

Looking at the intricate detail and the mastery of light and mood in Cooper's work, it's hard to believe he's never taken a single art class. His talent's always been instinctive: as a child he drew caricatures and cartoons, and he went through a phase of painting birds. At about the same time, his uncle introduced him to the sport of fly-fishing and together they traipsed the Western Cape in search of trout. He spent a few years in the UK as a teenager, both in Scotland (the home of fly-fishing) and at a school in Surrey, which had its own trout stream.



Cooper returned to his homeland and despite some success as an amateur artist ("My first exhibition sold out within 20 minutes – but the paintings were very cheap!"), he took up a position in the family business.



*Clockwise, from above:* Andrew Cooper. • Rawsonville. • Sedgefield lagoon. • Elandspad River, Dutoitskloof. • Dutoitskloof. • Holsloot River painted for a Cape Leopard Trust auction. • Highland Run near Dullstroom.

# THE ART OF FLY-FISHING

Ever since he was a boy growing up in Cape Town, two threads have run through Andrew Cooper's life: art and fly-fishing. Now, however, those threads have become one. *By Nick Dall*

He credits fly-fishing for his decision to become a full-time artist at the age of 29.

## THE SUN ALSO RISES

It all happened on a morning like many others, fishing the Elandspad River in the Dutoitskloof Mountains, with his stepfather and fishing mentor, Mort Hunter. "I spent a few hours at one of my favourite pools, intermittently fishing, sitting and watching. During the course of the morning – as the light changed – I



realised that that one scene could be painted in 10 or 15 different ways," he recalls.

In the 18 years since that Rubicon moment, Cooper's art has explored the natural beauty of the Western Cape in all its facets. "My paintings are all impressions or memories of places I've visited. And I return to my favourite fly-fishing spots again and again in my art."

If fly-fishing's such an inspiration, why do none of his paintings feature a fisherman, let alone a fish? "That's the fisherman in me," he laughs. "The last

thing I'd want to see on my favourite stretch of river is another person. I prefer to present the scene as if it's being discovered for the first time."

## CLOSE TO HOME

The majority of the fishing destinations featured in Cooper's work are only a few hours away from Cape Town. The Elandspad River is his first love. "It's right next to the N1, but once you've walked a couple of hundred metres, you'd never know it. The sound of the highway is replaced by the sound of water and a sense of how small we are," he says.



The Holsloot River near Rawsonville is another recurring focus. There's a family connection to the valley that goes back generations and Cooper prides himself on getting the details right. "I never paint on site and I only occasionally use a photograph as a reference. So I only paint places I really



being immersed in a river,” he explains. There are also favoured fishing spots that haven’t yet received the artistic treatment. One is Lakenvlei, a dam way up in the mountains behind Ceres. “It’s got amazing, foreboding rock faces which put on a show of ochres and ambers every evening. There’s a quaint little hut on the water’s edge which is just crying out to be painted. We’ve fished the dam when it’s a snowy winter wonderland and also in times of drought, when its banks are caked with cracked mud.”

### CASTING A WIDER NET

Cooper’s time in Scotland as a teen inspired him to return as an adult. “According to local legend, in the



**“I want to give non-fishermen the feeling and sound of being immersed in a river.”**

know.” That’s why you’ll never find the wrong kind of fynbos or rock in any of his works. “Driving next to a river or looking down on it from above just isn’t the same. I want to give non-fishermen the feeling and sound of



Hebrides it’s easier to change your loch than your fly – and there really does seem to be more water than land on the islands,” he says. He spent his time walking from loch to loch, catching small, spritely brown trout and marvelling at the topography of a place that’s every landscape painter’s Xanadu. When he got home, he painted the experience.

Like many of us, Cooper has a bucket list which features places like the Victoria Falls and Namibia. Except that he dreams of preserving his memories on canvas, not photographic paper. At the very top of this list is the South Island of New Zealand, a place he’s “desperate to visit for fishing and painting purposes”. The mountains are dramatic, the rivers pristine, the fish big and he has family there.

So what are you waiting for, Andrew? We want to see the picture! 🎨

## SA’S TOP 10 FLY-FISHING DESTINATIONS

These days, fly-fishing isn’t only about trout. If you try hard enough, you can catch just about anything on a fly...

### 1 DUTOITSKLOOF, WESTERN CAPE

The three rivers in this valley all feature “single-malt water” and feisty, wild populations of rainbow trout which will rise to a dry fly all day long. *On the N1, one hour from Cape Town. Tel: 021 424 7725. Visit: www.piscator.co.za*

### 2 RHODES, EASTERN CAPE

With a population of just 26, Rhodes is SA’s trout-fishing Mecca. You have over 150km of streams to choose from and some top-class stillwaters too, so you’re utterly spoiled for choice. *On the R396, four hours from Bloemfontein. Tel: 045 974 290. Visit: www.wildtrout.co.za*

### 3 LAKENVLEI DAM, WESTERN CAPE

This vast expanse of water in a remote and rugged location offers the best stillwater trout fishing in the Western Cape. *Off the R46, 2,5 hours from Cape Town. Tel: 021 424 7725. Visit: www.piscator.co.za*

### 4 DULLSTROOM, MPUMALANGA

The great thing about Dullstroom is that there really is something for every kind of trout fisherman, from absolute beginners to seasoned pros. *On the R540, three hours from Johannesburg. Tel: 013 254 0270. Visit: www.flyfishing.co.za*

### 5 GIANT’S CUP, KWAZULU-NATAL (KZN)

Giant’s Cup is home to the only lake in SA with a self-sustaining population of wild trout. The backdrop’s pretty special too. *On the R617, 2,5 hours from Durban. Tel: 033 701 1511. Visit: www.giantscup.co.za*

### 6 DE MOND, WESTERN CAPE

De Mond doesn’t have the biggest *leervis* in the country, but it’s perfect for fly-fishing because of its manageable size. *On the R316, 2,5 hours from Cape Town. Tel: 028 425 1242. Visit: www.capenature.co.za*

### 7 KOSI BAY, KZN

Kosi Bay is most famous for its giant kingfish – the biggest, meanest things you can catch without a boat. There are also plenty of other species in its warm, subtropical waters. *Off the R22, five hours from Durban. Tel: 035 592 0236. Visit: www.kznwildlife.com*

### 8 LAKE JOZINI, KZN

The tigerfish in Jozini are getting bigger every year, so book your trip before the rest of the country cottons on. *Off the N2, four hours from Durban. Tel: 035 572 1020. Visit: www.jozinitigerlodge.co.za*

### 9 WAG ’N BIETJIE EKOPLAAS, FREE STATE

Yellowfish are big, strong fighting fish which present a challenge to any fisherman. This stretch of the Vaal River offers a wealth of both small- and large-mouth varieties. *On the S636, three hours from Johannesburg. Tel: 082 826 7076. Visit: www.wagnbietjie.net*

### 10 RICHTERSVELD NATIONAL PARK, NORTHERN CAPE

If you think catching yellowfish in the Vaal is epic, then you haven’t tried the Orange River. The remote landscapes are untouched and the fishing’s out of this world. *On the R382, five hours from Springbok. Tel: 027 831 1506. Visit: www.sanparks.co.za*