

## **My Story: Being Scottish**

Split from my family in Scotland when I came to study in Berlin, I increasingly felt an identity with the divided city: West and East Berlin. It was perhaps the contrast of those two disparate parts of a city that made me aware of my own identity. When I made my East Side Gallery painting on the Berlin Wall in 1989 it was still the former 'East Germany' (GDR) and it seemed important for me to say who I was and so I boldly painted SCOTLAND under my name. I was surprised at how few of the artists from the twenty-one different countries also painting on the Wall did that.

In my artwork, *Duality* became a recurrent theme; the double head, and the concept of inside-outside, the mask. I would build up oil colour on my paintings on wood in order to scratch back, to uncover, hack into, then often I would bring the parts together again with wax and colour. The idea of splits and drawing together became a major theme.

At the time I came to Berlin there were few Scottish artists living here. Often people in Germany were (and are) fascinated by my Scottish accent; it was curious for them, nothing like the English they'd learned in school. I found it amusing when they considered it 'exotic' – not the way we think of ourselves in Scotland! Sometimes as they smiled and nodded, it dawned on me that they weren't listening to what I was saying, but how!

At one of my first exhibition openings in Berlin I was introduced during the opening speech as 'Margaret Hunter the English artist'. I held up my hand, stopped the proceedings and corrected, 'No, no I'm Scottish'. After a stunned silence there were smiles, aha's and knowing nods as most remembered the traditional antipathy between Scotland and England. More generally, I often find that I have to correct the assertion that England is Britain; even on television, news and talk shows, this error is regularly made.

In relation to exhibitions, I was one of the first West artists to have exhibitions in East Germany after the Fall of the Wall. This was in contrast to many West Germans who were still apprehensive about going to the East but I was very curious and enjoyed having exhibitions in Dresden, Halberstadt, Potsdam and Görlitz. At that time, there was still distrust between Ossies and Wessies (as they were called then) and West Germans were sometimes perceived as arrogant. However, coming from Scotland people wanted to talk

to me, to tell me their stories. Most people in the GDR knew Scotland only in a romantic way, through the books of Robert Louis Stevenson, highland landscape, ruined castles and lochs but there was a great interest in my home country. I was always made very welcome by the people I met then and have remained in contact with several of them since.

I've never felt belittled when Germans listen to my accent with curiosity or amusement. In fact I speak German with a strong Scottish accent so sometimes when I ask, 'where do you think I come from' they answer with a list of English-speaking countries and rarely Scotland. When I give them the answer the remark is usually 'Scotland, a land I always want to visit'.

On the other hand I feel that as a foreigner or onlooker I am in a privileged position; being an outsider occasionally gives greater freedom. Scots generally like to get straight to the point and I found it painstaking when working with a group of German artists at how long discussions had to go on; things mulled over, then repeated again and again. In my not perfect German they'd sometimes be shocked at some succinct point I would make. Then they'd shake their heads and agree Margaret hadn't really understood; but I had, and being the outsider I could make my point.

Generally the attitude to artists in Germany was and is different from Scotland. In Germany an artist generally has more of a status. Perhaps it's part of the German psyche, conveyed from the Romantic period, as in the themes of Casper David Friedrich a revered German painter of that time, whose primary interest was the contemplation of nature.

In Germany I am able to express myself more openly in my artwork. Some of my stylized sculptural and painted figures can be perceived as, 'challenging' although I don't think they suggest something 'less human'; by conveying and suggesting inner states, they are perhaps more 'human'. This form of art is probably less accepted by the general public in Scotland where there is more admiration for academic art skills, interest in technique, and natural subjects; landscapes and still lifes painted in a realistic way.

Scots, myself included, tend to stay modest, keep our feet on the ground. So when asked in Scotland what I work at, I usually don't say that I am a professional artist; instead 'I paint'.

I was privileged to have an exceptional art education at an outstanding Scottish university art school. But before that opportunity, art education was essentially missing from my school years. I believe – and fear – the reasons I was not allowed to study still exist in Scotland today. Having a job after art study is difficult and surviving as a practicing artist is extremely hard, only a few survive. While academic subjects remain important in education, subjects such as art, music, and sport are increasingly becoming recognised as an aid to other skills and need to be given appropriate weight in the curriculum. Education in art influences how people relate to artwork.

Often I believe the general public expects that art should entertain them. But my aim is to express my ideas developed into paintings or sculptures; they should say something and have a presence, it is a bonus if/when others see something they can relate to for themselves.

The years immediately after my study were spent between Scotland and Berlin. My son Thomas came to live in Berlin worked and learned the language and my daughter, later with family, came to stay. The schism of both lives began to integrate as I consciously left paintings and home jobs unfinished in both places.

Today, I consider Berlin is my home although my roots and identity are Scottish. However, my affinity with Germany has grown over the years as I've made friends and established my art identity. It was therefore a natural step for me to obtain German citizenship while proudly retaining my British passport.

Although welcomed and content in Berlin, I consider myself in a privileged position, as an artist and a foreigner. A Scottish artist in Berlin, Germany, in Europe.

**Margaret Hunter**

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