



Different shapes and colors of fruit and flowers form the basis of Jill Barthorpe's still lifes. "I like painting flowers because they aren't passive and they're not still," she says. "They move around, and the light changes, making everything look different, so you're forced to really observe them and to get to know them." As an artist with a studio in her cozy Lincolnshire home, deep in the English countryside, she compares that focused attention to the way an artist gains intimacy or connection with landscapes—another subject she enjoys painting.

Although Barthorpe doesn't work with the buyer in mind, her representational work resonates with viewers. She hopes, however, to take viewers a bit further—into an appreciation of light and form and other aspects of composition and design. "I think there's a lot of communication in painting," she says. "It's not always a conscious thing."

THE MAKING OF A STILL LIFE

A tabletop full of quinces is the subject of one of Barthorpe's recent paintings, *Quinces With Bramble*, (opposite). "It's full of wonderful yellows and greens on a mirrored tabletop," she says. "The quinces are an incredible color. They reflect so much light." She goes on to explain her handling of color: "I try to keep things on either a cool or a hot scale and to use a very restricted palette. That way it's much easier to achieve harmony, so you don't get confused with too much color."

The artist likes to select objects for her setups that she finds around

OPPOSITE
Quinces With Bramble (oil on canvas, 20x30)

BELOW
Blue Road (oil on canvas, 20x28)



Poetry IN Paint

JILL BARTHORPE EXPLORES HARMONIOUS RELATIONSHIPS OF COLOR, LINE AND SHAPE TO CREATE LYRICAL WORK IN OIL.

BY Tim Saunders



her—things that are familiar. “We have a quince tree that’s very prolific, and we have apple trees,” she says (See *Apples With Ivy*, above, and *Red With Purple Stripe*, page ••). Brambles also make frequent appearances in her still lifes. As common as the elements in her setups may be, however, her compositions are anything but prosaic. In fact, Barthorpe compares them to poetry. “I constantly pare down the elements until I have something that might barely hang together but, seen as a whole, will convey reality,” she says. “Being selective, I try to include only elements that create the drama. One piece of color can describe light, texture and a position in space. The challenge is to find those elusive elements and stitch them together. It’s purely about the colors, the lines, the shapes, the balance and the harmony between them.”

Barthorpe works with the still life setup in front of her, making adjustments along the way, as needed. “I might start painting and think things need to be moved a couple of inches or decide to add or take things away,” she says. “It’s all so changeable, and you don’t have to be stuck with what you’ve got in front of you. You can change the scale if it isn’t quite right.”

Each blank canvas is treated in the same manner. “To begin, I square up by making lines from corner to corner,” says Barthorpe. “I’ll find the center of the surface, the dynamics of the canvas.” Then, using a plumb line, she’ll do

the same thing with her still life setups, marking the edges (see *Mapping the Picture*, opposite).

Having established the boundaries, the artist creates a compositional brush drawing on the canvas. These marks are her way of taking notes.

Apples With Ivy (oil on canvas, 14x18)

INSPIRING FOREBEARS

Astonished by the light and power of the oil sketches of John Constable (English, 1776–1837), Barthorpe keeps a small book of his outdoor studies in her studio. She’s also drawn to the everyday subject matter of Paul Cezanne (French, 1839–1906). “He had the ability to create wonderful drama with apples and a jug,” she says. Barthorpe also finds herself returning to Georges Braque (French, 1882–1963) again and again, especially his tabletop still lifes. “The reality he creates seems to only hang together by a thread but is intensely powerful,” she says.

Mapping the Picture

Before starting a painting, Barthorpe marks key points on her canvas, then does the same with her still life setup by drawing marks on the tabletop, backdrop and even the objects themselves. She may move the objects as she progresses through the painting process, but the marks establish boundaries and provide other guides or notes. Some of the marks on the canvas remain visible on the finished work.

BELOW
Two Pots With Ivy
(oil on canvas, 14x18)





ABOVE
**Red With Purple
Stripe** (oil on
canvas, 12x16)

RIGHT
Red Tulips (oil on
canvas, 14x20)



“Usually I draw with a mixture of blue-black and cadmium yellow pale,” she says. “Most of the lines get lost behind color, but the bits I need tend to surface. These become points of emphasis, giving structure and movement.”

A medium-sized painting takes about three weeks to complete. Barthorpe finds that if she works on a painting too long, she may need to scrape paint off to keep it from becoming too thick, which can exhaust the canvas. Each completed work tends to nudge her toward the next one. “I try to follow the lead of the previous painting and see what ideas it has sparked,” she says. “Sometimes it’s just about color, such as the particular lemon yellow that I’m a bit obsessed with at the moment. If I’ve been painting a lot of green, I might want to change that and paint a white still life or a very dark one. Other times, it can be about the size or proportions of the canvas.”



Celery and Roses
(oil on canvas,
20x16)

MY MATERIALS

—JILL BARTHORPE

SURFACE: I stretch cotton duck canvas over wood stretcher bars. Once I have the tension I like, I size the surface with two coats of rabbitskin glue. Then I apply an oil painting ground, sometimes adding an oil ground color—usually Indian red. I prepare several surfaces at a time, so I always have a stack of prepared canvases.

