

Thought

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Photography by Paolo Roversi

{NEWCASTLE}

Art, Where Is Thy Sting?

Although a true world traveller, **Sting** has not forgotten his home town of Newcastle. And as this northern English city, once rich and then economically ravaged, has forged its renaissance, he wanted something to be an artistic symbol of it. Knowing and collecting the work of the magnificent American landscapist **Stephen Hannock** has proved to be the answer.

{THOUGHT}

The *Landscape* of My Dreams

How do you ask a friend to paint that? When you're Sting, you know exactly what to do and where to turn: to the accomplished Stephen Hannock.

By Duncan Christy | Photography by Cedric Angeles



STEPHEN HANNOCK IS STANDING IN A SPACIOUS STUDIO IN North Adams, Massachusetts, in front of an elaborate and exact charcoal drawing. The dimensions of the drawing are 8 feet by 12 feet (2.4 metres by 3.6 metres), and the drawing coming to life depicts the city of Newcastle, England. There distinctively bisecting the city is the River Tyne. There distinctively is the Gateshead Millennium Bridge, and there equally distinctively is Sir Norman Foster's recently constructed The Sage Gateshead concert and exhibition hall, the symbol of the ongoing renaissance of this capital of the northeast of England.

But other aspects of the drawing—the precise life-size study for an eventual painting—are less exact, more fanciful. A series of illuminations glow at both bottom and particularly top, creating a kind of haze. What are they, one wonders?

Nearby on a wall, a finished 40-inch painted study makes some things slightly clearer. The city of Newcastle is rendered with architectural exactitude, but spotted and blotched with bluish lights of differing sizes. This is evidently a painting which is combining fact with fancy, detail with symbol. Its title, the artist relates, is *Northern City Renaissance, Newcastle, England*.

He is casually clad: running shoes, cargo shorts, a T-shirt well-stained with pigment as are his hands. Later in his 50s, he is boyishly handsome and moves with quick, vigorous grace through his familiar environs. The studio looks as one would expect a painter's to look with its vast array of brushes and paints, with stretched canvases stacked loosely together, with walls covered with the work of artistic heroes from Rembrandt forward. The only unexpected hardware is a series of orbital sanders and an array of sandpapers of different grits grouped amid what he good-naturedly calls "the mess," the tools with which he achieves the technique he describes as "polished oil on canvas."

The patron of this particular painting project is the rock star Sting, a personal friend. He has no doubts about the painter's ability to deliver a work that is to be an important artistic statement about his hometown; he and his wife, actress Trudie Styler, own more than a dozen of Hannock's distinctive landscapes, which hang in their different homes. "Stephen Hannock used to be an American Frisbee champion," Sting says, "and in fact he looks more like a jock than he does a sensitive aesthete. 'That guy, that walking fashion disaster with the ancient sneakers and creased Levis is in the Met? Are you kidding?'"

Luminosity

The light of Stephen Hannock's life is his favourite assistant and studio mate (and daughter), 8-year-old Georgia.

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“That’s my friend Hannock, he’s chock-full of surprises.”

“That guy” is in fact in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, represented by two major pieces, as well as in the National Gallery in Washington. He’s there because he is unquestionably the leading landscapist in the United States today, the spiritual heir to an artistic tradition which embraces centrally the Hudson River

School of 19th-century America, but also pays homage to such European luminaries as Caspar David Friedrich and his personal idol, J.M.W. Turner. The large-format landscapes, the best-known part of Hannock’s oeuvre, are the most physical symbol of resemblance. But there is something more to the comparisons, something more mysterious, delicate and, to painters, technically challenging: the masterful use of light.

“I’m obsessed with light,” says Hannock. “I’m obsessed with everything light does. With how powerful it is and yet how fragile, how intense and yet how fleeting. One minute it’s overwhelming, unbelievable, and the next minute, gone. The work is about what the paint can do to create the illusion of luminosity.”

What, therefore, are those bluish lights which stipple his rendering of Newcastle?

Here it helps to know something of Newcastle’s history. A coal town, it grew rich in the 19th century on its mines, or, rather, some of its citizenry grew rich on the gruelling work of generations of miners. A proud city, it found itself fallen into economic disrepair in the 20th century when shipbuilding went elsewhere to cheaper yards abroad. This was the Newcastle that Sting grew up in when he was still a young jazz-loving musician named Gordon Sumner.

Of the most original impulse for the painting, Sting says, “I suppose it was my album, *The Soul Cages*, that took its inspiration from my home town, Newcastle. It’s an interesting place on many levels, visually, historically and, for me, spiritually. I encouraged Stephen to visit, knowing that he would find it stimulating.”

There are certainly clues there in the 1991 album. But there’s another lyric that places us even closer to Hannock’s purpose, and Sting’s, from “We Work the Black Seam” on the musician’s first



Feast of Stephen

More of the artist’s work, including studies for Newcastle, can be found in *Stephen Hannock* (Hudson Hills Press).

solo album. “Our blood has stained the coal,” Sting sings in this brooding treatment over its insistent percussive beat. “We work the black seam together.”

What Hannock is doing, as perhaps only painters can, is eliding yesterday with today, the past with the present. He explains of the smaller bluish lights in the foreground near the river: “I’ve taken the closed shipyards and represented them not so much with

images of the deserted docks and burned-out or broken-down slag heaps of iron. The history is celebrated by representing these yards as glowing villages.

“And that luminosity creates a real wonder,” he continues, “almost like there are these magic villages that wind their way down the Tyne. And in concert with that are the closed coal mines. I actually went to the library of records in Newcastle and looked up the different configurations and different generations of coal mines and found a pattern that was most conducive to what I want to do in this painting. And each of the now-closed coal mines is represented with a starburst blue, glowing image. So in fact we have the history of the coal industry and the shipbuilding industry celebrated for its history rather than for its realistic presence.”

These are better times in Newcastle, which is seeing what is locally described as a “regeneration through culture.” *Northern City Renaissance, Newcastle, England* will hang in the Laing Art Gallery through the autumn and then part of the winter, then perhaps move to London. By then Hannock will have moved on to other canvases to satisfy the lengthy list of admiring and affluent collectors who crave his work and will pay into six figures for it. But he will have his friend’s gratitude as well as, very likely, the city’s.

“There is an enormous amount of detailed research evident in this painting,” says Sting. “On the one side it is a straightforward landscape, but closer attention reveals layer upon layer of information, stories, myth and memory. He has managed to capture the defining spirit of the place where I grew up, that is also the landscape of my dreams.”

Duncan Christy is the editorial director of Four Seasons Magazine.