

## Story: Wanting to be an Artist

Art, particularly drawing, was a talent in my family: my grandfather, aunts, uncles and cousins. My older sister at twelve years joined a children's drawing class and I remember putting a lot of effort into a small painting hoping I would be exceptionally accepted at age eleven.

At school, overall I was academically a 'B' student but I excelled in art, drawing and painting. The brown paper protecting my primary school books was always covered with my drawings. In my young life there was no doubt what I would do when I grew up: I would be an artist!



*My father with labourers building the school in Mashi*

During 1959 and 1961 when I was eleven and twelve years old my family spent extended time in Nigeria, leading up to the country's Independence. My father, working for the Crown Agents, was responsible for setting up a Government Craft School for teenage boys.

Living in Nigeria was an extraordinary experience so I will write about it here in more detail.

I had an idea of Africa in my mind but I was not prepared for the reality. After a thirteen-hour flight the first thing that hit me stepping off the plane at Kano airport was the heat and the smell; the smell of Africa. My mother, sister and I were met by our father and we drove 100 miles to reach the School area and the house where we would live. It was almost at the border to the State of Niger and we were in the 'bush', miles from any other Europeans.

On our first visit to the nearby village of Mashi a crowd of village children were hanging onto the car, staring in the windows at us laughing and chattering; they'd never seen white children before. It was strange and a little frightening. I remember at one point a man knocked on the window and talked to my Dad's colleague. The adults started laughing and when we asked what the joke was they told us the man wants to marry



*Me and my sister Catherine fascinated by a monkey under a truck while in Nigeria*

Margaret. I was eleven and I wasn't laughing at all; I was petrified. I was sure that he would come in the night and steal me and I begged to be sent back home. I was a sensitive child, small, serious and often quite apprehensive.



*Gajere, one of our watchmen – showing facial markings*

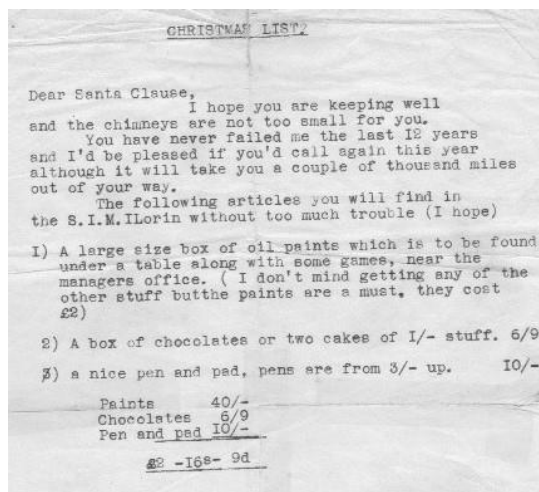
Among the many images of this time, I particularly remember the markings on the faces of the men and the idea of tribal identity. I recall my father saying it was the barber who made these marks. He would shave their heads then make the cuts. I did not realise it at the time, but these images turned out to be significant among the symbols I subsequently used in my professional art work.

We lived a mainly isolated life and what we considered to be 'normal' was often challenged by what was new for us, strange behaviour and events. One night, a worker from the compound woke my father to come with his rifle to hunt a 'Hyena-Man' who was attacking the locals. I believe my father was relieved he didn't actually meet the perpetrator. Years later I read that the cult of the Hyena Man is common in the folklore of Nigeria.

An exciting and fascinating event was to watch when a camel train that had wended its way through the Sahara dunes from Tripoli passed by our road end heading for Katsina or Kano. A tremendous sight.

Everyday life entailed home schooling and there was also plenty of time for me to become lost in my incessant drawing and painting.

Quite extraordinarily, I recently came across a letter I typed to Santa Clause as a twelve-year-old. I asked for “a large size box of oil paints” – and also “a box of chocolates or two cakes”. I could not have realised at the time how significant paints and painting would become in my life – or that I would always have a weakness for chocolate!



When we went back to Scotland my father continued with his contract in Nigeria. However we joined him again for almost a year, 1960 till '61 this time with my 5 weeks old sister, Norma. By then we had become more accustomed to the way of life.

These periods in Africa were my first experience of being an observer in another culture, involved but at a distance.

Back in Scotland, I attended Irvine Royal Academy where during a career advice discussion I expressed my ambition to be an artist. The idea was treated with derision on the grounds that there were no jobs for women from this kind of study. My hopes were dashed; during my childhood and youth I was sure I would become an artist – but I was not to be given the opportunity to apply for Art School. Disheartened, I left school at sixteen and worked for an engineering company in their tool drawing office, technical drawing, but was glad at least to work on a professional drawing board!

I married young and by the time I was twenty-two I had two children. Life was difficult, my husband was self-employed with often frequent new ideas but without the ability to see things through. However, I noticed that in the seaside town of Saltcoats where we lived there was an abundance of shoe shops but nowhere selling leather goods. Allowed to borrow £3000 from the bank without collateral, I opened a handbag and luggage shop in the main street of the town. It was financially under my control; I felt the responsibility and it became successful. We moved to a bungalow in the lovely village of Fairlie further along the coast.

I employed two friendly, efficient women, which allowed me to be there part time to suit the children's schooling. I ordered stock, regularly changing the window decoration which I enjoyed, like setting up a 'still-life' and moving stock around the shop which brought in regular customers. In a small way I was therefore using my artistic insights.

During this period, I continued art hobby classes until the time I decided I should catch up with a formal level (Scottish Higher) art qualification at a local college. The teacher told me I would love art school but in my late 20's I thought I was too old and furthermore I didn't have the academic qualifications. However she said an exceptional few of the intake were judged on portfolio alone. Although my teacher thought preference would more likely be given to an extra talented younger applicant, she suggested it would be worthwhile to build up a portfolio of artwork. I enjoyed having an artistic aim through compiling a portfolio.

When I took the step of applying to the art school, the application required a first choice and a second choice college. On my own with two children in Fairlie attending the local school, there could only be one choice: the most prestigious and internationally recognised, the Glasgow School of Art! I feared that specifying only one art school would be another reason for refusal.

So it was with astonishment, almost disbelief, that I received the acceptance letter.

Starting the Art School became the beginning of the end for my shop, which I thought I could deal with at the weekends. But I'd underestimated my part-time role in it and I was no longer able to oversee what was happening there. My marriage failed; our house in my husband's name was sold. Luckily, I managed to rent an old stable house with enough accommodation for me and my two children. It had a stable with carriage space beneath which was ideal as a studio. There was no child maintenance from my ex-husband and we existed financially on one of the last of the government study grants.

But I'd made it to the Glasgow School of Art!

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