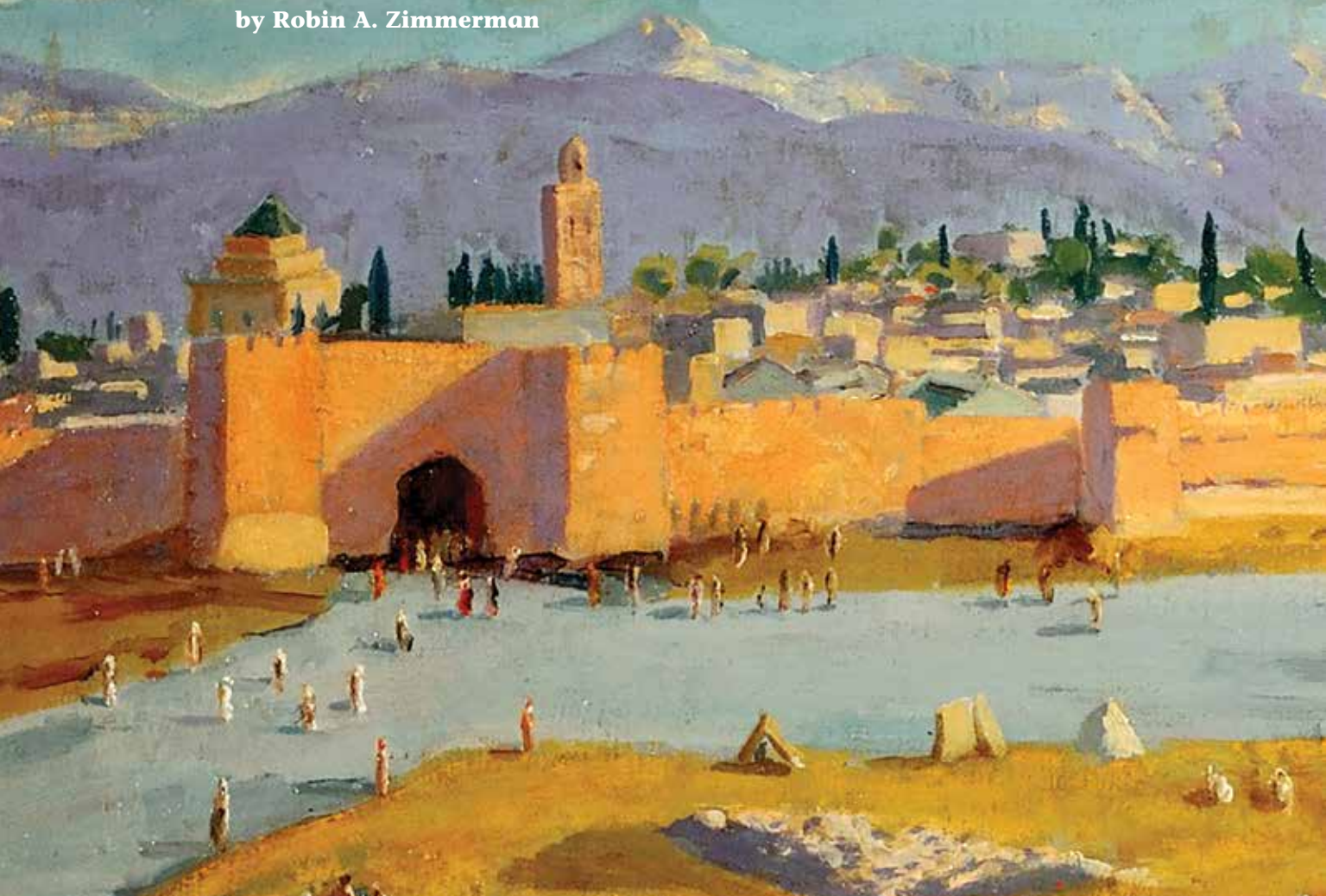


'Joy Ride in Paint Box

by Robin A. Zimmerman



Sir Winston Spencer Churchill was bitten occasionally, not by a pug dog, but by depression—“Black Dog” he called it. During the First World War, his forced resignation as head of the British Royal Navy tormented him. Clementine, his wife, was

concerned. Perhaps a family retreat at Hoe Farm in the quiet English countryside would soothe his most recent “Black Dog” episode.

