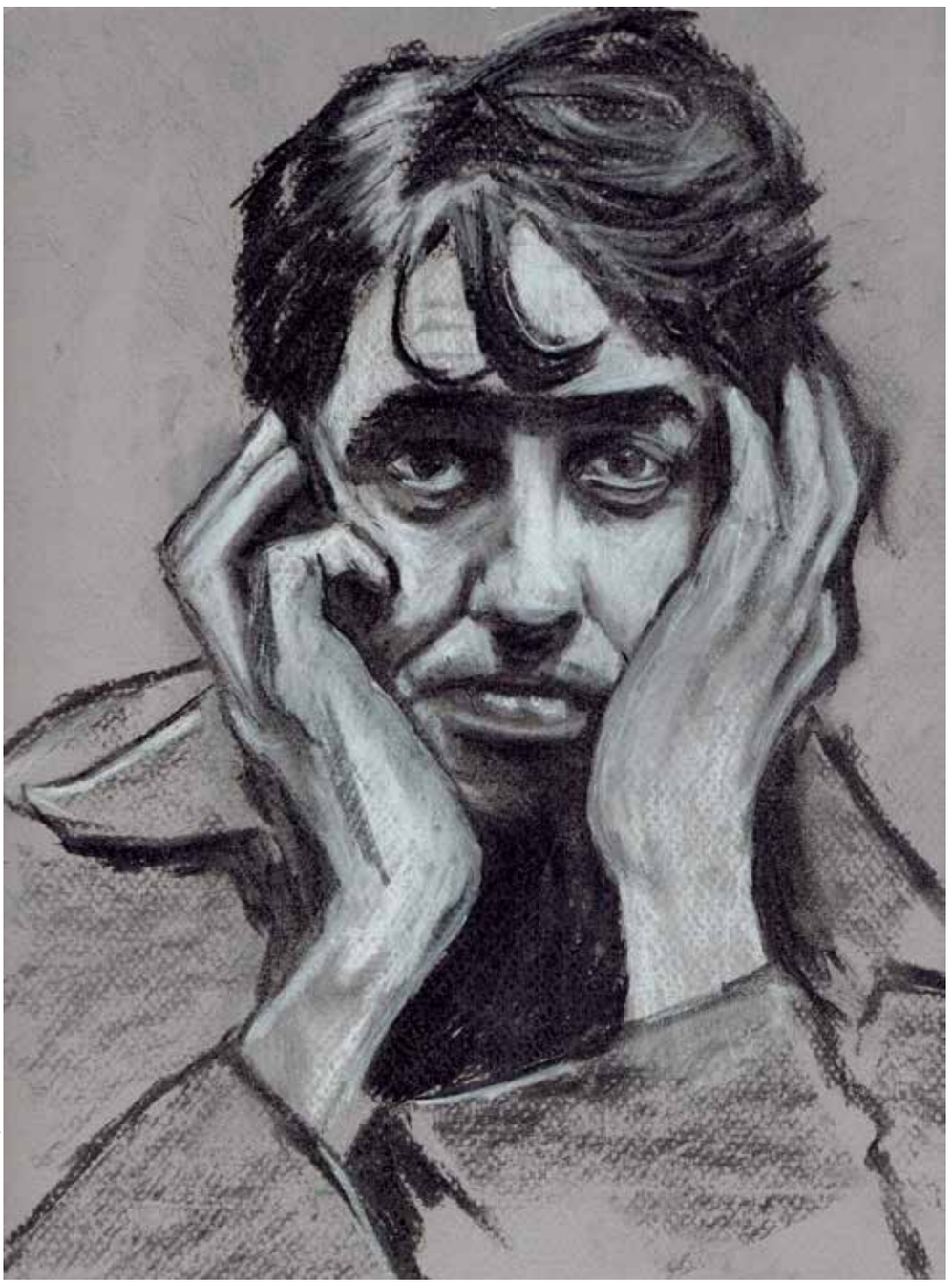


BRUSH WITH *success*

MARK GATISS has conquered stage and screen, but painting is his passion. **SALLY HALES** finds out why art holds such allure



ALL ARTWORKS MARK GATISS/PHOTO: ELVIND HANSEN

LEFT *John Minton*, charcoal on paper, dimensions unknown

How do curious, creative people quiet their minds when it's time to recharge? We asked Mark Gatiss. The County Durham-born actor is also a screenwriter, producer, comedian, novelist and director. In the past six months alone, he's completed an almost 50-date tour with his era-defining comedy troupe, *The League of Gentlemen*, played the lead in a revival of Alan Bennett's *The Madness of King George* to critical acclaim, and written and directed a ghost story for TV, *The Dead Room*, set to air on BBC Four this Christmas. He is the definition of a polymath, so his answer should be revealing.

