

HOUSE AND GARDEN

August 2000 *Liz Elliot*

'It's a way of life, not really a job,' explains picture restorer Simon Gillespie, as we sit surrounded by work in progress – a sixteenth-century full-length painting of a Spanish courtesan, every stitch of her lace dress picked out in minute detail; a portrait of a young man attributed to Bronzino; a delightful depiction of one of the first bridges over the River Thames.

'I love the challenge that so many pictures present,' says Simon; 'finding out the identity of an unknown sitter, for example. Early portraits are only of people of importance, and often have a fascinating history behind them. My latest interest,' he continues enthusiastically, 'is in researching the influence of the artists who fled here in the late eighteenth century during the French Revolution. The result is a fascinating marriage between French flamboyance and our own rather more subdued school of English landscape painting.'

Simon's office and studios are on the first floor of a building in Albemarle Street, London, where at any one time four restorers are working on paintings ranging from the medieval to the present day. 'Our main concern,' he explains, 'is to intervene as little as possible – we hardly ever paint over the original paintwork.' Instead, with incredible dexterity, they 'join up' – invisibly making good the flaking and cracks. 'In painting, everything is there for a reason and there is always more to the piece than meets the eye, with fashion playing an enormous part: backgrounds, for example were often painted out, or put in, to suit the changing taste of a later period.'

Although half his work comes from museums and large corporate collections, many pieces come from individuals and collectors. He prides himself on taking the worry out of owning, preserving or buying a painting, and his expertise is often called upon by buyers wanting reassurance about a prospective purchase. Armed with an ultraviolet light which reveals any original work beneath the surface of a painting, Simon visits auction houses and dealers, checking on damage to the canvas brought about by inexpert restorations. His firm also arranges insurance, shipping, and packaging and even framing – he insists that a painting be in the correct frame with regard to period and style.

Clients are provided with a list of priorities in the care of the paintings, from basic restoration such as the removal of discoloured varnish, to treatments of more serious problems. 'The biggest enemy of our artistic inheritance is the radiator – heat, not humidity, causes canvases to move, and it is essential to keep a canvas taut. Everytime a door in a house is slammed, it causes the picture to jump in its frame and the paint, over the years, to flake.

'Removal men are our best friends,' he jokes, 'He has even had the 'Yellow Pages call' from a young man whose parents were away and who had made a dent in a painting. Could he help? He could and did; leaving the house almost as the parent arrived home.'