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Alexander & Mary

Creswell's
Copse Hill, Surrey



*the House
of the
Single Gable*
*Alexander & Mary Creswell's
Copse Hill, Surrey*

*Southern facade
overlooking banks
of lavender and the
gardens*





Is it any surprise painter Alexander Creswell inhabits an aerie? When HYLAND editor Kyle Marshall returned from England with a fine collection of photographs of the Creswell residence, Copse Hill in the Downs, Surrey, I was enchanted to see that the Arts & Crafts house, perched on a steep escarpment and designed by architect and social reformer Christopher Hatton Turnor (1873-1940), consists of an impossibly elongated single gabled roof, 76 feet wide. Immediately I longed to peer into the rooms lodged under those broad eaves. Kyle's photographs



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*A work of art in
itself, historic Copse Hill,
under Alexander and Mary
Creswell's careful, creative
husbandry provides an
exceptional setting...*





provide an intriguing, sometimes intimate glimpse of the place Creswell—who travels far abroad to capture, in watercolor, landscapes of all ilk—calls home, a refuge where he refines his ideas, sketches and writings into the luminous, precise watercolors which have made him world famous.

There are certain kinds of artifacts, amounting to unpremeditated still lives, which characterize a distinctly English interior. I must admit that the photograph of Kyle's which speaks to me most powerfully, evoking my own memories of England, is of a detail, a luncheon plate painted at the center with a neoclassical manor house, on which reposes knife, fork and the remains of a fig. Nearby are wine glass drained



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Ladies traveling case



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to the lees and teacup with leaves, Great Britain's twin libations. The fig reminds me of the scene in Ken Russell's film of D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, wherein Alan Bates' character, Rupert Birkin, demonstrates, while speaking of women, the sensual way to eat a fig. In any case, England surpasses other lands in country pleasures, especially dining and disquisitions al fresco when the weather is fine.

Many commentators, including Creswell himself, find a heady scent of the Mediterranean in Copse Hill's house and environs, for it is built of lime-washed brick, its roofs made of terracotta tiles with Venetian style chimneys. But for me, the house is quintessentially English Arts & Crafts; when I saw the roof, I thought of my favorite architect of the style, C.F.A. Voysey. Kyle mentions several architectural elements of the house—an enclosed stairway, entrances



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to the right and left rather than center, which hint at Lutyens, and indeed, Christopher Hatton Turnor, designer of the Watts Gallery, Surrey and the Stoneham War Shrine, Hampshire, trained initially as an architect under Edwin Lutyens and Robert Weir Schultz. Lutyens described Turnor, not without admiration, as “odd and mad”; Turnor’s architectural career was brief, for he is known mainly as an agricultural reformer, having inherited vast tracts of land.

Creswell’s grandparents did not commission the house; rather, they discovered it, in 1908, half-finished, in a most fortuitous way, after they took a wrong turn on the road while motoring to visit cousins nearby. Thus began a happy tenure which has lasted generations.

Creswell’s grandparents, particularly his grandmother, Isabel Vulliamy (1869-1956), entrain a fascinating pedigree and character. Vulliamy’s father, of Huguenot descent, fled France in the 1880s. Isabel met and married Col. Edmund Creswell, a widower with no fewer than eight children, and together they came to live at Copse Hill, which Turnor had originally designed for a Miss Head and her female companion.



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As the doyenne of Copse Hill, Isabel Vulliamy Creswell did surprising things. In a 2008 article for Country Life, Mary Miers describes Isabel as “passionate and tricky,” a Bohemian interested in Theosophy among other intellectual pursuits, who filled the

house, during the Blitz, with waifs and Basque refugees whom she would not allow, however, to descend the main staircase.



Isabel’s heritage is tangible throughout the house in the form of the beautiful toile de Jouy pattern, a red version used in the dining room, a blue one in a guest bedroom. Isabel’s mother was descended from the Oberkampf family who developed the pattern; much of the living room furniture at Copse Hill comes from their house, the Chateau de Jouy. The dining room toile is printed with Travaux de la Manufacture design, showing the Oberkamps’

Jouey-en-Jonas textile mills. The blue toile in the bedroom is a romance, entitled L’Offrande a l’amour, the votive offering to love.

