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Andrew Franks

by Rachael Chambers

“Beauty is the splendour of the true”

This is the inspirational inscription that Andrew Franks saw as he entered the Prince's School for Traditional Art in London for the first time.

“From the moment you enter the building and are greeted with the inscription you know you are in a very special place. I remember travelling back home to Sussex after that first week feeling pretty emotional as I knew I was finally, at the age of 50, on the right journey, and it really did prove to be quite an amazing journey. It was wonderful, energising, fulfilling, exhausting, challenging, and life changing!”

Andrew recalls his early creative path with fond memories and a pinch of embarrassment. “I can certainly remember loving art at junior school,” he says. “Being set extra drawing projects and making things which I usually ended up giving to my lovely teacher, Miss Brown, with whom I was completely in love. I remember the whole class having to make something to take home for Halloween and my attempt at a huge, black spider made from pipe cleaners ended up on poor Miss Brown’s desk. Sometimes one needs a reason to be creative and infatuation can often be a good inspiration.”

Andrew’s love for Miss Brown faded as he continued through secondary school and on to a degree in Visual and Performing Arts.

Andrew had a pretty mixed career from then on, working as a portrait photographer, in outdoor theatre, as a workshop leader with people with learning difficulties, and as a garden designer. But he spent most of his working life involved with music, either in teaching instruments, or as a professional freelance musician, and would often be found in the orchestra pit on Worthing pier.

“I think I’ve always had a ‘must have a go at that’ attitude, so I’ve never really been daunted to try out different creative and practical things, from staining

patterns onto floorboards, redesigning gardens, laying brick paths and choosing the plants, to composing music for a Shakespeare play and then acting and playing in it. I’m certainly not saying I am any good at these things, but I love to have a go.”

It was this ‘have a go’ attitude and a desire to return to visual arts that found Andrew looking into courses with the help of a friend and it was when reading the School’s brochure that a strong sense of optimism and promise overwhelmed him, as he explains.

“It was when I read about the ethos of the School and in particular the sentence, ‘traditional art is a contemplative process based upon universal spiritual truths’ that something clicked. It somehow made a deep impression on me and I couldn’t get it out of my mind. It was a rather odd feeling, as if I had found something important without really knowing that I was looking for it, if that makes any sense? When I looked through all the disciplines taught on the MA course and then looked around my room at home, I was amazed to see that the postcards on my walls, collected over many years, were the same as the set courses: Indian miniatures, Byzantine icons, Islamic tiles. I knew that somehow I had to do the course.”

Andrew admits that starting the MA course was daunting as, apart from DIY, he had never used a paintbrush before.

“Almost everything was new to me. In that first year you become a bit of a medieval apprentice: grinding and preparing pigments, studying and practising the techniques of egg tempera, gilding, Persian and Indian miniature painting with tiny squirrel haired brushes, Russian icon painting, stained glass, western calligraphy, Islamic ceramic tile and plate design and painting, wood parquetry, biomorphic design and sacred geometry. It was extremely full-on and to help remember it all we kept journals and note books on each subject so that we can refer to them later.”

I visited Andrew and his fellow students as they were nearing the end of their course, to give a talk on Professional Practice and was also able to view their degree show. The talent, craftsmanship and skill on display was incredible.

Andrew had on show a large, stunningly decorated, hand painted paper-fibre composite bowl; a beautiful show stopper which was surrounded by other works that were showered in red dots.



Images by Kristian Tobin

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Rose bush with Nightingale. Painted onto a paper-fibre composite panel. 15cm x 23.7cm

Leaf plaster relief on elm wood 16cm x 16cm

Indian miniature. Blue magpie. natural pigments on wasli paper. 17.2cm x 24cm



Iznik inspired paper-fibre composite bowl. 70cm x 20.5cm deep



HRH The Prince of Wales meets Andrew Franks during his visit to The Prince's School of Traditional Arts' degree show, July 2015.

"It was all a bit of a surprise for me really, seeing the red dots appearing on the various pieces and I was truly moved by people's responses and comments about the work, which were very beautiful and heartfelt. They ranged from people interested in what we were learning at the School, fellow students, dear friends wanting to support me, patrons of the School and collectors. I must say, I found it immensely rewarding, selling a piece to someone I'd never met before."

After finishing his MA at the School, Andrew was offered an artist's residency at Dumfries House, in Scotland starting just two weeks after the degree show.

"My brief was to soak up the atmosphere, be creative, and donate a piece for the house's archive," he explains. "This gave me a wonderful opportunity to explore some ideas I had been thinking about, and without the pressure of degree assessments. As a result of doing the residency, the School then commissioned thirty plaster-reliefs of a Scots pine bough to be given as gifts to the School's patrons. This was a great honour, as they were presented at Dumfries House as part of a big celebration dinner."

Since finishing the residency Andrew has been working towards reaching a wider audience after taking on board the advice I gave him when we met last summer.

"When you visited the School last July to give a talk on professional practice, you certainly gave us some excellent advice on how to approach gallery owners, to try and make an impression, perhaps by being different from the rest and to seek out the right market for one's work. Since completing the School's commission, I've been working on my portfolio and in the New Year I plan to start approaching the right galleries and hopefully make that 'memorable' impression."

And I have no doubt that you will Andrew.

www.andrewmarkfranks.com

Find more about the Prince's School of Traditional Crafts at www.psta.org.uk



Iznik inspired ceramic plate. 33cm diameter
Image Kristian Tobin

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