Outside this charming, rented farmhouse, the garden “gleamed with summer jewellery,” to quote Churchill. There Churchill strolled, head down,

n a
x'



TOWER OF THE KATOUBIA MOSQUE

After a major conference in January 1943, Prime Minister Churchill persuaded U. S. President Franklin Roosevelt to join him at Marrakech in North Africa to witness the glorious “sunset on the snows of the Atlas Mountains.” Mesmerized, Churchill painted “the only picture I ever attempted during the war.” He gave the painting to Roosevelt as a remembrance.

thoughts at that moment. Rather, he took the watercolors and departed. He later opened the paint box and moistened the brush. Swirling it into the color, he dabbed paint onto paper and smiled in delight. The very next day he traded watercolors for oils.

To paint, Churchill would don a white smock and sombrero. The colors were “...delicious to squeeze out,” he recalled. “So very gingerly I mixed a little blue paint on the palette.” He had no sooner made a bean-sized mark on the snow-white canvas when the boisterous sound of a motorcar interrupted him.

Lady Hazel, the talented painter and wife of artist-friend Sir John Lavery, happened by. “Painting!” she said. “But what are you hesitating about? Let me have that brush—the big one.”

Churchill handed her the brush.

“Splash into the turpentine,” he recounted, marveling at Lady Hazel’s actions, “wallop into the blue and the white, frantic flourish on the palette—clean no longer—and then several large, fierce strokes and slashes of blue on an absolutely cowering canvas. Anyone could see that it could not hit back.”

At that moment, “painting,” his daughter Mary wrote, “literally grabbed him.” Churchill later wrote, “The spell was broken.... I seized the largest brush and fell upon my victim with berserk fury. I have never felt any awe of a canvas since.”

until he came upon his sister-in-law Lady Gwendeline at her easel. He watched her deliberate strokes and splashes of color on canvas. Gwendeline saw the glint in his eye. She handed him her young son’s paint box and urged him to paint.

Paint! Churchill had no words to express his

PLUG STREET

Churchill looks out over the battlefield in this genre-painting. War waged below him in the village of Ploegsteert (called “Plug Street” by English soldiers) and distant enemy shells exploded. Wearing his steel helmet, Churchill kept on painting.



There really is nothing like oils.

Churchill took his oil painting lessons seriously, having many mentors along the way to help guide his brush. He frequented Sir John Lavery’s studio, painting alongside his earliest instructor for hours on end. Portrait, genre painting (scenes from everyday life), still life, landscape—he wanted to paint them all!

Trying to paint a picture is...like trying to fight a battle.

By 1916, Churchill rejoined the army and

commanded a battalion near the French/Belgian border. The battlefield became his studio. Amid chaos, he painted several canvases.

I must say I like bright colours.

Following the Great War, Churchill’s family moved to Chartwell Manor outside of London, where his brush captured gentle rolling hills and stunning views. With England’s generous rains, Churchill often stood indoors at his easel. Here in his warm dining room/studio were merriment, satisfaction, and the trials of still-life painting.



1933: Churchill is painting in France. His subject is the scene before him—the Cote d'Azur (better known as the French Riviera).

This is the last picture we shall paint in peace for a very long time.

Churchill produced around half of his paintings during the decade leading up to the Second World War. He favored landscapes during this time. His brush seized worldwide scenes from the Scottish Highlands to the plantations of South Carolina. He even sketched atop a camel, as he circled the Egyptian Sphinx and pyramids, for his painting gear was always within reach.

Eight months after war was declared, Churchill was elected prime minister. Duties consumed him, leaving no time for painting.

When I get to heaven, I mean to spend a considerable portion of my first million years in painting.

The Prime Minister claimed his paintings were “too bad to sell and too dear to me to give!” Still,

many found their way into grateful hands, from his bodyguard to Queen Elizabeth II. The Royal Academy of Arts honored his achievement in painting. A work submitted anonymously won first prize in an amateur exhibition, and his book, *Painting as a Pastime*, remains in print.

Churchill painted not for glory, but for pure joy and for calm in his “Black Dog” days. And with every brushstroke, his magic wand helped to create yet another canvas. Each revealed a tiny segment in the intimate life of one of the “world’s greatest statesmen.”

Churchill’s 540 surviving “daubs” reflect the passionate account of what he called a “joy ride in a paint box.”

Freelance writer **Robin A. Zimmerman**, a former teacher and national education consultant, lives in the California Sierra Nevada foothills where she writes about people passionately drawn to the arts.