



## VICTOR RICHARDSON REVEALS HIS 6-STEP PROCESS FOR CREATING PAINTINGS THAT DELIGHT THE SENSES AND SOOTHE THE SOUL.

**M**atisse once said that a good painting was something a tired businessman could relax with after a hard day at the office. Something to help one unwind, rather like sinking into a cosy chair with a stiff drink. Judging by the amount of abuse heaped upon him by the critics of his day, he probably regretted this observation, but it seems to me that he suggests one answer to that basic question, What is the use of art?

Many argue today that for art to have any relevance, it must say something meaningful and possibly contain some political or moral view of our values in contemporary society. Much good art certainly fits these criteria, but in my experience, particularly in Europe, representational paintings of landscape or flowers are often dismissed as trivial, because "they have nothing to say". In response, I propose that an artist has much to say if he can accurately convey the miraculous, sun-rippled beauty of an orchard in flower and let us share his evident pleasure in the joy of seeing.

Over the years I have tried to do what that great art educator Robert Henri outlined in his book, "The Art Spirit".

*"The artist must first learn to see, then to filter and select by memory the most choice sensations. He does not merely reproduce nature, but strives to make a personal statement of what seems most beautiful to him, at that particular place and time."*

# a broken surface as visual therapy

### **capturing beauty on film**

Wherever I go, I always try to carry a camera, even if it is only a small pocket variety. So often I will catch a glimpse of something wonderful and in just a few moments it is gone, so I like to be prepared. Irish skies are a good example. The south-westerlies blow great banks of clouds in from the Atlantic creating a constantly moving tableau of light and shade on the landscape. One solitary cornfield can glow with light while the rest of the countryside is in shadow.

To see and remember is all very well, but a photograph is extremely helpful. These photographs and a few quick pencil sketches are my notebook for the studio painting. They provide the bare bones of the composition, which I flesh out, sometimes in colours of my own invention to convey the sensation of mood.

### **following two paths**

When I'm ready to start work in the studio, I find that my work tends to fall into two categories — either large, atmospheric paintings of trees and water or more detailed studies of architecture or flowers. In either case, however, my approach to the process of painting is quite logical

and straightforward, involving six basic steps.

### **1. Choosing the right surface**

I have always been fascinated by reflections in water and the way light falls both vertically (creating a mirror image) and horizontally as little flecks of translucence on the surface. For this type of scene, I prefer a large surface of 140lb watercolour paper glued onto acid-free mount board. To give a firmer support, I sometimes use Foamcore board. Watercolour paper can be treated with gesso or acrylic to provide a suitable ground for pastel. The smaller, detailed paintings are done on sanded board and almost entirely executed in pastel pencil. No matter the size, I prefer to work on pale backgrounds, simply because I do most of my drawing in pencil and I can see what I'm doing.

### **2. Drawing the composition**

I prefer to outline the composition with either lead or pastel pencils. I am quite clinical about this, employing just a single line with no attempt at shading. My aim is simply to denote where everything will be. The more

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**Lavender Fields, 20 x 30" (51 x 76cm)**

The rows of lavender seem to me like corduroy, leading the eye into the mid-distance. This ancient landscape in Provence saturates the senses.



**Evening Light, Dinan, 25 x 29" (64 x 74cm)**

That golden light as day fades always makes me feel good. This picture has all the elements that inspire me — trees, atmosphere, reflections and the interesting architecture of a world that is sadly long gone. Why can't we build like this anymore?



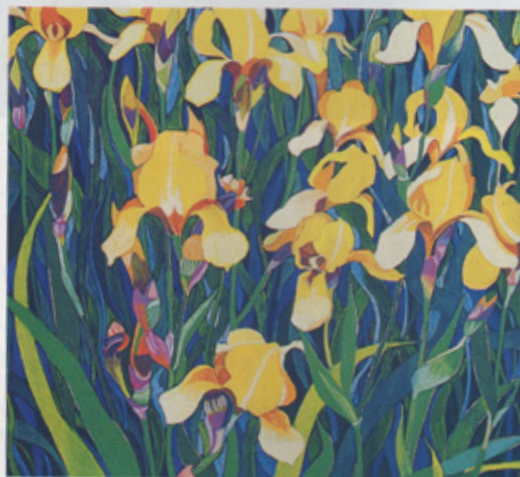
## art in the making a colour pattern in 6 steps

From time to time, I like to do more intimate, up-close scenes such as this floral painting. As you can see, this piece is more about pattern than depth. It also possesses a combination of flat blocks of colour with both long and short strokes.



