HOME FROM HOME

Geoffrey Humphries: Venice

PAOLO TITOLO/LUCKY STAR

Geoffrey Humphries has worked as an artist in Venice for the past 24 years. He lives on the island of Giudecca, across the water from San Marco, where he talked to Tom Pocock

MY STUDIO is on the first floor of a 17th-century house. It is not a *palazzo* but, like most of the larger Venetian houses, it was built to a palatial design.

I have lived here for over half my life, but I still take delight in the view from my windows. Each morning I wake in the dark because I sleep on a platform high in a corner of the studio. So I climb down a ladder and switch on the stereo to flood the place with Mahler's Fourth. Then I go outside into that wonderful, enormous, luminous space of water, sky and Venice.

First I look in at the café next door for a reviving cup of coffee, then inspect the strange sea-monsters on the fishmonger's slab. If I am giving a dinner party that night, I will buy some fish, paint them as a still life in the studio, then cook them for my guests in the evening.

Every day is different. I may paint a portrait, either a commission, or just a quick portrait of a visiting friend to keep my eye in. Or a bunch of students may come round for a life class, which is expensive for me as models cost £10.50 an hour here, almost three times as much as in London. My view of Venice is best in the early morning or evening, when the low sun throws shadows and it looks the exotic, almost oriental city that it is. But in full sunlight it looks curiously flat.

Social life is mostly confined to the evenings. I have a glass of wine near the pier while waiting for the *vaporetto* to take me across the water, and then make my way to the Campo San Stefano. Social life revolves around the squares and this is my *campo*, where I meet friends sitting outside a café or on marble steps. These days the city closes down before ten and there is virtually no night life — except for parties at my studio.

I was brought up in Slough and went to art school at High Wycombe and Chelsea. I first arrived in Venice as a B-stream bum with a flair with a pencil. I found that an uncle was vice-consul in Venice and he showed me round. In the early Sixties, it was still full of the residue of old Europe, like the two ancient princesses, one of whom wore a wig and the other a wax nose which would start to melt in hot weather. But they were swept away by two catastrophes: the great flood of 1966 and the 1973 oil crisis, which also put an end to most of the night life.

I spent some months in a village in the hills to the north-east of here called Venzone. I did a lot of drawing but my models were 15th-century mummies, kept in the local church as a poor little tourist attraction for visiting Austrians. I did work briefly as a pavement artist in Treviso, which was not a success until a policeman advised me to draw a picture of the Madonna so that people would not walk over it and might give me some money.

Then I returned to Venice and rented a dungeon-like room in the house where I still live. At first I sold drawings of Venice to tourists at café tables. I also began painting portraits. I only wish I had painted Peggy Guggenheim, the American millionairess who collected modern art in her *palazzo* on the Grand Canal. My uncle introduced me to her and she told me that her portrait had never been painted. She's dead now and her palace is a museum of modern art. But I have painted a number of well-known people — Sir Ashley Clarke, the former Ambassador to Italy, who now lives here and ran the Venice in Peril campaign, and the American novelist Joseph Heller . . .

I never paint Venice nowadays. It is a dangerous subject for an artist because it is a city of illusions, already a work of art in itself. But it has inspired two themes that I paint in oils: mermaids and cabaret. I put on cabarets at my parties and even have a little stage at the back of the studio. But what really prompted the cabaret theme was designing costumes for a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; that and the rather decadent theatricality of the paintings of Klimt and the German Expressionists.

There are still a lot of interesting or odd people in Venice, even if only as visitors. Everything seems larger than life and anything seems possible. One attractive young woman with a famous French name lived in high style at the best hotel, was entertained by everybody and borrowed money before it was eventually realised, when she disappeared, that she was a confidence trickster. I even painted her portrait myself.

But nearly all the marvellous old characters I knew 20 years ago have gone. Now the tourists march through the city with souvenir gondoliers' straw hats on their heads and Coca-Cola cans in their hands. I have even seen them land at San Marco with buckets and spades.

Life is a good mixture of work and play. Like all artists I am tempted to follow the money to America or Germany. Occasionally I visit England and I have just had a little exhibition of drawings at the Chelsea Arts Club. But I will always come back to Venice. It would now be difficult to work anywhere else. T

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