



# Alexander Creswell

## an eccentric watercolourist

WORDS: Alexander Creswell PHOTOGRAPHY: courtesy of Alexander Creswell

In the froth of spectator-boat excitement which has surrounded the classic regattas over recent years, the appearance of a figure on a RIB apparently engrossed in the act of drawing at speed has generated a certain curiosity. That figure is me.

I am an architectural watercolourist and I have spent most of my career drawing and painting ruins of the past, glories of the present and the monuments of the future: temples, palaces, places. I also sail. The iconic beauty of classic yachts, it seems to me, is a great form of architecture combined with action, grace, speed and water – which make the process of drawing and painting rather more demanding.

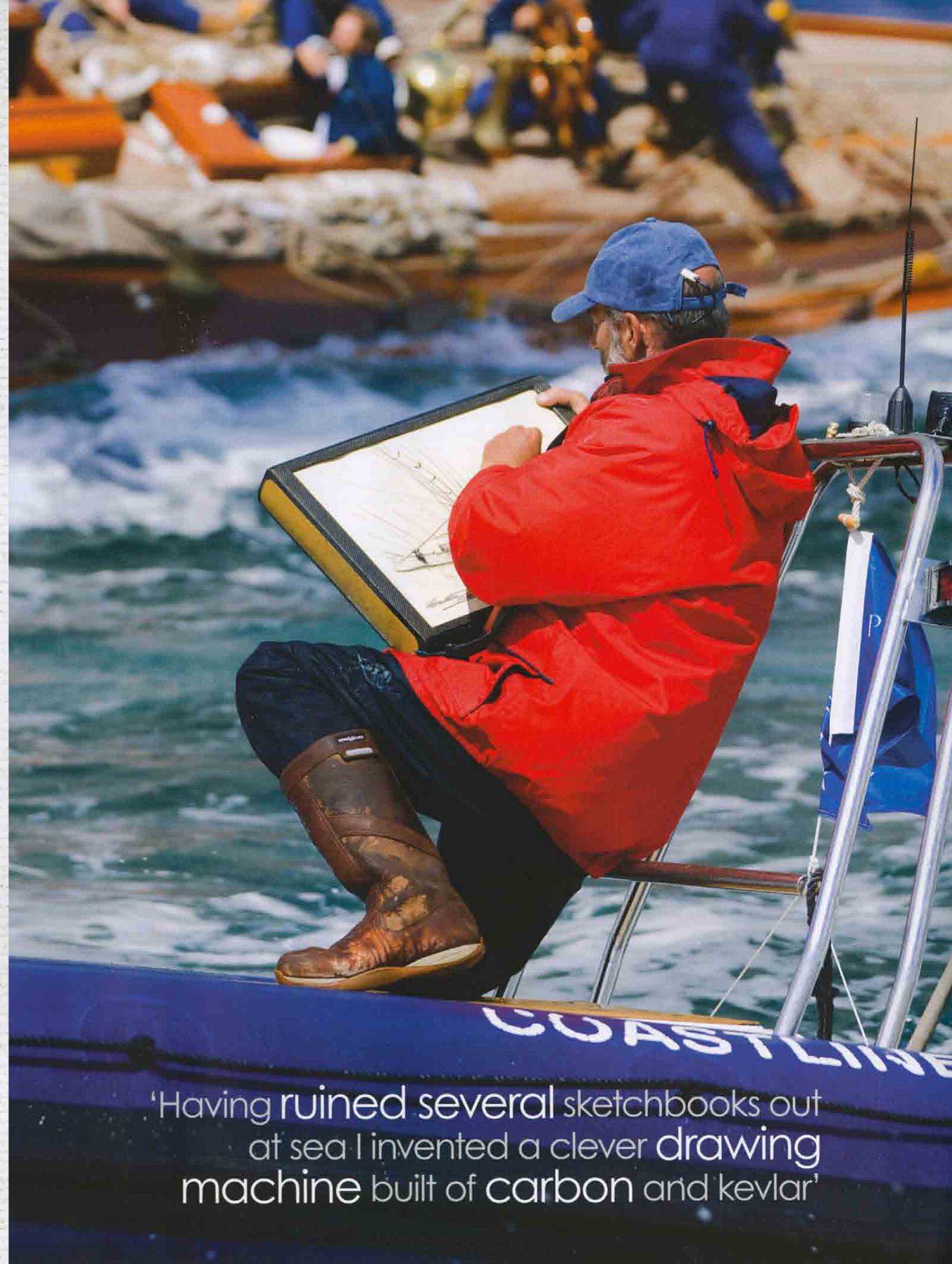
Having ruined several sketchbooks out at sea I invented a clever drawing machine built of carbon and kevlar, which was then made by Hamble model-maker Darren Maple. This ingenious machine enables me to have a 10 metre roll of dry paper safely contained in a box, and allows me to draw in the most hostile conditions – extreme sketching, I call it. Armed with this piece of kit, the open sea has become my studio and Falmouth Bay, the Solent, the Cote d'Azur and the Caribbean my playground over the last four years. Not a bad job really.

