

# Reports from Members

## For the love of art

by Tina Whiteley



It was a dream Cathy van Ee and I had often talked about for several years, going to Europe on an art tour. Over the last few weeks, that dream was our reality and we enjoyed a whistle-stop tour through England, France and Holland, taking in as much beautiful art as we could each day. Our visits included the National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery and Courtauld's Gallery in London; the Musée d'Orsay and Musée Marmottin in Paris; the Van Gogh Museum, Stedelijk Museum and Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, not forgetting the beautiful gardens and art of Chartwell and Scotney Castle in Kent and Sussex, England and the highlight of our trip, Monet's Garden in Giverny, France.

As avid fans of Impressionist art, we've been discussing, over our last few days, what we learned from our cultural foray into their world. Above all we've learned that not all paintings are masterpieces, and there are as many unresolved works as there are gems but there is something so compelling about them. They mark the thought processes and techniques of the artist and track their progress from student to genius. Many paintings on show were not even finished, but they conveyed such raw emotion and such delicacy of mark-making, that they stood on their own as beautiful works of art, worthy of an audience's praise and appreciation. That these artists had to work for years to hone their craft, gives us encouragement and inspiration and also reminds us that to perfect our work, we must practise practise practise and not be afraid to try out new techniques, new colour combinations and make our own marks.

We practised our art while on our travels, particularly at Giverny. Away from the frenetic, almost suffocating hustle and bustle of Paris, we spent four days in this idyllic, flower-filled village, an hour's train ride from the big city. We stayed in a beautiful hotel called La Musardière, a mere 200 metres from Monet's house and garden. For three days, we had the luxury of being able to stroll down the road just before 9.30 am and walk straight into Monet's house and garden and follow the meandering paths around the waterlily pond, having them almost to ourselves, before the crowds arrived. It was one of the most beautiful

gardens we'd ever been to and it was easy to see how Monet could spend hours there, entranced by the ever-changing light falling on the flowerbeds and the water.

It was not possible to set up easels in the gardens, but we came back to our hotel room to paint in the afternoon, with our photographs illuminated on our computer screens and set to work to recreate what we'd seen. What came out was quite a surprise to both of us. Cathy discovered that she responded to the landscape, with her pastel sketches, in a far more expressionist way than before. Tina discovered a way of mark-making on watercolour underpaintings that would allow her to convert her sketches into stitched textile art. We had both been influenced subconsciously by our artistic hero Monet to just "go with the flow" and not worry about the outcome; just enjoy the process; drink in the atmosphere and let the emotion of the surroundings wash over us. We were lost in the moment and were able to make some significant discoveries in our own work and realise that only by being ourselves can our work progress.

There are many many great artists out there, but the ones that tend to stand out are the ones who had the courage to follow their hearts and do their own work, in their own style. It is their uniqueness that attracts us. Their paintings may not be the most perfectly executed, but they resonate within us and enrich our souls, with their colour harmonies and sensitive brushwork, in the same way music resonates and moves us to feel happy or sad, with its major and minor chords. Our visit to the Van Gogh museum was certainly a profound emotional experience. With the added element of Van Gogh's letters on show alongside his art, you could both read and see how much passion and emotion he poured into just 10 years of professional painting.

We were lucky enough to visit exhibitions of Matisse and Degas who also worked tirelessly to create their art – constantly practising, trying out new techniques and painting the same scenes over and over to resolve artistic problems and find their own unique style, even, in the case of Matisse, using cut outs and collage as a powerful means of expression.

For some of us painting is a wonderful hobby that we enjoy and do mainly for relaxation, but for others among us, it's a passion, a means of communication, self-expression and something all-consuming. That's the joy of art in all its forms – it's so subjective that we appreciate it in different ways – all of which are valid.

Our appreciation of art through the ages has been significantly heightened by the hundreds of works we have been fortunate enough to see up close and personal in those European Galleries. Standing in front of a painting in close-up, you can really see the brushstrokes, the texture and thickness of the paint applied to the canvas and it's easier to understand how tone and shadows create form. You can more easily follow the styles of paintings as they changed over the centuries, in line with collective social trends.

We had our own different favourites that meant something special to each of us. They stirred something inside, giving us renewed inspiration and confidence to follow our own artistic paths and we would urge all artists out there to seize the chance to visit some of those aforementioned galleries if you're travelling overseas – you and your art will be the richer for it.