

## Anne Cotterill



### Nasturtiums in a Blue Jug

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Is orange the colour of autumn? Pumpkins, bonfires, leaves burnt by Keats's "maturing sun": as the days cool, so nature provides warmth in its colours, from deep yellow to the darkest red. At the heart of this palette lies orange, that wild mixture of red and yellow, a colour that somehow manages to be surprising, shocking and comforting all at the same time. Among the most popular of the summer-fading-to-autumn orange flowers is the nasturtium. Straggling and snaking across flower beds and vegetable patches, it offers little pockets of warm sunshine amid the shortening days. Which makes Anne Cotterill's gorgeous *Nasturtiums in a Blue Jug* the perfect flower painting for this time of year.

Anne Cotterill (1934-2010) is among the finest and most interesting of twentieth century British flower painters. She has been described as a "modern traditionalist" which is surely correct. Her work combines the elements of classic continental flower and still life painting but with a free and loose sensibility which feel particularly contemporary. It is a compelling and charming combination.

Anne Cotterill was born in Scotland and trained at the Edinburgh College of Art with Sir William Gillies in the 1950s. By this stage of Gillies's career, his work was influenced by continental colourists such as the Fauvists and Paul Klee. This fascination with colour clearly had an effect on Anne and it deepened when, in 1957, on a travelling scholarship, she came face to face not just with the great European still life tradition of painters such as Chardin but also (then still quite modern) painters like Klimt whose shimmering, vivid, jewel-like colours find a distant, rustic echo in Anne's flower paintings.

And it is the rich colour of the gem-like orange petals in *Nasturtiums in a Blue Jug* that strikes us first. Everything about the work is designed to push out the flowers into our space. The blue of the jug is, of course, complementary to the orange while the grey background draws away from us giving a sense of living, three-dimensionality to the flowers.

This vivid freshness lies at the heart of Anne Cotterill's work. She lived most of her life in rural Somerset and used as her subject flowers from her own garden or local wild flowers. Importantly, she did not make formal arrangements but, as she said, would "place the flowers in their pot the day before I start painting, to allow them to settle. Essentially they arrange themselves and usually when I return the next day they look just right". The containers for the flowers were always simple and rustic; a glass jar, a clay pot or a kitchen jug. Nothing grand or decorative to detract from the flowers. She always used natural light, falling from the left (firmly in the Dutch flower tradition of reading a painting, like a book, from left to right) and we see this clearly here with the reflection of the window on the blue jug. Again, the painting of reflections to enhance flower and still life paintings was an invention of the Dutch Golden Age painters showing the debt that Anne owes to that formidable tradition.

Anne Cotterill painted exclusively in oils: "what I like about this medium are the textures and the glowing colours that can be achieved, the way that you can move the paint about and develop different effects". From this, we can see that she saw her paintings as living things, like the flowers themselves. "All flowers", she said "change to some extent; they never just sit still in the pot". And this sense of life and movement is what makes Anne work so fresh and modern. Flower painting may be a branch of still life or, as the French call it, "nature morte" but there is nothing still or dead about Anne Cotterill's flowers. They are full of life and colour even as nature starts its winter sleep.