house in Savannah, Ga., that was 6x4 feet. And, as part of the refurbishing of the landmark Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin, he was commissioned to paint a series of six large oil paintings for the space between the cornicing in the No. 27 Bar. He had to dismantle a door and door frame to get the finished works out of his studio.