

Still Lives *and* Moving Pictures

A chance meeting saw artist **James Gemmill** get his break on Hollywood sets but it is his dedication to 12-hour days that have kept him there. “It’s damned hard work,” he tells Pamela Spencer

A chance meeting at a fishing lodge in Idaho during the recessionary 1990s gave American-born artist James Gemmill the opportunity to become a scenic artist. “A friend invited me to the lodge one Christmas and introduced me to two important people in the film world and they suggested I apply my skills in the film industry,” he explains. At the time, he was represented by a gallery in Boston but, during the crunch, large corporations and banks had stopped buying paintings. Gemmill’s promising career prospects vanished. The film industry proved an unlikely break: his first project was the phenomenally successful *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.

Scenic art involves the use of the entire range of Gemmill’s skills because the art required for films can be immensely diverse – the period could be anything from futuristic to mediaeval. “The artistic skill lies in knowing the quality of light, and in being able to recognise and paint the difference between local colour and atmospheric colour,” he says.

The work may also involve replicating actual paintings and textural finishes such as wood grain and marbling. Credited as “Head Scenic Artist”, Gemmill will start all the paintings himself, but if the schedule gets too tight he has up to three people he can bring in whom he knows will paint in similar styles that will “gel” with his own.

“I am responsible for the final look of everything and there must be no deviation of style between the artists. There was no way I could have finished a project like *The Da Vinci Code* by myself because it involved producing 165 paintings plus the views out of windows. It was eight months of solid work with 12 hour days,” explains Gemmill. The long working days also have strict time frames because filming could start by ‘next Tuesday,’ so all work has to be completed in that time. “There is no leeway,” he says.

When working on set, he will sometimes glimpse the film’s stars but he doesn’t get involved with them. “I’m on set sometimes weeks and months before the actors. By the time they arrive on that set I’ve moved to another set. I really only get involved when I’m asked to do specific portraits of actors and actresses.”

He feels that working on films has taught him to paint quicker. “In a sense, working on films made me a better painter because anyone who paints every single day and has to produce a huge variety of paintings can only improve.”



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ABOVE James on location in the African desert, painting plywood scenery for 1999’s *Star Wars* – *Episode 1: The Phantom Menace*. Photos courtesy of Ray Barrett **LEFT** *Battersea Bridge, London*, oil on canvas, 59x63cm





ABOVE Tom Hanks and Audrey Tautou stand in front of James Gemmill's version of the *Mona Lisa* in 2006's *The Da Vinci Code*.

© 2006 Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved. *Angels & Demons* is out on DVD and Blu-ray on 14 September, courtesy of Sony Pictures Home Entertainment. *The Da Vinci Code* is out on DVD and Blu-ray now **INSET** Gemmill at work on the copy of *Da Vinci's Mona Lisa*

The Belgravia Gallery's Anna Hunter is looking forward to exhibiting the results in September when she shows Gemmill's paintings. "For clients to be able to acquire a James Gemmill from his own heart rather than something commissioned by a film director will be of significant interest," she says.


Did Gemmill feel any diminishment of his own creativity when painting to someone else's spec? "No, because what I am required to paint on set appeals to my creativity anyway," he says. "In a studio I see effects that I find interesting – darkrooms with shafts of light and sets with people walking around; odd things one wouldn't normally see."

On set, Gemmill will use the best possible oil and acrylic paints, which tend to be pure pigments. He works with a limited palette of just eight or nine colours, bought usually from Robert Harding. When the request is for *trompe l'oeil* scenic effects, Gemmill feels the paint used is not as important as the tools, such as a snap line, straight edge and levelling bubble.

"With paints I can make anything look like anything. I could use child's paint and make it look like oil paint, but if someone says 'paint a doorway,' I

have to know how that doorway is built and the thickness of the door. I could just copy the lights and darks, but that understanding is the difference between believability and non-believability."

Gemmill believes a good grasp of the basics is essential for a newcomer to scenic art. "The best way into this business is to know how to paint the human form. I had a very formal art teaching background, painting from cadavers. I don't know of any UK school of painting that gives this formal training today, with the exception perhaps of the Slade School of Fine Art, but there are still formal art schools in the States that adopt the formal training approach."

He believes there is no such thing as inspiration, either. "It's just damned hard work. Sometimes it would be so easy to say 'I don't feel like painting today', and let it go. What then happens is that painting merely becomes a hobby. If you are going to be a professional painter, you just have to get on and do it – there's no easy way." 

James Gemmill was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1954 and completed an MFA in Drawing/Painting from Boston University, where he earned a Fulbright Hays scholarship to the Royal College of Art. Since the early 1990s, Gemmill has worked as a scenic artist on a number of films including *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *The Da Vinci Code* and *Atonement*. His next exhibition will take place at Belgravia Gallery, London, in September. (020) 7495 1010; www.belgraviagallery.com