

## It's A Funny Old Life, This Art Thing by Alix Baker

At what point does a person stumble across the urge to paint, or does something ambush them?

Many artists don't pick up a brush until well into adulthood and go on to be wonderful painters or sculptors. My father was excellent at drawing, and my maternal grandfather was an artist and it began for me at around six years of age, when my mother taught me the rudiments of perspective. My Damascene moment came when, aged eight and living in Cyprus, I spotted a few scrubby trees on barren land, strong light, heat and shadow – perhaps nature produced one of those rare perfect compositions which click with the brain. Something about what I saw has stayed with me vividly to this day. As William Blake said so neatly: 'The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way'.



*Sunlight, Steps and Stone*

Cyprus was going through a nasty period of terrorism and several plots were made against my family as my father was directing the army operations. That and the build-up on the island prior to Suez probably contributed to my eventually becoming a military artist for most of my art career. Certainly, my first dramatic 'war' picture was done at that time. Nowadays probably I would have been sent to a psychiatrist. Also, the heat and light of the island may have contributed to another speciality which is painting the Arabian Gulf and other parts of the Middle East.



*Sailing on the Evening Tide, Dubai*

In my school days there was very little emphasis given to art. An art room was often small and cold. At the school one of my brothers attended, the art room for 500 pupils was one dark room with a potter's wheel. Not surprisingly he brought home a lot of ashtrays. Art teachers were viewed as strange creatures in the staff room and had less clout and status than the music or sports teachers. Luckily I was fortunate to have a couple of teachers with infectious enthusiasm (at the age of ten I received my first prize from William Russell Flint). Nowadays many schools are providing better teaching, art rooms and standards of work than the London art college I attended, where we were told to take off our shoes and 'feel the emotion of the paint' squeezing between your toes. Not much emphasis on the nuts and bolts of drawing, anatomy and perspective, so essential even for future abstract painters. I do remember a life class when we drew some poor unfortunate man, possibly off the street and with no idea what an almost nude life model should wear, who looked remarkably like Lord Hailsham! My parents dined out on that one for weeks.



*1st The Queen's Dragoon Guards, Afghanistan*

From those days in Cyprus, and having long ears, I had always wanted to join MI6, but I decided on Art College at first, although clearly art was not quite ready for me – just lurking in the wings (shades of 'Black Swan'). Other things intruded – such as becoming one of the first women skydivers in the UK. From the scruff of the art studio I moved on to various jobs (including a spell in No. 10), to a career where elbow gloves were required for certain overseas functions! In 1969 I was working in Singapore and the art itch started and, like rashes do in the tropics, it started to spread. I did a spell in Saigon during the Vietnam War and later was despatched at 24 hours' notice to Pakistan, just a couple of days before the India-Pakistan War started in 1971, and from which I was evacuated in an RAF aircraft. One of the telegrams from London was a message that merely said 'Knew you would start something'.



*Royal Navy, WW2 (one of those now on HMS Belfast, London)*

Well, something was starting: Military was going to be an unavoidable theme – in art and life! A short time later my future husband returned from fighting in the little known Dhofar War on the Oman/Yemen border. So I left the desk job and developed my military side, working on official commissions from units and museums, writing articles on the evolution of military dress with particular interest in that worn on campaigns through the centuries, for military authors and selling for or advising collectors, modellers and researchers worldwide. Several of my WW2 paintings hang on HMS Belfast on the River Thames (see above). Two historical paintings are on wine labels in Tasmania!



*The Royal Yeomanry caricature*



When our children were small we were extremely lucky to have a posting back to Oman which gave me the chance to make every other painting a local subject, while keeping the military side ticking over. When our time was up I left with a commission from HM The Sultan for a very large series of paintings to record his armed forces and police, all with real faces. These he presented to his Royal Guard and they hang in the building next to his palace in Muscat.



*Gunseller, old souk, Nizwa, Oman*

Art is a funny business: many years ago I was broke - it happens all the time to artists - but completely out of the blue a Chinese company asked me to design two boxes for military model kits of the German army in WW2. Rather an odd commission and I almost dismissed it as a joke. However, it was genuine and the language barrier was tricky but they understood the important bit - MY BILL - and I lurched merrily onwards with a huge feeling of gratitude to whoever, in China's population of over a billion, had stumbled across me. If only it had been the Lottery.

