

Portrait of the artist

The watercolourist Alexander Creswell has devoted his life to his remarkable home in the Surrey hills. By **Emma Wells**

According to the artist Alexander Creswell, every house tells its own story, and the one told by his 100-year-old home in the Surrey hills is very much about art. "I paint architecture and houses," he says, "but houses exude their own personality and history."

The 1907 building, 10 miles from Guildford, in what was once highwayman country and, later, a hotbed for Arts and Crafts architecture, also tells the story of Creswell's family — of his French grandmother, Mea, who died before he was born, and his diplomat father, Sir Michael, whom he suspects was a spy — and of toile de Jouy, the historic French fabric.

The house was built in the style of a Basque villa by Christopher Turnor, a local gentleman-architect, for two ladies — who never moved in. Instead, it was bought by Creswell's grandmother, who motored past one afternoon with her husband and fell in love with it.

The cream-and-green three-storey building, built of local sandstone, has an almost Palladian front, with a wing on either side and rounded windows. It has seven bedrooms and 10 acres of terraced gardens that sweep down to bluebell woods. It was built just one room deep — "with its back to London", as Creswell puts it — to make the most of the spectacular views over the Weald and to the Sussex coast beyond.

Creswell, 50, one of Britain's leading watercolourists, was born and brought up in this house, which he now shares with his wife, Mary, 38, an art consultant, their three children, Theo, 8, Cicely, 7, and Constance, 4, and a collection of rabbits and ducklings.

"I remember playing in the gardens as a child," he says, although this was only in school holidays while he was at Winchester College, and during summers when his father was a diplomat in Finland, Yugoslavia and Argentina.

When his parents died, Creswell inherited a share of the house. He bought the rest from his elder half-brother in the early 1990s and has devoted himself into turning it into a functional yet beautiful family home and studio.

"Beautiful buildings make you feel better," he says. Indeed, it is architecture, in any state, that is his *raison d'être*, with his life's work being to capture what he describes as "the spirit of place". In a 1991 series of paintings, *Silent Houses of Britain*, grand country homes — many now abandoned ruins — are shown with the half-light playing over their crumbling stones, trees breaking through windows and nature reclaiming man-made form.



The sandstone facade of the Creswells' 1907 house near Guildford, Surrey

Creswell's technical brilliance has brought him royal attention: after the fire at Windsor Castle in 1992, he was commissioned by the Queen to record the devastated State Rooms. Five years later, he was commissioned again, this time to show their phoenix-like restoration from the ashes. These paintings — 27 in all — now form part of the Royal Collection, in London and Windsor.

In 2000, he recorded Prince Charles's tour of central Europe in his watercolour sketchbook, and in 2002, he was commissioned to paint the lying in state of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother for the Queen and for the House of Lords, a "very special, very profound" experience.

Having had 25 solo exhibitions worldwide, Creswell is preparing to show about 40 works at Art London, a contemporary art fair, next month, through the Portland Gallery. His pictures of the buildings of Italy, and Venice in particular, in which each stone is represented with startling verisimilitude, will feature prominently.

Inspired by Turner and Cotman, the masters of the golden age of watercolour, Creswell has been labelled a "traditional eccentric" by critics. He likes to paint from his 60-year-old drop-head Bentley — "I use it as my open-air studio" — and from his *sandolo*, a boat he keeps in Venice and can moor up at whatever spot takes his fancy.

Aren't watercolours a bit old hat in these days of £50m diamond-studded skulls? Not at all, Creswell says — painting in watercolour allows a spontaneity that oils, for example, do not. He has also revolutionised the medium: recent



Creswell had the shade of blue in the drawing room specially mixed to re-create the era of his grandparents

“A beautiful building makes you feel better. I try to capture the spirit of a place”

technical breakthroughs in paper size have allowed him to paint probably the largest single-piece watercolours in the world.

His works have grown from a standard 22in x 30in to 108in x 60in. And he intends to go even larger. "I can paint architecture almost life-size and work on details of stone, with particular sunlight and atmosphere up close," he says.

Which explains a curious device in the large ground-floor dining room, where Creswell does much of his painting. At the touch of a button, the seemingly innocuous dining table whirs and tilts: beneath is a hydraulic table on

which he can place his paper, which can be swivelled almost upright, allowing him to reach parts of his paintings quickly and with ease.

"Timing is crucial in the execution of watercolours," he says. "Normally, you would need steam machines and so on. Besides, it's great fun to unnerve party guests at the end of a dinner."

