



# A FRESH CANVAS

Building a new house in the Scottish Borders enabled artist Sue Phipps to capture the best light for painting, and add character with architectural details and her curiosities

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**F**ree range dogs' is the sign that greets visitors to Sue and Jeremy Phipps' house, located in a sheltered valley in the Scottish Borders. Hens peck about the garden, not bothered by the surge of friendly Jack Russell terriers and lurchers. The warm welcome might just as likely be from their grandchildren, or triggered by the life-size jockey cut out in 2D that's holding a tray in the hall. Inside the house, there is often a horse stabled in the studio – not a real one, but a work in progress of one of the world-famous racehorses and steeplechasers painted by Sue, under her professional name Susan Crawford.

Jeremy and Sue moved to the Borders from Wiltshire four years ago. They rebuilt the house over the foundations of a tumbledown cottage, slightly shifting and widening the footprint to angle the house towards the northern light – so important for artists.

'We planned the house together, then Jeremy drew up plans on graph paper with a pencil and a ruler before we got the architectural drawings,' Sue says. In two stages, they built a small two-bedroom house and then added another wing with more bedrooms and bathrooms, and a spectacular studio with high ceilings.

Bringing grace and charm to a newbuild was achieved largely with architectural details made from Sue's collection of old wooden pieces. The mellow colour scheme used throughout the house was inspired by her favourite shade of oil paint – Winsor & Newton's 'Burnt Sienna'. She describes the deep-red, lime-washed walls in the dining room as 'almost brick red with a bit of umber', while the open-plan kitchen

OPPOSITE Set in the green landscape of the Scottish Borders, the new house was built over the foundations of a derelict cottage four years ago. THIS PAGE The open-plan kitchen is painted in a wheat yellow that matches the burr-oak table designed by Sue and Jeremy's son, Jake



diner is painted wheat yellow, matching the golden glow of the cat's paw burr-oak table by her son, the designer Jake Phipps. Dove grey and turquoise accents on blinds, soft furnishings and the mounts of many paintings bring to life these sunny shades. Upstairs, the bedroom walls are painted in silvery-grey 'Elephant's Breath' from Farrow & Ball. In her studio, 'Thames Mud' from Paint Library is the background to classical friezes of spirited horses charging across the walls.

Sue's studio is a place of curiosities, filled with what she calls 'bits and pieces' – all the things I love'. Horses fly, rear, prance or simply stand about looking beautiful in paintings and bronzes. There is a big, blanketed bed for dogs, naturally dyed rugs on the oak floorboards and an easel that once belonged to Joshua Reynolds. There are books everywhere – on Stubbs, Munnings, Degas, Agasse, Géricault, Sargent and John – as well as a volume of early Derby winners. A Mongolian saddle lined with shagreen is a prized possession. There is an oil painting of sheep with startled, inquisitive expressions – Sue has captured exactly the movement as they step out, the grass in the field swaying in a non-existent wind. A painting of the Sultan of Oman, where the Phipps lived for four years, is on another easel. 'I occasionally paint people but my daughter Jemma is better,' she says modestly, as she has painted both the Queen and the Queen Mother.

There are the early drawings she made at the Studio Simi in Florence, where she studied classical drawing between 1965 and 1967. She taught herself to paint later, going to the Tate to look carefully at Stubbs'

technique of glazing. 'I was always told by tutors that I went deeper into detail, but it suits my kind of work on racehorses,' she says. Her painting of Frankel, 'a rich red bay, with great strength in his hindquarters', commissioned by his breeder and owner Prince Khalid Abdullah, is testament to that. Sue keeps all her old palettes and paintbrushes, acquired over the past 50 years – 'they are like old friends' – and her notebooks filled with sketches and photographs.

'I look at the ways the ears are set, and at the muscles,' she says of painting horses. 'Most importantly, I look straight into the eye. I write down the colours and pray for sun as it makes all the muscles gleam. A dull day equals a dull, flat coat.' Such powers of observation and the skill to translate them on to canvas make Susan Crawford a contender for the title of the twenty-first-century Stubbs.

Mixing a dash of 'Burnt Umber' into 'Naples Yellow', the colour loved by Old Masters, Sue has combined her painterly palette and her eye for detail, and mellowed a new house as if it has stood there for centuries □

Susan Crawford: [www.sl Crawford.com](http://www.sl Crawford.com)

OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The drawing room contains an ottoman upholstered by George Smith and antique, lime-washed oak bookcases. Sue's studio. An assortment of Sue's paintbrushes. The landscaping includes a newly dug lake. The dining room is painted in 'Sun Dried Tomato' by Francesca's Paints. THIS PAGE A painting of Frankel, which was commissioned by his owner Prince Khalid Abdullah, sits in the studio

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