For many years I was a complete oddity as a woman at the top of my part of the military art field. This meant some unusual invitations. Such as when I was asked to go in midwinter on a Royal Navy ship in the storms of the North Sea - I couldn't as I was very pregnant. Then I was asked during the Bosnia War to go and paint a British unit but I couldn't because the people who had asked me had forgotten that there were 400 miles of mountains and fighting between their bases and trying to get a woman clutching paints and canvas through the mountains in mid-winter might look like a cunning plan and clever trick by NATO.

After many years of military art I hit a wall - as quite a few in that field do. No longer did I want to do heavily researched and very detailed and, at times, more illustrative work. No more dealing with months of committees trying to come to a conclusion about the details of a commission. It was solitary work, too, but I had a dog in order not to appear to be talking to myself. I wanted to loosen up, get bold, paint whatever I wanted - 'civilian art'. I continue to do the occasional military picture, particularly for longstanding customers.

Some years ago I was extremely honoured to be elected the first non-uniformed and female Chairman of the Armed Forces Art Society which holds its top quality annual exhibitions in The Mall Galleries, London. Perhaps they just wanted a woman to do the Hoovering but it was a very busy 6 years. It is far from being a society painting only military subjects and I continue to enjoy the company and stimulation of so many of its exciting artists.

I have been fortunate to use my art to raise funds for charities to do with the blind, children (especially those made homeless by war) and military ones involved with the wounded, rehabilitation or PTSD and continue to do so. It is wonderful that art has proved time and again to be one of the most therapeutic things for those of the Armed Forces affected by or injured in combat.

A funny career but at least I feel I've improved on the suggestion made by my school's careers adviser who, for some extraordinary reason, said I might consider being a Sanitary Inspector - or perhaps it was more a comment on my sense of humour....

So, what can I pass on that might be of any remote use?

- Firstly, prepare your polite answer to that irritating question "How long did it take you to do that?". An artist friend always replies "A lifetime of learning".
- Being an artist is a constant learning curve. Painting may not pursue for a very long time but as sure as anything it will pop out at some time in your life. Creative arts have that way of ambushing you.
- Do something art-related every day - a simple sketch, make notes of ideas and inspiration, spend a minute or two looking more deeply at something in the street, in a shop window, on the bus, wherever. Look through your artist's eyes - the more you look, the more you see what others miss.
- Join groups - they can be very cheap indeed. You can learn so much from other members, whatever their age or style.
- If you can, share a work area, or time, with other artists - you will spark off each other.
- Visit galleries - large institutions and small local ones. You may not like what you see but you will improve your eye through seeing how other people work, improve your imagination and learn more than you realise.
- Look at artists and galleries worldwide on the internet. Advice on absolutely everything to do with art is out there, including so many lessons - and they're free. Also, there are artists who are more than willing to help if you approach them. I've had many over the years - usually asking "I want to be an artist like you. How do I go about it?" a huge subject and seldom a thank you for hours spent helping them, sadly. A thank you can get a continuing interest in how you are getting on.
- Have your work on the internet. Lots of websites are free or cheap. Keep it up to date and mention where you are exhibiting. Use Facebook, create a blog - quite a number of artists create their blog like, but instead of, a website.
- Exhibit. Joining groups helps. Work from small and local to a bit bigger and so on. You will learn what the public thinks of your work and your price level. Where there is a selection process, you will learn from your betters and it will help you to judge your progress.
- Try to be organised. Creative time is wasted without organisation. Artists can be notoriously disorganised with paperwork. An Organised Artist stands out from the herd.
- If you are young, you might think that experimentation and exploration come at the beginning of your art life. Not at all, most artist I know find that they get more adventurous and curious as they age! Perhaps years of experience (or sense of time running out?) sees them producing some of their most exciting work later on.

**Someone once said:**

- He who works with his hands is a labourer.
- He who works with his hands and head is a craftsman.
- He who works with his hands and head and heart is an artist.

*If you explain your dreadful untidiness by saying, "it's a work-in-progress..."*

*If you have cadmium orange fingerprints on your mobile.*

*If you absent-mindedly clean your brushes in your beer/wine.*

*If you cut your pizza with a sculptor's chisel.*

*If you are left exhausted while others say "art must be such a relaxing thing to do"*

**THEN YOU ARE AN ARTIST!**