### 1 drawing in pencil

I created the initial drawing in pencil on sanded board. I never use an eraser on this surface because it tends to remove the grit necessary for the pastel to adhere.



### 4 adding interest

On top of the prussian blue, I began to suggest a more complicated background pattern of stems and leaves. I really let my imagination go, but kept that long tapering iris leaf in mind. I left the barest trace of blue on the edges of the outlines, particularly on the main flowers, to bring them forward, ensuring they did not get lost in the tangle. The main flowers and stems without the blue underpainting tend to be lighter in tone, creating a nice variety with these stems and leaves added later.



### 5 putting on finishing touches

Now I put in the highlights and details. As usual, I worked from dark to light, although this is not a hard and fast rule. I stroked on the texture by following the shape of the buds and petals. A white conté stick dragged lightly over the underpainting was very effective in lightening some areas. I finished by lightening the stems and sharpening up the edges. A little defining line here and there was applied with dark blue pencil.



### 2 creating a dark background

Next, I painted in the background using a heavy layer of a dark tint of prussian blue pastel, leaving the outlines of the main flowers and stems clearly delineated. By colouring this negative space, I could tell already that my flowers looked like flowers.



### 3 blocking in the subject

In the next phase, I blocked in the flower heads, stems and leaves, using soft pastels and pastel pencils. The pencils are easier to control, which was better for keeping the edges of the petals sharp. I find that a blade works better than a sharpener for keeping my pencil points sharp.



### 6 enjoying the results

Here is the end result — *Irises* (soft pastel on sanded board, 13 x 14" or 33 x 36cm).





**Polly's Pond, Savannah,**  
44 x 46" (112 x 117cm)

This beautiful creek, so typical of the Georgia Low Country, is located on Talahi Island, just outside Savannah. I have stayed here with friends every spring for the last 10 years. I have painted it often — it is almost like a second home.

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accurate I am at this point, the less grief I will have later. When using lead, I do so lightly, otherwise the pastel will not adhere and simply skid over the shiny surface of the graphite.

### 3. Blocking in the blue underpainting

On the large, looser landscapes, I block in the shadow areas with prussian blue pastel — the darkest tone I can find. I prefer blue to black because I can mix and layer colour on top without deadening the tones. The blue underpainting makes it easier to mix interesting greens, whereas black tends to give me turgid greys — maybe it's just me! In the flower paintings, I use dark blue to draw the negative

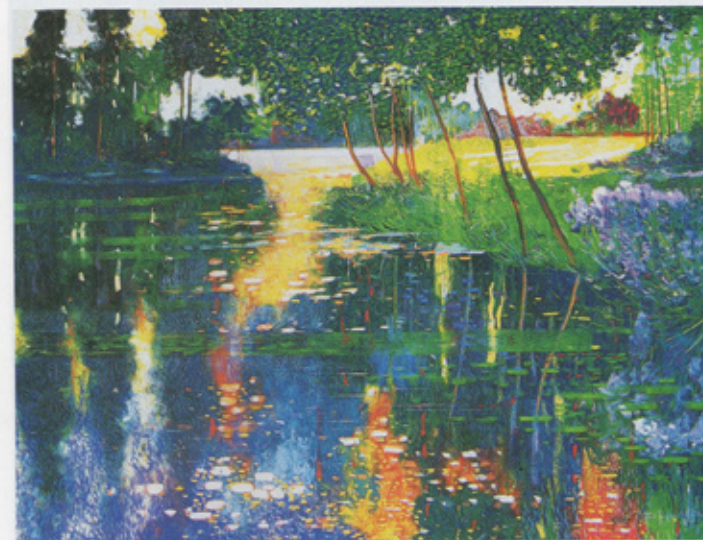
space that the flower occupies. This enables me to see clearly the shape of the flower. When I mix the greens of the leaves behind the flowers, I try to leave the faintest line of blue on the edge of the flower, which brings it forward from the busy background.

