



Charlotte Sorapure

# The mystery within

Oliver Lange examines the eerie and enigmatic paintings of Charlotte Sorapure



*Jacob's Ladder*, oil on linen, 36×48in (91.5×122cm)



*The Roost (Cordoba)*, oil on linen  
39×19¾in (99×50cm)

Whether inspired by actual places, memories, imagination or myths, Charlotte Sorapure's beautifully crafted paintings are rich in mood, intrigue and narrative – a narrative that hints at a kind of poetic awareness rather than any literal story. Equally, her work is defined by a clear understanding and concern for the interrelation of forms and space, a strong interest in composition, organisation and drawing. 'By developing an understanding of how parts relate to the whole, it is possible to tackle any theme or subject, observed or imagined,' she says.

Working in this way, and with the aim of giving each idea optimum expression, Charlotte will move, distort, crop, emphasise or diminish elements as necessary. In her paintings buildings, trees and other inanimate objects and places can take on anthropomorphic characteristics. They are never just separate entities, but like silent characters they have a role to play: they establish a series of relationships that evokes a particular mood.

'These elements are carefully placed in the composition and related to all the other parts of the painting,' Charlotte





explains. 'Some need to be brought forward, others have a more subsidiary role, but I am always trying to set up a "conversation". And whether working directly from life or from imagination, I am constantly searching for the extraordinary or the significant in the ordinary.

'Chairs have always interested me as a subject. Not only do they often have a character and stance of their own, but they imply the sitter or a human presence, without anyone being there. In my painting *Lights and Shadows* (page 15), other components, such as the small lay-figure running across the mantelpiece or the portrait looking out at the viewer, help to emphasise this feeling. A painting of a still life or interior begins with how carefully you set up the subject. The more relationships and connections you see before you put paint to canvas, the stronger the image will be.'

While Charlotte's style of work is distinctly her own, she acknowledges that there are many artists whose work has, in some respect, been inspirational and influential. These include Stanley Spencer, Richard Eurich, Zurbaran, Botticelli and other Renaissance painters,

such as Masolino, Carpaccio and Ghirlandaio. She also has a strong interest in the geometric patterns and designs of Islamic art, as well as both Persian and Indian miniatures.

▲ **Wedding Party**, oil on linen, 24×30in (61×76cm)

▼ **Hide and Seek**, oil on linen, 24×30in (61×76cm)





## MASTERCLASS



**Graffiti Cleaners**, oil on linen, 24×36¼in (61×92cm)



**An Evening Hymn**, oil on gesso panel, 37×26in (94×66cm)

### Colour and mood

Whatever the subject, Charlotte usually begins by making preparatory compositional studies, looking at the placement and relationship of intervals, shapes and rhythms. Colour is another factor to be considered, and even when working from life she will extrapolate from what is seen, conscious of the fact that different tonal schemes or colour themes evoke different moods.

‘Even what appears to be spontaneous or unexpected is usually the outcome of careful consideration,’ she explains. ‘I prize clarity and the power of simplicity, conscious of the viewer in the sense of trying to communicate, but without pandering to expectation. It is always better to leave the audience pondering the subtleties and ambiguities of the subject. The image should leave an impression that lasts well beyond the few moments spent in front of the painting.’

Charlotte works in a variety of media, although chiefly in oil paint. Due to the extraordinary versatility of oil paint, amendments and alterations can be made indefinitely, without any time constraints, allowing greater freedom to consider one’s thoughts and actions. Her full colour palette is titanium white, ivory or lamp black, cadmium yellow, lemon yellow, cadmium red, rose madder, French ultramarine, cobalt blue, viridian and emerald green. She likes to have two of every colour – one warmer, one cooler.

Sometimes she also includes some earth colours, which she selects from raw umber, burnt umber, yellow ochre, raw sienna, burnt sienna, light red or Indian red. However, she usually limits the palette to suit the requirements of the subject, ‘to play in different keys as the subject demands, and so produce a stronger flavour’.

### Supports

Increasingly, for the smaller paintings, Charlotte prefers to work on panels covered with a fine grade linen surface. But here again her choice is influenced by the particular effect and outcome she has in mind for the subject. As she explains: ‘Canvas and linen are much more forgiving, sensuous surfaces, and softer in terms of drawing. Gesso, on the other hand, is a hard, plaster surface and much more absorbent and unyielding. Every subtlety and effect has to be hard won with gesso, whereas the flexibility and texture of linen or canvas tends to work with you. Where draughtsmanship is paramount, a harder surface like gesso panel is preferable, but where painterly effects are wanted, canvas is more amenable.’



The support is prepared with a mid-toned ground to eliminate all the white surface. This enables her to relate tonal values right from the start. Next, she makes a drawing on the toned surface to establish the main elements of the composition, using paint or charcoal. Both media are easy to rub out and rework if necessary.