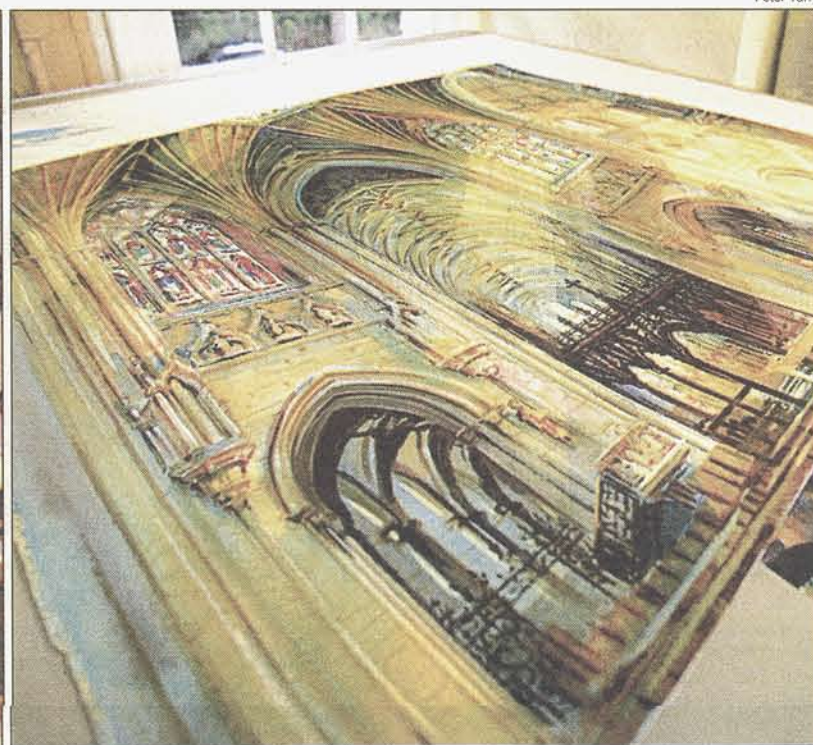
The room, which has a large-scale painting of fireworks over Venice on the wall, overlooks a stone terrace decked with lemon and olive trees. "It's a very Mediterranean garden," he says. "We rebuilt these terraces to the 1930s designs of my grandmother."

as a family man

Peter Tarry



Alexander and Mary with Constance, Theo and Cicely in the living room/library of their richly decorated home



The hydraulic painting table in the dining room 'unnerves' party guests

Although he never met her, Creswell feels deeply connected. "The garden told us what to do — one day, I was about to cut down an old rose when there was an insistent tapping at the window. I'm sure it was my grandmother telling me not to," he says. Suffice to say, he left the rose untouched, and it bloomed gloriously the following year.

Upstairs, another strong connection to the family's French forebears is found in one of the seven bedrooms, which is decked out in toile de Jouy fabric, which was created by Creswell's French ancestors. Here, it is used as it would have been originally — without restraint, on walls, curtains, bedspreads over the high French wooden twin beds, cushions and chairs. Typical motifs on the fabric tell stories of rural life and history. It is now limited to one room, but when Creswell was a child, it was everywhere. "I grew up following patterns around the house," he says.

Creswell has tried to keep the house true to the time when his grandparents were there — for example, creating an authentic creamy-blue paint for the antiques-filled drawing room. He did, however, knock through the scullery and tiny kitchen to create a larger family room. Here, he has built 1950s-style cream-and-green cabinets, and work benches with dark mahogany tops.

His wife, Mary, originally from Cornwall, adores the home. "I love the Surrey countryside, and it is amazing to be able to walk the children over the hill to school," she says. A botanical artist, she uses a corner of the living room/library as her study. "I felt a bit uncomfortable using the French antique desk at first, because it was filled with Alexander's parents' love letters," she says. "But now it's fine. And I look out over the gardens, not back to the rows of

stuffed animals [Creswell's father was a great stalker] on the wall behind."

In this room, oak shelves — built with wood from trees that fell in the storms of 1987 — are filled with ornately bound and tooled antique books, Persian carpets and saddlebags. Elsewhere in the house are inexpensive items with which Mary fell in love on family travels: brass Moroccan lamps, Chinese trunk clasps, North African bedspreads.

"We are so, so lucky to live here — and we work jolly hard to keep it all up," Mary says. The tall, stately-looking Creswell agrees. "It's a bit like painting the Forth Bridge." Creswell, however, is no stranger to hard graft. He says he would work "seven days a week, 12 hours a day, if I could". His family, however, won't let him. "They take the handle off the door to my studio at dinner time and hide it," he says.

The artist, whose paintings sell for between £1,500 and £40,000, will soon be preparing for another show, Venice Only, to be held next June at the Portland Gallery. Europe is not his only source of inspiration: he has lived with the Bedouin in Petra, crossed China by train and explored North Korea. But home will always be the one of his childhood.

"This is a special place," he says. "And we are not going anywhere. It is wonderful to sleep in beds where generations of your family have slept. And the children love it."

■ Tickets for Art London, at the Royal Hospital, Chelsea, SW3, October 4-8, cost £12 or £18 for two; www.artlondon.net
■ www.alexandercreswell.net

DIFFERENT STROKES

See more pictures of the Creswells' house at timesonline.co.uk/property