### 4. Pouring on the colour

In the next step, I saturate the paper with colour, basically filling in the shapes of the whole composition, leaving no white paper showing. I then add another layer of colour, lightening here and there to suggest form.

### 5. Making marks

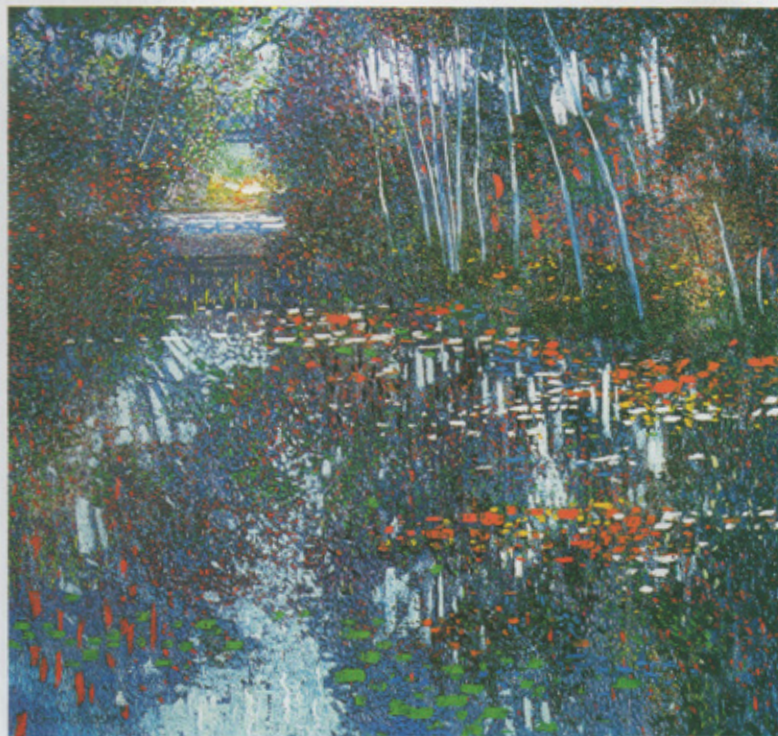
I then begin another layer of colour, this time concentrating on texture by adding dots or dashes,



**Edisto Island, South Carolina,**  
14 1/2 x 18 1/2"  
(36 x 48cm)

The colours of the marsh grasses and the steamy atmosphere of the Carolina Low-country were the inspiration for this piece. The only drawback was the mosquitoes — they love Irish blood!

Much of the painting was done with pastel pencils, which are ideal for making the tiny little textural marks suggesting the movement on land and water. The light areas were laid on at the end with very soft pastel. I rarely fix the finished work because I find that sprays tend to kill whites and deaden the overall effect.



**Sunrise on the Dropt, France,**  
20 1/2 x 21 1/2" (52 x 55cm)

Early mornings are a favourite time, when colour just begins to bleed through the trees and the shadows are long.



**The River Dropt, France,** 24 1/2 x 30" (62 x 76cm)

Here's another peaceful backwater, this time in the Dordogne, in the wine-growing region of Bergerac. The river bends under an old railway bridge, reflecting the soft colours at the dimming of the day. Monet would have loved to paint here! This was done on 140lb watercolour paper glued to a foam core support, and the image was then underpainted in reds with large sticks of pastel. It was layered with texture and some of the final marks were made with a white conté stick.





**McKenna Bridge, Dublin,**  
42 x 47" (107 x 120cm)

The Grand Canal runs right into the centre of Dublin, providing some scenic surprises in the hustle and bustle of traffic. The autumn foliage and the dappled reflections of the towpath trees drew me here. This painting is perhaps a little idealised — the canal not shown as it is, but how it ought to be!

