

Art Lessons by Diane Fine

My evolution as an artist began with crayons and colouring books. Colour was my rainbow. Art was the best form of playing for an active child with a zest for life. My grade 3 giraffe made my parents prepare for a child prodigy who would make them famous.

As a teenager I drew mostly pretty faces of the glamorous girl I wished I was. They covered all my school work books. I was dreaming through pictures. Faces have always fascinated me. How can we all have the same features and yet look so different? - even the same person, from one moment to the next depending on their mood, the hour, the light etc. ...But there was also my darker, pensive side, when I would spend hours poring over pictures from the national geographic magazine, copying foreign, exotic characters- the world outside my little bubble.

Art could be a window to the world.

I entered a competition from an ad for a free course in a commercial art school at about 10 years of age. One had to copy a sketchy profile of a woman and send it in. I was so happy with my entry. It was turned down because I was 6 years too young, I rationalized.

It was here I first understood that promoting art could take the joy away from creating it.

My parents sent me to Sunday art classes with Mrs. Cushmario, a beautifully coiffed European lady of sophisticated tastes, who wore glamorous outfits topped with a string of pearls. Making a mess in her elegant apartment was not on the curriculum. She chose the subject matter and medium for me- usually Japanese prints or classical drawings. Charcoal pencil or pastel were on offer to the sounds of opera. I would work for hours slavishly copying what was put before me. Before leaving, under the auspices of instruction, she would erase and redo any trace of my involvement. I would then sign it and bring it home to my parents. They quietly marvelled that I was still on that prodigy trajectory.

To this day there are many of those framed pieces of Greek busts, Japanese prints and National Geographic llamas proudly hanging on their walls.

Another lesson learnt- do your own work.

I excelled in art in High school and loved the eccentric Miss Irigo's classes which gave us more license for individuality. She didn't give us much direction- a welcome reprieve from Mrs. Cushmario. She did though look the part of the iconoclast bohemian with her long black hair, dark eye makeup and jewelry studded fingers.

Lesson learnt: art was a way of life and could be expressed in many ways.

I plastered paintings of the impressionists and Fauves all over my walls, and listened to baroque music for hours on the second hand record player my father bought me. No one in my family was artistic. Our house was decorated in plastic covered furniture without a beautiful artifact to be found. There were few books, let alone art books. Where did the thirst for beauty and creative expression come from? I felt like an alien in my own home with a bionic third eye that affected my mood and psyche.

Art was already my elixir in life.

There developed a hunger for identifying with like-minded others in the past and present. The world of art beckoned.

I enrolled in a Bachelors of Art majoring in Fine Art at Sir George Williams University in Montreal (Concordia)- renowned for their Fine Arts program. My professors were well known practising artists; Guido Molinari, Gentile Tondino, Yves Gaucher, Charles Gagnon. I had the most wonderful extensive art history education here. It was a thorough bedrock exposure to the world of art where I was taught every form of 2 and 3 dimensional art from printmaking, silk screening to sculpture and life drawing. My American Literature teacher was Margaret Atwood. (It was an era when a well-rounded humanities education was encouraged and respected as a starter kit for every life).

In my first art class at university the professor announced that the year's goal was to undo all the accumulated damage of our art related conditioning to date. The harsh reality was that the safety nets would be removed- those black, bold lines of the colouring books and the slavish copying without thinking. We would be venturing into unknown territory. No more reproduction of pretty, predictable pictures. Our long dormant imaginations were to be unleashed and this would free us to express our individuality as true artists. This was accomplished by losing attachment to the outcome. It was a year of endless failures. A year of 'chucking out' each attempt to create a masterpiece. There was little to show for the year other than a reshaped right brain. This was the true beginning of my life as a visual artist.

The same first life drawing that we were so proud of at the beginning of

the year, was an embarrassment by the end of the year.

Lesson learnt: be ready to fail.

