

# WINSTON CHURCHILL

## the artist

Remembered as Britain's most forceful statesman and war leader, Winston Churchill was also a prolific writer and painter. Hugh St Clair explores the great man's 'hinterland'

**W**inston Churchill and Adolf Hitler may have been arch enemies, but both men shared a love of painting. During the First World War, they were only a few miles from each other with their paint boxes depicting scenes from the Western Front. Hitler became frustrated that he was not accepted by Germany's art world and was forced to eke out an existence selling his images as postcards. Churchill quite wisely never sought to become a professional artist and was therefore spared rejection. Neither men were fans of Modern French and German art. Churchill did believe, though, that in a democracy artists could paint what they liked, unlike his German adversary. However, he made exceptions when it came to pictures of himself, expressing a great dislike of Ruskin Spear's depiction. He hated Graham Sutherland's portrait, which was destroyed by Lady Churchill after his death. But this may have been because he didn't like being shown as a frail old man.

Winston Churchill saw painting as a respite from his political duties and a panacea for his bouts of depression, which he called 'the black dog'. He never sought to sell his work and, indeed, every painting remained until his death with his family and friends, or modern world statesmen who received them as gifts. He published a book, *Painting as a Pastime*, recently reprinted, outlining his thoughts on men who have to bear exceptional responsibilities. 'I consider myself lucky that painting came to my rescue in a most trying time... Painting is a friend who makes no undue demands.'

Normally, Winston Churchill produced one picture a month, but in

times of unhappiness, he painted more. When he found himself removed as Prime Minister by the electorate in 1945, his output increased dramatically. He decided to escape to Italy to stay with a friend and distracted himself from his disappointment through brush and easel.

Winston Churchill didn't pick up a paintbrush until he was over 40 and had never been in an art gallery until 1915, although he had seen great paintings at his family's home, Blenheim Palace. Two years earlier, he'd given a speech at the Royal Academy of Arts as First Lord of the Admiralty, but his theme was about the importance of British sea power rather than anything about art. But from then he gave many speeches to the Royal Academy and wrote art reviews in newspapers extolling the virtues of painting and discussing various artists' merits. These speeches and articles have just been compiled into a fascinating book by respected historian David Cannadine entitled *Churchill: The Statesman as Artist*.

In the late 1940s, John Rothenstein, director of the Tate Gallery, visited Churchill at Chartwell, his country home in Kent, citing Delacroix's observation that to know a painter you must see him in his studio. Rothenstein found he had recovered from his electoral setback and found the former Prime Minister relaxed and happy in his siren suit embroidered with his initials in gold. They went down to his garden studio - a long, narrow room brightly lit by high windows along two walls, beneath which were a row of paint tubes. Churchill often remarked to visitors, 'A day away from Chartwell is a day wasted.'

Winston and his wife Clementine bought Chartwell House and 800 surrounding acres in 1922, primarily for the



Winter Sunshine at Chartwell, c1924



Self-portrait, c1915

The Dining Room at Chartwell with Diana Churchill



Sir Winston Churchill paints in his studio, 1945 (left); with Clementine, 1924 (above)



beautiful view over the Kent Weald and, with the help of the architect Philip Tilden, set about remodelling what they saw as a dark and dreary Victorian house into a modern, light-filled home. The Churchills insisted on their sitting room, and her bedroom above, had a three-sided aspect from which they could gaze over the huge expanse of scenery. Winston, who enjoyed bricklaying, helped build some walls and tile the roof of one of the cottages on the estate. Now in the possession of the National Trust, the house remains much as the Churchills left it. The studio walls are covered with his colourful local landscapes but also views of the Mediterranean and some still lifes. Winston particularly enjoyed painting the bright light of Morocco and managed to escape to Marrakech during the dark days of war. He gave his 1943 painting, *View of Marrakech*, to President Roosevelt.

But what of his reputation as an artist? In 1947, two paintings by him submitted under the pseudonym David Winter were accepted for the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. Augustus John, seeing Churchill's work a few years before his death, wrote: 'Our Statesman, Artist and Historian has stuck to his guns and shows us all, how by disregarding the wisecracks and lures of Fashion, he has, as if by instinct, what surely must be the basic principles of the Masters: "to thine own self be true."'

In the late 1950s, newspaper proprietor Lord Beaverbrook offered £150,000 for all Churchill's paintings, telling him that, 'when you are gone, they won't be worth

two shillings a piece'. Beaverbrook was wrong. Interest in everything about Winston Churchill has reached a new generation who weren't even born when he led Britain to victory. After the death of his daughter Mary Soames, some of his paintings were included in a Sotheby's sale of selected items from her estate. His picture *Goldfish Pool at Chartwell* fetched £1.5m. The subject matter and

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ownership gave it exceptional value, but in 2017, an Essex auction house still managed to sell one of his landscapes for £230,000.

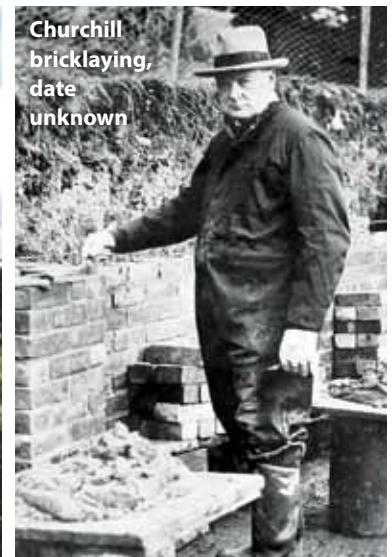
Today, people mourn that politicians lack 'hinterland', that they don't have hobbies or interests outside politics. Churchill was adamant that 'the cultivation of a hobby is a policy of first importance to a public man'. ■

◆ *Churchill: The Statesman as Artist* edited by David Cannadine is published by Bloomsbury, priced £25. *Painting as a Pastime* is published by Unicorn Press, priced £7.99. *From Blenheim to Chartwell: The Untold Story of Churchill's Houses and Gardens* by Stefan Buczacki is published by Unicorn, priced £25

◆ *The Studio at Chartwell* is open all year round, except January 2019. *Chartwell House* reopens on 1 March 2019: 01732-868381, [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/chartwell](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/chartwell)



Churchill's study (above) and the Butterfly Walk (right) at Chartwell House



Churchill bricklaying, date unknown