**Brantome, France,**  
32 x 40 1/2" (81 x 102cm)

This is the Dordogne at its best with its medieval dwellings and bridges, wide rivers and wooded hillsides. This painting probably owes much to the local *vin rouge*!



using hard pastels or pencils. My paintings are always busy, packed with little points or dashes of colour, and it often surprises me that such a broken surface can convey a sense of tranquility. I try to use unusual colours and as many as possible per square inch. This is usually when happy accidents occur and effects are created that I didn't even consider. Such are the joys of pastel — the beauty of drawing and vibrant colour all at once!

#### 6. Heightening the contrasts

The final stage is to accentuate the contrasts by adding highlights in soft, creamy pastels or by darkening the shadow areas, sometimes even using black. I take care with this, though, because a little goes a long way. As with all painting, the

biggest problem is to know when to stop. Oh, the number of times I've fiddled and tinkered and eventually tickled something to death! My motto now is: if in doubt, STOP and come back to it another day.

#### creating visual therapy

Atmosphere and design are the most important aspects of what I do. I look for possibilities of playing about with light and texture, and I hope that these qualities in my finished paintings will give pleasure. A client once said that he bought one of my pictures because it made him feel good, simply by looking at it. I like to think of my work as visual therapy, so refreshing that even Matisse's tired old businessman would enjoy it. □



**The Quarry Lake and  
The Furry Glen,**  
both 25 x 29" (64 x 74cm)

These are both places in Dublin's Phoenix Park, one of Europe's biggest city parks. It has a zoo, outdoor concert area, lakes, herds of deer and even the official residence of the American ambassador to Ireland. Early in the morning, as the sun rises and burns off the mist on the dewy grass, it is a magical place. In these two paintings, I tried to share my delight in finding such a haven in the middle of a large city. In both cases, the water is suggested by making the reflections with vertical strokes of colour to create an approximate mirror image and then laying down little bars of light horizontally to suggest the surface plane. The latter must be perfectly horizontal, otherwise it will seem that the water is flowing uphill!







**Roches Point, County Cork, 9 1/2 x 27 1/2" (24 x 70cm)**

This scene has that typical pearly light that falls like a spotlight from pale skies in our part of the world. I like the fact that I cannot see the sky from this angle and the way the old coastguard houses and lighthouse are lit like a theatre set. In a composition

like this, where there is a lot of architecture, I am very meticulous with the initial pencil drawing. I never project slides but I do use my photographs to give as accurate a rendering as possible. Time spent at this stage is time saved later on!



**Still Morning, Kinsale, 14 x 34 1/2" (36 x 87cm)**

My studio is just a few miles from here. In recent times, this old fishing port has become a yachting and gourmet centre. I love the still mornings when the harbour is like a mirror.



**Bell Tower, Montignac, France, 14 x 33" (36 x 84cm)**

I was fascinated by the different textures of growing things in these allotments and orchards. I like the cosy feel of this busy and fruitful landscape in the southwest of France.



**The Brest-Nantes Canal, France, 27 x 35" (69 x 89cm)**

France is full of quiet waterways lined with poplars. The Brest-Nantes Canal in Brittany is no exception, and every bend seems to frame a picture waiting to be painted.



## about the artist

Victor Richardson was born in Belfast in 1952. He moved to County Cork in 1974, working at night to earn a living to support his young family and painting during the day. Gradually he began to find a market for his oils and charcoal sketches. Around 1980, someone gave him a box of soft pastels. "I didn't even know what it was, but it was soon clear to me that I had found my niche. Galleries thereafter began to promote me as a pastellist."

Looking back, he says that he has been very fortunate and is particularly appreciative of his wife's support. "She was willing to let me dream my crazy dreams and to accept the precarious financial existence that is the lot of many artists. Not many women could rear two children and live like that."

Victor is represented by the Solomon Gallery, Dublin, Ireland and by the Jerald Meiberg Gallery, Charlotte, North Carolina, USA.