When I’m ready to begin a painting, I’ll decide on the shape and size of the canvas I want and square it up, using standard rectangles (2x3, 3x4 or 4x6 feet). Square canvases are the most difficult because they don’t have the directional tug of a rectangle to counter. If an old canvas is in good condition, I’ll paint over the top of the picture.

PAINT: I’ve used Winsor & Newton Artists’ Oil Colour since I was in college, so I know exactly what the colors are going to do—their viscosity and transparency. My basic palette is titanium white, cadmium yellow pale, cadmium red, alizarin crimson and French ultramarine. My secondary palette consists of cadmium lemon, cadmium yellow deep, cadmium orange, yellow ochre, burnt sienna, viridian, cadmium green, cerulean, cobalt blue, Prussian blue and blue-black. I add other colors depending on the painting. I’ve discovered geranium lake and have enjoyed finding a use for it, and I also use Old Holland cadmium orange.

For mixtures, I combine two or three main colors, using a palette knife. Then, to test the result, I’ll put a dab of color on the canvas with my finger.

BRUSHES: I use an expensive long-handled Russian black-sable brush for drawing, and I go through about three of these within a year. For the rest of my work, I use long hog-hair brushes.

FRAMING: Before sending a work to a framer, I apply a single coat of semi-matte varnish. For special paintings, I use a framer who does gesso hand-painted frames. For most of my paintings, though, I use another framer who lives nearby. I’ll ask him to use either the “dark-frame recipe” or the “pale-frame recipe,” depending on the work.

DISCIPLINED ROUTINE

Barthorpe finds that a daily schedule keeps her on a productive track. “I get up early and go for a long walk with my dog,” she says. “By 9 a.m. I’m working, and I paint until lunchtime. I then think about what I’ve done and go on to paint into the afternoon as long as it’s light enough. I paint as much as I can during the day and only work with natural light, so that dictates my working hours.” With longer daylight hours in the summer she’ll paint until she’s either too tired or has run out of ideas.

The artist admits that she works faster during the winter. “The shorter, more concentrated hours force you to work a bit harder,” says Barthorpe. “There’s an urgency, which isn’t altogether unwelcome.”

Barthorpe credits her discipline to her years as a student at the Slade School of Fine Art, at the University College, London. Having maintained a routine for so long, she has developed a rhythm to her day. “I know my best painting hours,” she says. “I just try to work, and if I’m feeling lazy, I use tricks to keep me standing there. I’ll say to myself, ‘Okay, do one hour and you can go and have another pot of coffee.’ I just work as hard as I can most of the time.”

Deadlines are effective motivators for longer-term goals. “They force you to get on with stuff,” says Barthorpe. “I know what exhibitions are coming up, and I have a few galleries that take work all the time. I focus on the painting I’m creating at the moment and make it the best one I can.”



ABOVE
South From the Lodge (oil on canvas, 16x32)

RIGHT
Stonygate Lane West (oil on canvas, 8x12)



MEET THE ARTIST

After graduating from the Slade School of Fine Art, at the University College, London, Barthorpe won a private scholarship enabling her to live and paint in rural France. [Jill: How long did the scholarship enable you to stay in France, and What degree did you earn at the Slade?] The award allowed her time to paint alone without financial worries and has introduced many opportunities since. Her paintings are often selected for Critic's Choice exhibitions and sold through Christie's contemporary art sales. This year, Barthorpe is exhibiting her work at Principle Gallery, in Charleston, S.C.; and, in the United Kingdom, at Nadia Waterfield Fine Art, in Andover; British Art Portfolio, in Northampton; Gallerytop, in Derbyshire; and Cobbold & Judd Modern & Contemporary Art, in Colchester.

▶ VISIT THE ARTIST'S WEBSITE AT JILLBARTHORPE.CO.UK.

STEPPING OUTSIDE

Painting landscapes requires a different sort of discipline from that of painting still lifes—and the creative process is more varied. “Ideally, I work en plein air, but it depends on what I’m painting,” says Barthorpe. “I make lots of drawings.” She credits oil sketches for helping her get to know an area incredibly well. “It’s amazing what you absorb when you look at the same thing every day as you walk around a landscape,” she says.

Photographs can also be helpful, but to a limited degree. “When a scene is too big, I use a camera and put the photographs together or chop them up to use as a visual reference. I do very much enjoy the movement and changes of things, so I try not to rely on photographs. I find drawings a much more accurate way of recollection. I make notes, including color notes, so when I’m painting landscapes, I draw from a huge amount of resources.”

Atmospheric conditions and seasonal weather inspire the artist. “Fog is just amazing,” says Barthorpe. “It’s thrilling to see the hedges starting to change through the fog.”

I also like the time in the fall when the fields have been harvested. You have that almost white stubble on a bright day, and the hedges are very dark because they’re losing all their color. It’s a definite change—a landscape of contrast, which, in a way, makes it easier to see.”

LOOKING AHEAD

In the coming months Barthorpe wants to explore new ideas. “I feel excited. The pandemic lockdown helped me focus on the reason I’m painting—what it is about the process that’s important to me,” she says. “When I feel excited about what I’ve painted, I feel successful. It doesn’t always work, but sometimes I can just look at a line or a piece of color and think, ‘That absolutely nailed it.’ It’s difficult when you’re your own audience and critic, which I think is one of the most challenging aspects of painting.”

Tim Saunders is a journalist based in the United Kingdom. His podcast interviews with artists are available at anchor.fm/creative-coverage.