When Mark is in need of rest, he paints. His desire to understand the process is palpable, but practising art is about more than adding another string to his professional bow. "I find it honestly and genuinely relaxing," he says. "It uses a different part of my head. Time flies and I find it very restful. There are days when I've got a creative itch, and I find it's the best way to fulfil it."

> "I can't stop painting. It has honestly changed my life"

The actor has always appreciated art and enjoyed creating. "I have drawn since I was little," he says, "but I dabbled. I did O-level and A-level art, and I used to do a lot of cartoons. I was obsessed with Aubrey Beardsley as a teenager, with line and precision." At the time, he found painting too messy and imprecise. "I remember it being challenging," he adds, "but, when I think about it now, what we were working with was virtually poster paint. I could never get on with it. I was trying to draw with paint." Then, like so many others, he stopped, art taking a back seat to the business of life. But, in 1998, the urge suddenly resurfaced. "I just thought, 'I want to do this,'" he explains. Mark bought himself some oil paints and discovered not only his latent ability but a new passion.

A PASSION FOR PAINT

Over the past year, this new love for putting brush to canvas has burgeoned into an obsession. "I can't stop doing it," he enthuses. "It has honestly changed my life. I slightly regret that I have wasted a lot of time but, at the same time, it's great. It's simultaneously reconnecting to an old passion and finding a new one."

Keen to improve his technique, Mark started taking classes at the Cass Art store near his London home. Regular lessons in a supportive atmosphere sparked real >



ABOVE
Pomegranates, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown

> **"I just want to try to improve and learn from other people"**

progress, bolstered by his wonderfully open and unprecious attitude towards learning. When he's not at a class, he voraciously reads books and watches online tutorials. "I'm trying to learn to do it much more instinctively, so I rarely do any preparatory sketches," he explains. "I just want to get on with it. I like that about oil painting. You go through the process of thinking, 'this looks awful'. And then you put another layer on and go, 'oh that looks all right'. Then, suddenly, it's there. I like the speed of it."

Sometimes he makes two paintings a day, usually painting portraits and still lifes *alla prima* in oil, happily throwing away anything that's not working and giving more successful works to friends. And, while he's making great strides in painting in oil, he's also enjoying some adventures with new media. "Going back to drawing with charcoal has been a huge discovery," he reveals. "I started this mass-drawing technique, which is amazing. It's mostly drawing with the rubber – rubbing things out – and, suddenly, it's there with the little white highlights."

Pen and ink also piqued his interest when he created a drawing of *The Madness of King George* cast to auction in aid of a youth theatre charity. "I haven't drawn in pen and ink since I was a teenager," he explains. "I loved it. I was deliberately doing it in the style of James Gillray because it's George III and trying to remember about crosshatching. Using coloured inks was extraordinary. I did everyone's faces and they were too pink, so I got some white ink and went over. It's actually like oil painting: it does layer, so you can leave little highlights."

Working plein-air intrigues him, too. "I'm trying to get over being afraid to sketch in public. That is a big thing," he says. "I am going to get a travelling easel. I want to get one with proper legs so that I can do it. I love the idea of just going somewhere and sitting out in the rain."

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Although Mark's not wedded to specific brands or tools, he's found the plethora of materials on the market a joyful part of the learning process. "It's slightly fetishistic," he says. "Going to Cass Art for new stuff is exciting." He's partial, too, to the aesthetic charms of Bloomsbury's beautiful L Cornelissen & Son, a historic art supplies shop where rows of jars of beautifully coloured pigments line the walls. "It's like going to church. It's extraordinary. It's the way it's meant to be. I'd go there just to inhale."

But he has learned an invaluable lesson about materials from his hero, John Minton, about whom he made a TV documentary recently. Mark always opts for good-quality paper above anything else. "Minton used to use anything and, as a result, even though there are so many of his drawings around, they're often on very poor-quality paper," he adds. "It's very distressing."

