

A study of the studiolo

MARTIN KEMP

In March 2015 the British Academy will be taking delivery of a new addition to its collection of artworks adorning the walls of 10-11 Carlton House Terrace. The artist Patrick Hughes is producing for the Academy a version of his recent work *A Study of the Studiolo*. Professor Martin Kemp FBA, a member of the Academy's Pictures Committee, discusses the artist and the work.

The visual paradoxes of Patrick Hughes

Patrick Hughes is a magician of paradoxical space. In this he stands in a long tradition, dating back to the earliest spatial illusions in ancient painting, and more obviously in Renaissance art. His uncanny works relate historically to types of historical perspective that are painted or sculpted on inclined planes – those that are not perpendicular to our line of sight. Particularly relevant is perspectival stage design in the Renaissance and Baroque. This scenographic technique is exemplified in enduring form in the Teatro Olimpico at Vicenza by Andrea Palladio and Vincenzo Scamozzi, where short, tapering corridors of space flanked by sculpted architecture convince us that we are looking down deep streets.

We can also relate what Hughes is doing to anamorphic illusions, those 'trick' paintings that have to be viewed from an acute angle for the image to become coherent. The distorted skull smeared across the tiled floor in Holbein's *Ambassadors* in the National Gallery is an anamorphosis. We can also look at comparable effects in the National Gallery's intricate perspective box by the Dutch master of illusion, Samuel van Hoogstraten.

Hughes began as a painter of ironic visual paradoxes in the tradition of Surrealism. In one painting, a very definite, flat rainbow arches parabolically through the bars of a prison cell, becoming abruptly drained of its colour before plunging to the floor. In 1964 he constructed a rectangular relief in the form of a shallow box in which the four sides converge towards the front plane. The result is a shallow truncated pyramid. He then painted the five planes of the relief according to

orthodox linear perspective, directly contradicting their actual orientation – resulting in what he called a *Sticking Out Room*. Viewed from the side, the actual form of the relief is apparent. From the front it looks like a standard perspectival view of the interior of a rectangular room. This teasing piece of pictorial wit laid the foundations for what has become his characteristic genre, painted reliefs that exploit what he calls 'reverse perspective'.

In subsequent works, the single truncated pyramid of the *Sticking Out Room* was multiplied laterally to create as many as six separate cells or 'corridors' of perspectival space, each of which is painted in perspective in such a way that the illusionistic recessions assertively contradict surfaces that actually protrude. As we move in front of the constructions, the spaces slip, slide and lurch bewilderingly. He is creating a kind of kinetic art in which the spectator triggers the motion. Unsurprisingly his magic has attracted much attention from scientists involved in visual perception and cognition.

The way reverse perspective is created and operates is difficult to describe in words, and eludes flat photography. A video on Hughes's website helps greatly.¹

His subject matter – too often neglected in commentaries on his art – ranges across elaborate compounds of buildings and landscapes to radiant interiors inhabited by diverse objects. His repertoire includes recurrent motifs: densely shelved and stacked books, the titles of which underscore his wide reading in visual art and perception; many appropriated works of modern and historical art that dance to his geometrical tune; and angled doors that stand illogically in front of distant landscapes and seascapes. The tone is that of a highly personal Surrealism with a smile.

Studiolo

Fellows, staff and visitors to the British Academy can now see for themselves. He has specifically made for the Academy a version of a recent reverse perspective construction based on the *intarsia studiolo* created around 1480 for the Ducal Palace in Gubbio. This is the second

1. www.patrickhughes.co.uk/film.html



Patrick Hughes, *A Study of the Studiolo* (2013), oil on board construction, 98 × 278 × 24 cm. To mark Hughes' 75th birthday, in 2014 the Flowers Gallery in London hosted an exhibition of his 'reverspective' works – including this one – and published *A New Perspective: Patrick Hughes*, which included essays by Dawn Adès FBA and Martin Kemp FBA. The British Academy's version of this work will show four cupboards rather than five, so that it fits the intended space in the Academy's waiting room.

such chamber decorated in inlaid wood for Duke Federigo da Montefeltro, following the more famous one in Urbino. The Gubbio *studiolo* has now been reconstructed in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, using the original panelling from the palace. Federigo was the dedicatee of Piero della Francesca's treatise on the perspective of pictures. The Duke clearly appreciated the new 'science' of painting and how it comprised a major factor in the cerebral status of the visual arts.

The illusions in inlaid wood run across all four walls of the small private study in Gubbio, including the surfaces that lead into the recessed door and window. From the prime viewing location, or from a range of positions not too far from this point, we see a continuous tier of cupboards above a low wooden bench. The angled doors, partly open, allow us to peer into cupboards containing man-made objects that are represented in compelling perspective and ludicly modelled in light and shade. We see instruments of mensuration – compasses, set-square and quadrant – together with refined instruments

of musical harmony, most notably a lute and harp. An armillary sphere stands as a mathematical model for the cosmos. The military life and drum, on the bottom shelf below a large dagger, reminds us of the Duke's military prowess, while a hanging *scopetta* (short brush) is a political emblem that refers to his cleansing of his territories. The pen case, inkwell and plentiful books tell of his more learned pursuits and allude to his notable library.

Hughes works his own virtuoso variation on the Gubbio cupboards, creating a relief that depicts a set of receding compartments divided by shelves. But, as we might guess, the rear planes of the cupboards, seemingly furthest from us, are actually painted on the surfaces nearest us. As we move laterally, the spaces seem to pursue us in a mesmerising manner. Hughes is creating a unique kind of dynamic and time-based perspective that irresistibly draws each individual viewer into the illusion. We may imagine that Duke Federigo would have been as entranced as we are.