I moved with my by now little nuclear family to Toronto to further my art education. I attended University of Toronto and studied art history with McAllister Johnson and then enrolled in fine art classes at the Three Schools of Art (Larry Middlestat) for three years and the Toronto School of Art (studying printmaking with Vera Frankel and life drawing with Paul Young) for two years.

I have no recollection of how I became interested in copper enamelling, but I attended classes at Central Tech for years learning how to do grisaille and cloisonné technique which I applied to jewelry making. I was serious enough about it to buy my own kiln and go into production commercially. Cloisonné always attracted me as I saw it as miniature stained glass.

I also went on another creative tangent very early on in my marriage when I bought a huge rya rug backing and tapestry wool to create my own rug, from a Swedish woman's booth at the CNE. Once again my three bionic big eyes were to blame. It was an impulse buy that took three years to complete. It was a 10x6 foot, 2-inch pile rug. At the time of purchase we had very little furniture. Ten miles of wool and three years of backbreaking work later, it was on the floor- a magic carpet which is still the hearth of the home. Not being a kit, there was much expensive wool left over which I subsequently turned into four more rugs, 30 needlepoint pillows, 4 needlepoint ottomans, 3 needlepoint lamps, one needlepoint sculpture, about 25 hangings. I am forever working on a new piece to this day. (Lately I have been reinterpreting my abstracts into needlepoint paintings). By adopting these needlepoint works, I was liberated to be able to carry my creativity with me everywhere- often working on small pieces that I would sew together into one large piece-and so was born my alter ego: Madame Lafarge.

In both the rug and needlepoint applications I used the wool like an impressionist paintbrush, encouraging the eye to mix the colours of dots, slashes and strokes. I could keep the same colours, but combine them in endless variations which ensured the underlying unity of the piece.

Another lesson... Art can be reinvented in a medium from rugs to riches.

My professor from university, Gentile Tondino, used to come to my house during those heady years to give me critiques about the first rug which he accepted as a major painting assignment for his course. Once completed,

no one was permitted step on it, then they were allowed to without their shoes, then with their shoes, then with their muddy boots, then it weathered vomit, babypoo etc.... Yet it still looks as fresh as the day I finished it (because I keep banging it upside-down with a broom after a fresh snowfall every year as is the custom in Sweden). This exempted my need for visits to therapists.

Next lesson- Art as therapy, as Alan de Botton would say.

Art was on the back burner during my years as a stay at home mom. I did manage to write and illustrate two cookbooks to keep my creativity, other than diaper folding, alive- 'The Cookie Bookie' and 'Perfect Pies' – both published by Macmillan of Canada and William Morrow, U.S.A., sold in North America and Europe. In those years I also worked on commercial art assignments.

My personal works up until the age of 40 were black and white (other than the rugs and needlepoints). I didn't trust myself with a full palette of colour as I feared the temptation would be like a child in a candy store consuming everything in sight. I felt black and white was a starker, more direct route to individual expression.

I often prefer black and white drawings with their construction lines to be more descriptive about the process of creating than the finished paintings.

There were many mediums to explore: lino cuts, intaglio prints, pen and ink, and of course graphite pencil and charcoal. I produced many lino landscapes and still lives and did many pencil and charcoal life drawings during that period, which included an extensive series of charcoal drawings of Fjords executed during a trip to Norway. Drawing endless self-portraits was also a catalyst to become more self-aware, a major learning curve in using the medium and experimentation with character description...like Monet's waterlilies.

My black and white diet was broken when I began a series of coloured pencil semi representational drawings of nude women in settings of nature. There were women as trees whose hair became the branches, women floating in the sky as clouds, women lying under running brooks pinned down by rocks.... This was a time of unrest in my life and the drawings were an outlet for my feelings.

Lesson learnt- art is often a metaphor for life.

My next series of women showed I was gaining confidence. These women were once again nudes- self-portraits of women from the neck down as I believed that what I could see of myself looking down(faceless), was the

only true self -portrait. These truncated body parts were set indoors this time, immersed in patterns of table cloths, curtains and articles representing domestication. In other words, they spoke of my existence as a homemaker.

