

# The Telegraph

## A love letter to one of Britain's best-kept secrets

Artist Francis Hamel has captured the beauty of a spectacular garden  
By [Tim Richardson](#) 28 September 2021 • 5:00am



The Cold Bath Afternoon Sunshine by Francis Hamel (detail) CREDIT: Features Scans

Doubtless there are books being written now about the effect of the pandemic on artists. In most cases, it will be a tale of turning inwards, either to one's own psyche or to the home environment. For many painters, the back garden will have been a rich source of inspiration.

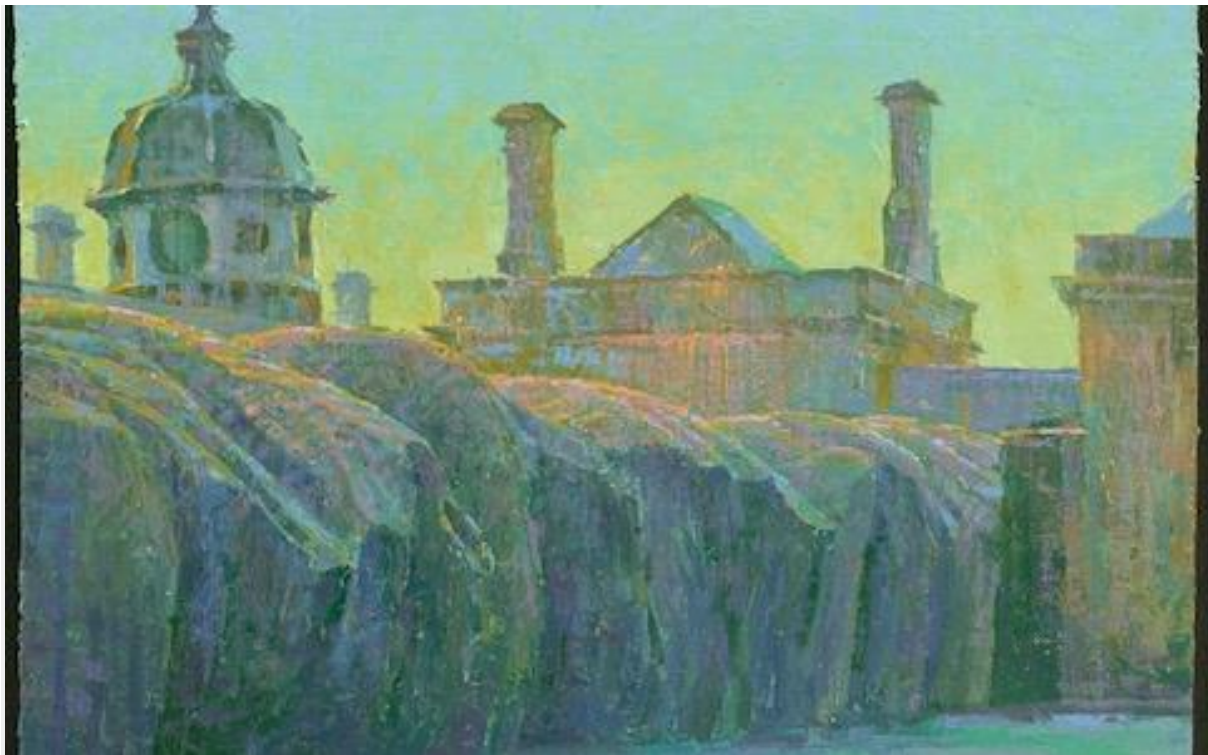
But what if your garden also happens to be one of the most spectacular and fabled of all 18th-century designed landscapes? That is the case with Francis Hamel, who has for the past 25 years lived in what was once a laundry in the stable yard at [Rousham House](#) in Oxfordshire.

The garden at Rousham was created in the mid-18th century for Whig diplomat General James Dormer by the architect and landscape architect William Kent. It is hailed as Kent's masterpiece – an extraordinarily atmospheric place of temples,

statuary and formal pools, with vistas across the Cherwell Valley beyond. Still in the hands of the Cottrell-Dormer family, it is considered to be one of Britain's best-kept garden secrets, with no tea room or shop, no intrusive bins or signage, and a self-service machine for tickets (for years it was simply an honesty box) – a million miles away from the corporate style of the National Trust.

Hamel, 57, has his studio in the building next to the grand arch leading into the stable yard. And there I find him, tousle-haired in a blue linen shirt, standing in the middle of the room, apparently surveying some of his recent canvases propped up against wall and fireplace. The smell of paint and turpentine lingers in the air as light streams in through tall windows. But it turns out he is not in fact looking at his pictures. He is eyeing the ceiling slightly nervously, since a section of it fell in the week before. Such are the travails of living and working in a historic building.

Until recently Hamel had only painted Rousham's garden on a handful of occasions. "I was slightly shy of it," he admits. He felt it had already been done, most notably by the English painter John Piper. Previously, Hamel was something of a globe-trotting artist, producing series of paintings in India, China, Africa, Italy and Provence. But the events of the past year and a half changed all that. "Lockdown was a message," he says. "There was that very weird atmosphere around lockdown. Spring last year was very odd. It was like a fall of snow – everything looked different."



The hedge with Buttresses and Chimney by Francis Hamel (detail) CREDIT: Features Scans  
With the garden closed to the public, he spent more than a year drawing and painting the garden, eventually producing a body of work which is being displayed at Rousham and in London this month. Avoiding the set-piece views within the garden, Hamel turned to subjects that include the old oaks in the park, longhorn cattle clustering in a golden dusk, limes lit up orange in the dawn, and dappled walks shading into a submarine blue-green.

He favours the rawness of dawn – “you get these extraordinary moments as the temperature changes” – to the elegiac quality of dusk, developing an unusual chromatic register in which rich greens, blues, purples or ochres often appear to dominate, but which in fact allows other colours to sing out from within.

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He does work en plein air – but more often waits until he is back in the studio. “When you recall the scene from memory, somehow you see it far more clearly,” he says. And he reveals that he has immersed himself in the garden in more ways than one, in that he has developed a daily habit of plunging into the octagonal pool at the heart of the garden.

Hamel can be described as a painter of light, but it is not the flickering, evanescent light of the Impressionists. This is something lustier, more solid, almost “meaty”, as if the colour is not just reflecting off surfaces but is somehow infused into the substance of the objects in the landscape.

Having walked together for an hour, we stop for a while at Pope’s Seat, set in a quiet corner of the garden, with views along the meandering River Cherwell. It is a sequestered spot, somehow caught out of time. “At Rousham you always feel like you are trespassing,” Hamel comments. And it’s true. It’s a delicious feeling that is captured in the best of these works.

**Francis Hamel: Rousham, Through the Gardens is at Rousham House, Oxon, Oct 1-7 and at John Martin Gallery, London W1, Oct 18-Nov 12.**

**Details: [rousham.org](http://rousham.org)**

**The Gardens at Rousham: Paintings by Francis Hamel (Clearview Books, £30)**