Offers of exhibitions have inevitably arrived but, so far, he's batted them away, preferring to wait until he feels more confident. "I'd love to," he says. "I'd have to feel like they were the right [paintings]. If I had a dozen that I thought were ok, I would certainly think about it." But, for now, he just wants to paint. "Sometimes, it's all I want to do," he muses. "I want to have at least a month, maybe two, of doing nothing but painting and just try to improve and learn from other people."

For a man with as curious and creative a mind as Mark Gatiss, it surely won't be long until he's out painting his heroes. But, in the mean time, you just might spot him perched behind a travelling easel on a drizzly London day, dabbing away at a canvas, looking rested and replenished.

You can see more of Mark's art on his Instagram @drphibes71. *The Dead Room* aired on BBC Four on Christmas Eve and will be available on iPlayer over the festive period. www.bbc.co.uk

•Turn the page to find out how you can win an artwork by Mark Gatiss in our charity auction. >

MARK'S FAVOURITE ARTISTS



PICTURES NOW / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925)

The premiere portraitist of his age, Sargent was famed for his oil paintings of high society, but his natural ability meant he also excelled as a watercolourist. Mark loves *Dr Pozzi at Home*.

LEFT John Singer Sargent, *Dr Pozzi at Home*, oil on canvas, 201.6x102.2cm



MUSEO SOROLLA, MADRID

ABOVE Joaquín Sorolla, *The Pink Robe*, 1916, oil on canvas, 208x126.5cm

Joaquín Sorolla (1863-1923)

One of history's greatest artists, Sorolla worked in an Impressionist style. Exhibitions of his work are always popular but he's less well known to the public outside his native Spain. "The Spanish Sargent!" Mark enthuses. "I love those. The beach pictures are just breathtaking." *Sorolla: Spanish Master of Light* is at the National Gallery, London WC2N, from 18 March to 7 July. www.nationalgallery.org.uk

John Minton (1917-1957)

Mark loves the style and inherent sadness of the artist's work, which he first saw at the National Portrait Gallery as a teenager. "I'd like spend a day with John Minton just to cheer him up," Mark jokes, "give him a kiss and stop him from killing himself." You can see John Minton's self-portrait, *John Minton*, at the National Portrait Gallery, London WC2H. www.npg.org.uk

ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART



ABOVE John Minton, *John Minton*, c.1953, oil on canvas, 35.6x25.4cm

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1654 or later)

The Italian Baroque artist is today considered one of the most accomplished painters of her generation. She specialised in strong, suffering women from mythology. "I'm so interested in her," says Mark. "Something's shifted in terms of the fact that there used to be this idea that music and painting were the two disciplines where there had never been top-rank female. It's obviously not true. She's something else. What a story she has." The National Gallery, London WC2H, has acquired Gentileschi's *Self Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, which is now on display. www.nationalgallery.org.uk

BELOW Artemisia Gentileschi, *Self Portrait as Saint Catherine of Alexandria*, about 1615-17, oil on canvas, 71.5x71cm



THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON



ARTEFACT / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Frank Brangwyn (1867-1956)

The Anglo-Welsh artist, painter, watercolourist, engraver, illustrator and progressive designer was president of the Royal Academy of Arts. "I love his pictures," says Mark. "They are very unusual and beautiful. He did graphically amazing etchings and worked with lots of colour."