It combined my sense of the body (being a dancer and fitness professional and student of life drawing) with my life as a homemaker and mother. These were not conscious choices of subject matter but just emanated from my being.

Lesson learnt: art is an extension of one's own experience, vision and personality.

I taught art at Ajax High School for a year. Teaching proved to be the best opportunity to learn.

We moved to England, a fresh visual territory for me. The gardens, ancient buildings and quilted hills became my subject matter. Every day I would bike through the quaint countryside. After completing many acrylic paintings, I became interested in flowers and the medium of collage.

I began with cut or torn acrylic painted paper. One day I tried on my sister's exquisite long skirt and decided it didn't fit properly. On my next bike ride I determined to cut it up and integrate it into my next collage. Upon returning back to our cottage I grabbed a scissors and committed the evil deed before I could change my mind. This was the beginning of over a decade of incorporating textiles in my collages. That particular skirt was immortalised 14 times with the hope my sister would never recognise it in my work. Soon after, on yet another bike ride, I noticed the patterns of vegetation along the path were endlessly varied and beautiful. I knew that I could only use dried organic matter in my pieces, but still, there was so much to choose from. I would come back to the cottage with all kinds of dead, dried, brittle grasses and ferns pouring out of my bicycle basket. (People wondered about this Canadian).

There is something about elements in nature that are always surprisingly abstract to me. I see the same patterns in nature that repeat themselves from microcosm to macrocosm and vice versa.

Dozens of still lives poured out of me- all manner of flowers in pots. They were colourful and joyous. Each one began by moving shapes of fabric, dead vegetation, and painted acrylic paper around on a blank board until the puzzle solved itself. This could take months of layering and was often tedious work.

I lived in a town in the north Cotswolds, England for 12 years. I joined the artist's cooperative. This was an opportunity to interact with an artist's

community and exhibit my work in the local town and other British venues. My subject matter evolved to include portraits and landscapes, all employing my favorite technique of mixed media collage.

We lived in Twine House, a 16th century timber framed home built in 1501 – well before Shakespeare appeared on the scene. Like clockwork each morning, I was awakened by the chirping of two birds sitting in the same spot next to the chimney of the ancient slated roof of the building across the street. I decided I had to record this for posterity. I chose the medium of charcoal pencil as it best described the timber framed structure and did 14 drawings of each room. Each drawing featured the idiosyncratic, inanimate architecture with a suggestion of the animated life in it from past and present - a shadow, a pet, an insect etc... This symbolised the life that had lived in the dwelling for 25 centuries and counting.
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Since we have moved back to Toronto I have delved more and more into the abstract. All my experience to date has been distilled into colour, shape and composition.

The aging process, along with experience, teaches you what is important- especially as an artist.

The lesson being-less is more.

A turning point for me was exposure to the American artist Judith Seligson, whose delightful geometric pieces reminded me what a fan I was of geometry and how playful one can be with it.

This is what I plan to do in the future: concentrate on exploring the relationship of the animated natural organic line, with the straight edge of mass production and industry. To be as free and daring as possible in my explorations as some of my inspirations: Klee, Matisse, Hundertvasser, Klimt, Bonnard, Vuillard, Jawlensky , Malevich, Norman Laliberte and Alfred Pellan , Hepzibah Swinford.

I also have been experimenting extensively with finishes. Using the high gloss resin to compliment the edgy abstracts, or coats of Golden's Leveling Gel, which I then sand and finish with a cold wax to give a less glossy, softer encaustic look. For backings, I am now using wood mounts, often to be displayed in large groupings, allowing the buyer to use their own creativity to arrange them to fit on any size wall. This works well with the subject matter and eliminates the need for frames.

I have been concentrating on patterns once again. My most recent work has been of endless versions of spirals- one of the seven universal patterns.

I have yet to spiral out of control....