My subjects are the paradigms of beauty and grace from the last 100 years, a lexicon of originals with names like *Altair*, *Cambria*, *Lulworth*, *Mariette*, *Mariquita* and *Moonbeam*; together with the more recent *Adix*, *Adela*, *Eleonora*, *Elena*; the iconic J Class *Velsheda*, *Ranger*,

*Shamrock Vand Hanuman*, and the smaller gems like *Kelpie*, *Kate*, *Rowdy*, *Stormy Weather* and *Fyne*. Ancient Romans believed that society is judged by what it builds, so it seems to me that a society that is inspired enough and wealthy enough to cherish, to restore or to replicate and then to race these fabulous yachts must be a confident and healthy society.

We, as spectators or participants, are the real beneficiaries of the resurgence of interest in what previous generations created and then abandoned. It was not so long ago that the hulk of *Velsheda* was dug out of her mud berth signalling the return of the

A wall of sketches (right), each capturing a feeling and a moment, painted while balanced precariously on a RIB, give Creswell inspiration for his finished pieces – such as the one above which shows *Mariquita* crossing *Tuiga* at the Westward Cup



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sketches into more controlled watercolours, which capture not only the architecture of sailing but also the spirit, like a good portrait painter captures the personality as well as the likeness. I find that my sketches say more in five minutes than a camera can in a day.

## Capturing the moment

Over recent years I have exhibited successfully dozens of marine watercolours in important galleries in London and New York, attracting patrons

both sailors and landmen alike. These paintings now grace important private collections both on land and at sea. One group of watercolours was bought for a new superyacht, to lend the credence of tradition, I felt, in an otherwise entirely modern motor yacht. Another set graces the house of a collector who has never set foot on a boat, and another group of watercolours was bought by a superyacht-owning British rock legend. The appeal of beauty is widespread, it seems.

Some owners invite me to paint their great yachts, a portrait of their love. The opportunities are not limited to sailing yachts and I was delighted to be asked to paint the gorgeous *Bluebird* by her owner and saviour Tara Getty. Anxious to see her performing, I requested that she be taken out and given full throttle down the Golfe de Saint Tropez while I chased along in the RIB to catch that fine bow-wave on paper and White Ensign flicking the water in her wake. We could barely keep up but it made the painting a success, showing *Bluebird* powering past *Moonbeam of Five*, which Getty had chartered for Les Voiles that year.

For a client of Redman Whiteley Dixon, I am compiling a set of drawings and watercolours that document the process of building a superyacht in Holland. This series includes the spectacle of the delicate transport of the yacht from one yard to another, its massive hull dwarfing the towns and windmills along the way, like a metallic cathedral being slowly manoeuvred across the landscape. I have also had the pleasure of joining RWD on their Auto Tour to the Monaco Yacht Show – beautiful classic cars rather than yachts – but I have not yet ventured to sketch while driving my 60-year-old Bentley down the Gorges du Verdon!

Whatever the subject, these paintings augment the actuality of the event, rendering the subject immortal. Just as Beken's images of the J Class stand as an icon of the era, so my paintings will exist after the reality has moved on. My paintings of the fire-damaged staterooms at Windsor Castle are now historic, surviving way beyond the newspapers of the time and are now hanging permanently in Windsor Castle. Similarly, those drawings of the superyacht in build will be the only lasting record of a period which will be history as soon as she is finished.

The onus of creating immortality has its responsibilities. Truth is important and in painting it can be deliberately distorted: *Moonbeam* and *Bluebird* never did race across the bay of Saint Tropez together, but the story told by the painting is broader than the facts. Art is always broader than fact.