ABOVE Frank Brangwyn, *Village Procession*, unknown media, 71.1x56.8cm

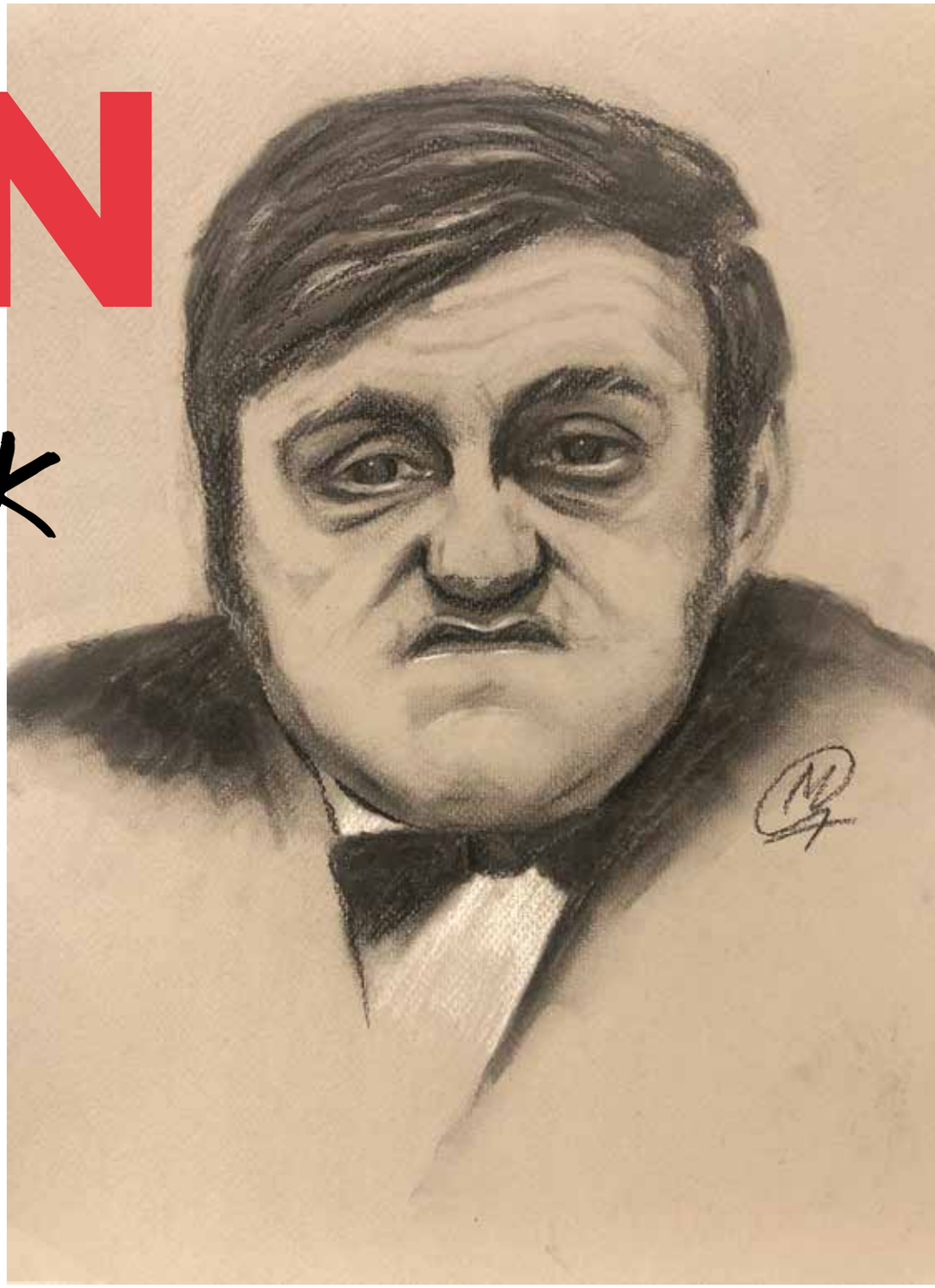
WIN THIS ARTWORK

To celebrate our 400th issue, we're auctioning a MARK GATISS charcoal work in aid of CHILDREN & THE ARTS

Mark has kindly donated a charming charcoal drawing of his comedy hero, Les Dawson – and you can be its proud owner. Just visit the competitions section of our website after 2 January to find out how you can bid in the auction. Proceeds will go to a wonderful cause – Children & the Arts, a national children's charity tackling inequality through sustained arts experiences. It believes that every child has the right to a rich and inspiring creative education and that no pupil's experiences should be limited by the circumstances of their birth.

Founded by HRH The Prince of Wales, Children & the Arts works with arts venues across the UK to reach children in communities and in hospices for whom the chances to enjoy creative and cultural experiences are limited.

www.artistsandillustrators.co.uk/competitions; www.childrenandarts.org.uk



ABOVE Mark Gatiss, *Les Dawson*, charcoal on paper, 35x35cm



TERMS & CONDITIONS

The auction will open at noon 2 January 2019 and run for one month. No correspondence regarding bids will be entered into.

For any other information, contact info@artistsandillustrators.co.uk

CHILDREN & THE ARTS