## Resolving ideas

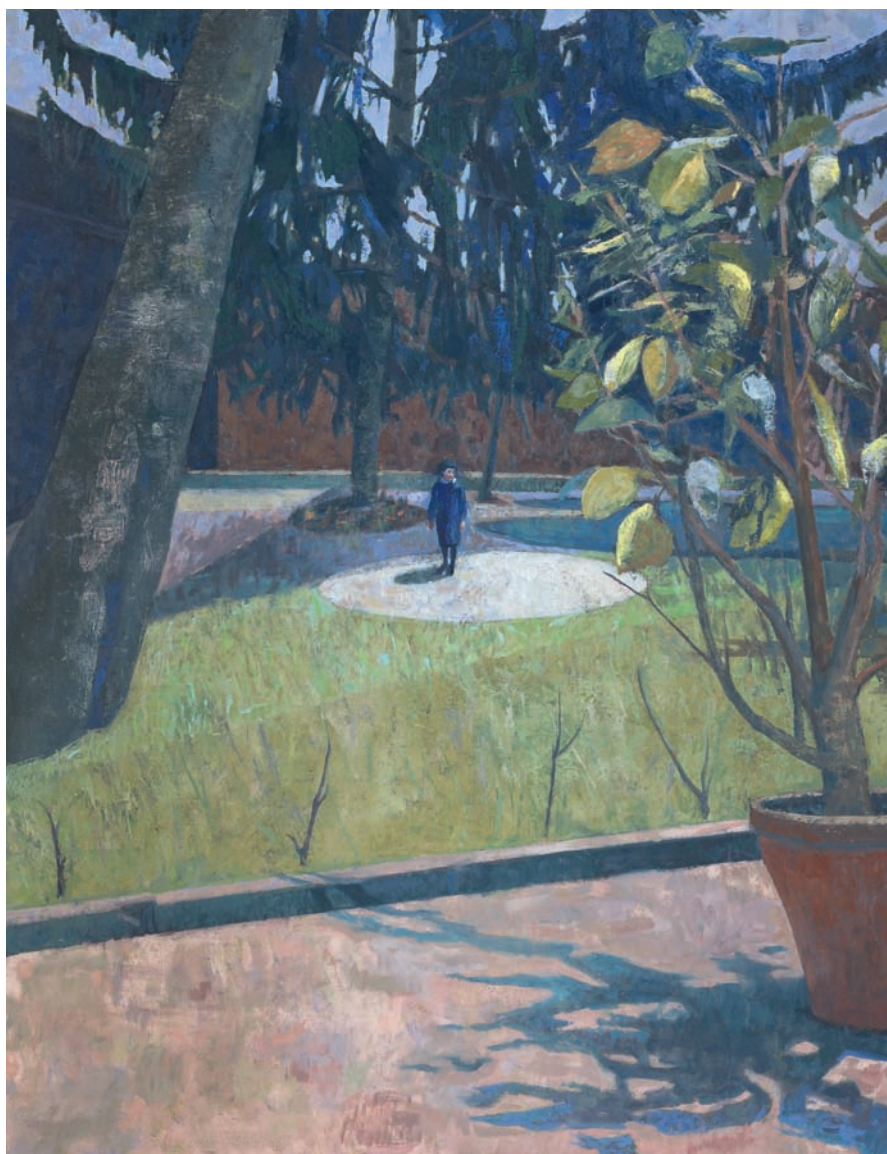
Then, in a single session, having mixed appropriate colours, she blocks in everything. 'I find it important to get the initial statement down in one go, as it is the best way to assess the tonal and compositional whole,' she says. 'Then, it is best to wait a few days for the paint to dry and also to reflect and mull over what has been done so far.'

'From there on, in practical terms, it is a (sometimes agonising!) process of adjusting, refining, adding or eliminating until the painting is saying what needs to be said. The difficulty is not just remaining

in contact with the initial feeling or idea throughout this process, but also to manipulate the forms and structures so that they give the idea or feeling full expression. Painting is never easy, and the reality often falls short of one's hopes and aspirations. As an image progresses and needs to be fixed, the possibilities and avenues narrow and the quality of decision-making becomes increasingly demanding.'

Charlotte finds it helpful and stimulating to have several paintings in progress at the same time. 'It is necessary to have a break from one image, as it can easily become stale,' she explains, 'then you can lose the objectivity needed to pull something through. Also, paintings can feed off one another: it can help to switch from an observed to an invented image. The objectivity of one and the lyricism of the other remind you that good paintings need to have both those qualities.'

'It is not unusual for me to go back to a



**Encounter**, oil on linen, 36×28in (91.5×71cm)



**Lights and Shadows**, oil on linen, 28½×22½in (72×57cm)

painting after it is supposedly finished, seeing a problem that was not obvious before, but has become so with the objectivity and distance of time. A painting is finished when one cannot find any more faults with it...in other words, hardly ever!

For Charlotte: 'A successful painting is one that seems to possess an unexpected inevitability. It is a painting in which all the elements have found their natural place in the scheme, yet the image is in no way predictable. A successful painting should be bold and decisive in design, it should read from a distance, yet also be subtle and deeply mysterious.'

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### Charlotte Sorapure

studied at Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Art and Technology, graduating with a BA (Hons) Fine Art, 1991, and the Royal Academy of Arts, for the Post Graduate Diploma in Painting, 1995. Since graduating, her work has been exhibited widely, including most recently at Messum's Gallery, London; Mall Galleries, London; Holburne Museum, Bath; University of Kentucky, Lexington, USA; and the Royal West of England Academy. Charlotte has won a number of awards for her work, including the Odin Painting Prize, Royal West of England Academy; Bill Patterson Memorial Award and Cecil Joseph Prize, New English Art Club; and the Elizabeth Greenshield Foundation Grant (twice awarded). She is an elected member of the New English Art Club.

For additional information, view:  
[www.charlottesorapure.co.uk](http://www.charlottesorapure.co.uk);  
[www.messums.com](http://www.messums.com).