Truth can also be manipulated to advantage: take *Eleonora*, for example, the replica of the 1910 schooner

classics; at that time I was working on a book about derelict country houses and padding around the ruins of ancient Rome. I believe there is great beauty in dereliction and ruin because it reminds us of the refined sensibilities of a previous era, and the fragility of the present time to which beauty is an antidote.

Beauty, it struck me, is good for you. To see *Velsheda* sailing again, fully restored at the America's Cup Jubilee in 2001, immediately took me back to the old Beken of Cowes photos from the Great Depression of the 1930s. In those days *Velsheda* and her class were a symbol of beauty in those hard times; a rich man's folly maybe, but an enduring signal that excellence was uplifting, a positive to outperform the negative.

Today we have an economic climate that is frighteningly similar to the 1930s, the future equally uncertain. In contrast, the growing entry lists for recent classic regattas at Saint Tropez, Cannes, Antigua, Cowes and Newport, together with the possibility of a record fleet of J Class yachts racing in British waters in 2012, indicates something encouraging: that beauty is more profound than prosperity, and that our culture is founded on something more reliable than just wealth. Wealth at best enables the creation of beauty. Without great patrons there would be no great architecture, nor great art.

## Access all areas

As a watercolourist I have been lucky enough to have been invited to paint in some remarkable places, from the burnt-out ruins of Windsor Castle to the best seat in the house in Westminster Abbey for the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton last year; from an Eric Clapton concert in London's Albert Hall to the Lying in State of the Queen Mother. I have also completed the biggest watercolours ever painted, in Venice, in Rome and in New York. Unlike many painters I do not work from photographs. Instead I do masses of sketches to capture the spirit, sketches which range from the slowly considered to the frantically uncomfortable.

At sea, bouncing along in a RIB at 15 knots, I capture the essence, the feeling of the race. I try to draw the force of wind transmitted through sail and rigging as well as displacement and speed. I shadow the yachts close in, surfing the quarter wave or tucked under the lee, right in the action. Soaked by spray I can feel the power, hear the animal groaning of sheets easing on a winch, the orders shouted above the wind noise. Towering above me are the acres of sail, tall as a church facade with light changing as rapidly as the helmsman's course. There is no time for accuracy or detail, just for exuberance.

Later, in the studio, I transfer all these spirited



A degree of artistic licence was used to depict *Bluebird* and *Moonbeam* in Saint Tropez (above). *Velsheda*, *Ranger* and *Eleonora* battle it out at the Antigua Classics (right), a drawing of Mariette shows the movement Creswell achieves in a quick sketch (far right), and Creswell driving his 60-year-old Bentley at the RWD Auto Tour (top left)





## 'I will aim to add a little legacy to the wonderful sights which will grace our waters for a few weeks'

*Westward*: her owner may have been understandably peeved when the replica of *Westward's* 1911 rival *Elena* was launched last year. *Elena* is quicker, in the original and in replica. It may have been churlish of me to exhibit a large watercolour at the Royal Yacht Squadron in 2010 during the Westward Cup, hosted by the owner of *Eleonora*. This huge painting showed both schooners neck and neck in full sail, *Eleonora* in the foreground and *Elena* beyond, to windward and therefore ahead. This cannot have escaped his notice. So to assuage my guilt I painted another version with *Eleonora* to windward and pulling ahead. This painting remains for sale while the other was bought by a collector who enjoyed the image irrespective of the truth.

### The home straight

For 2012 I am looking forward to some great excitements in Britain, in waters of the correct colours, green and grey with plenty of white. I will be following the first J-Class regatta in Falmouth, which promises to be as spectacular and iconic as anything from the 1930s. I plan a large watercolour of these thoroughbreds charging with bones in their teeth under leaden skies.

Following that, the third Pendennis Cup will welcome some old favourites and some newer superyachts to the

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Cornish approaches, a sporting and fun regatta that is growing in impact and popularity.

Attention will then move to the Solent with another great J Class gathering and the Superyacht Cup, putting the UK firmly back into the global regatta calendar. I will aim to represent the facts with embellishments which only art can allow, and to add a little legacy to the wonderful sights which will grace our waters for a few transient weeks in the summer. **bb**

Creswell presents a painting of *Adela*, the winning yacht at the 2008 Pendennis Cup, the event that diverted him into marine painting. He was the first to represent *Hanuman's* duets (with *P2*, above, at the Newport Bucket)