Since taking over the house in 1994, Alexander Creswell and



his wife, Mary, have become at once custodians and ongoing creators of Copse Hill and its many tableaux of precious heirlooms and other objects, not to mention its gardens (the subject of a related article in this issue of HYLAND).

In the study is a small, highly detailed painting which provides a key to certain of these objets: it is an 1820s self-portrait, depicting Pierre Antoine Labouchere, who married Baron Oberkampf's granddaughter, in his study. He is fancifully costumed as a religious of unspecified order in red robe and cap. The room he occupies is 17th century in feeling, with a canopied, red curtained bed alcove in the corner, Roman figurines and busts on top of the book-lined etagere. The



cleric faces two small Renaissance portraits, arched in outline, which actually hang in the Copse Hill study, along with a panoply of hunting trophies shot by Michael Creswell in 1939 in southern Germany, while covertly gathering intelligence from, among others, Hermann Goering.

Kyle was particularly taken with the drawing room, which Creswell noted in Miers' *Country Life* article is painted in a faded grey-blue he refers to as "dead butler," matched from an Imari plate



Toile de jouy, originally developed by Alexander's ancestors at the Chateau de Jouy

in the room. The furniture, good Empire and Restauration pieces from the Chateau de Jouy, are arranged with typically English informality — for comfort rather than grand effect. One is in the presence of important furniture, yet this is a room to inhabit, to live in, to use to good purpose. Presiding over the ensemble is a cheery spirit in the form of a painting of Baron Christophe-Philippe Oberkampf, inventor of toile de Jouy, with his mother, a delightful relic of the Rococo.

Creswell's own watercolors of Copse Hill evince the informal elegance of its interiors, transmitting, in turn, the very

*Water color papers in
Alexander's studio*

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Water color paints in the studio

*...a refuge
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*A watercolor depicting
Editor in Chief Christopher
Hyland's New York city
sitting room*



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personal, poetic attachment one may feel for a room. This fine-tuned painter of grand yachts, of Windsor and the great cathedrals, of Venice—the Canaletto of our age—when turning to painting his own house, becomes ever so slightly misty, rendering a chronicle of place that is emotional as well, of course, as accurate.



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*Sketches of
Queen's River
Thames jubilee*

What better place to achieve these creations than at home at Copse Hill? It goes almost without saying that Creswell's studio is housed in a small wing of his house, once servant's quarters, now a capacious single room with all the appurtenances of the artist. There are, of course, his myriad brushes, contained in appealing blue and white jars, but there are more specialized instruments as well. A friend created a portable contraption resembling a scroll, which, not unlike the Bayeux tapestry, unleashes swathes of paper which Creswell covers with studies and sketches, then rolls up again when he runs out of space. Then there is his lighting system, electric tubes of light calibrated to mimic all the variations of daylight, from overcast to sunny, which Kyle remarks would, by itself make an interesting Dan Flavin-like installation.

Alexander Creswell has become ever more ambitious in the scale of his work, and now seeks commissions—in watercolor—that attain the size of murals, covering a wall or even a ceiling. Copse Hill remains the place where such







plans incubate and eventually see the light of day. A work of art in itself, historic Copse Hill, under Alexander and Mary Creswell's careful, creative husbandry provides an exceptional setting, a place of gestation, for this important artist's oeuvre. **H** *Written by Lisa Zeiger | Photography by Kyle Marshall*

A photograph of a windowsill. In the foreground, there is a white windowsill with several objects: a black object on the left, a blue matchbox with the word 'MATCHES' on it, a small metal object, and a clear plastic container on the right. A ceramic pencil holder with a blue floral pattern is also on the sill, filled with several red pencils. In the background, a window looks out onto a lush green forest under a blue sky with some clouds.

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