

The Art of Peter Finnigen





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Interview with Peter Finnigen, November, 2017.

AM: Did you have much interest in art when you were younger?

Peter Finnigen: When I was young we didn't have much, we were very poor, we had a hard life, as my Dad left us after the war. I used to do all sorts of things to try and make money. I started making wee alabaster moulded figures which I bought in a shop off of Argyle Street in Glasgow. They were little Mexicans with black sombreros and guitars and I would paint them and then sell them.

One time in primary school it so happened that in the art class I did a town scene with roads, people and traffic. I had drawn this man on a bicycle going through the traffic, and the teacher got hold of it and was over the Moon about it and showed it to the other teachers. Not long after I was sent to the Kelvingrove Art Galleries in Glasgow for some art instruction, and I met up with this group of people. I was the youngest there and I was paired off with this older boy. We had to paint either an old woman at a window or a sailing ship. The older boy said he would do the sailing ship even though that was what I wanted to do, because I liked that subject. Anyway we wandered around the galleries looking for inspiration, but this boy was up to no good, causing all sorts of trouble and it ended up us getting thrown out. So I was disgraced by this boy.

AM: So you never took up art as a career?

Peter Finnigen: I was an engineer and was always making things. I had a great eye. I used to see details that other people would miss. Which helped me in my trade, as I could diagnose things that other people didn't notice. I suppose this now helps me with my art. Some years later, after I was married, somebody at work was talking about art and this sparked my interest. I went and bought a large pad of art paper. However, I never did anything with it. Through the years I never did any drawing or painting, but when I retired, my wife bought me a box of painting by numbers. Initially, I tossed it to the side but a few weeks later I found it again and decided to give it a try. I started messing around with it, but I realised I could do better myself. So I found the old drawing pad I had bought 35 or 40 years ago. So there must have been something in me saying 'keep that'. The paper in it was all yellowed with age. I started making some drawings. I found I could picture things, I could see how light came and created shadows. Somehow I had all that understanding. Where it came from I do not know. It seems to be something I have always had. It's always been there.

AM: Was this the start of you painting?

Peter Finnigen: I decided to go to some art classes, a one day a week course in Paisley run by an artist. So I would sit there painting and he would come round and see what people were doing. He would take a glance at my work but would pass me by and go and help the others. Eventually he asked me to do a portrait. So when I was at home I painted an old cavalier on one of the sheets from that old pad I still had. The following week when I went back, I had the portrait there, but he never came to look at it. I was hoping he might have suggested how I should mix colours. I had no instruction in the sequence of colours and just did this intuitively.

So he came over and said “Peter, I don’t know what I can tell you. I don’t think I can teach you anything. My advice to you it to take a day or so and visit some art galleries and look at some of the old masters and I think you will learn more from that.” So that was me finished with art courses. I never went back.

AM: So was that the Cavalier you have in the exhibition?

Peter Finnigen: Yes, done on the old pad.

AM: Was this one of the first paintings you created?

Peter Finnigen: Yes.

AM: I am glad we included that. It is very drawn, compared with your more recent work. It is drawn with outlines and is very fine work.

Peter Finnigen: Because of the long gap when I never painted I feel I am still learning.

AM: You did not have time to learn gradually, you had to accelerate your learning. Your style of painting moved on from that very quickly.

Peter Finnigen: I still don’t know what I should be doing. I was down South and went into a gallery and talked to the owner who was also an artist and he asked me what did I paint. I said I will paint anything, portraits, scenery, buildings. He said “So you’re a nothing painter.” He said ,“You can’t paint everything. You can’t paint them well. You’ve got to find your niche and stick to that.”

AM: You’ve had some great advice, I don’t think! When I first saw your work, I saw you as a jobbing artist, someone who could turn their hand to anything. I see that as your strength.

Peter Finnigen: It’s my trade I suppose.

AM: Painting a portrait and painting a landscape is basically the same technical exercise. The same transmission of light into pigment. I think your strength is in your diversity of imagery. Other artists, such as that man you mention who wrongly advised you, often do the same thing over and over again. They can develop a style, but it can get boring and repetitive. You are always coming up with something different.

Peter Finnigen: I like to ask folk what they like. It's not what I like to paint. I like people coming and looking and enjoying what I have done. Whether it sells or not doesn't matter. It's the enjoyment they get from seeing what I have tried to create.

AM: Let's go into the technical details. You paint in acrylic, on different surfaces. You use board, paper and canvas. You don't seem to varnish your paintings. They have a nice smooth matt surface. For many of your works you seem to use photographs as a basis for a painting.

Peter Finnigen: Rather than go out and sketch I take a photograph. It is quicker and I like to have the colours, so I can see the light and the reflections, that you cannot catch on a sketch pad, but you can get in a photograph. I will persevere till I get a good photo. What I see is what I paint, and if there is a wee mouse sitting there, it will be in the painting.

AM: You very much like to explore the detail. The first painting I saw of yours was that of Dunlop House and I was really surprised at the detail and the quality of the painting. Your painting really captures the architecture.

Peter Finnigen: Well I do love architecture and buildings. Coming from an engineering background, I love to look at buildings to see how they are put together, what is holding them up.

AM: Another painting of your I found quite surprising was the painting of the large paddle boat, the Waverley. It is such a well constructed work

Peter Finnigen: That is another early work. I would like to redo bits of that. There are things I see there that I do not like anymore. I have progressed since then. I would alter the sky, for example.

AM: Maybe you should instead do another version.

Peter Finnigen: The Waverley is a difficult ship to paint. If you paint it straight from a photo it looks flat. The ship is bulky, it's leaning out, it's all different shapes and forms, but if you paint it like that it will look like a bathtub. If I were to do another version I would emphasize the slopes, the shadows, the shapes, to give it more bulkiness, which is hard to create.

Cavalier
Flower and Vase
Dusk on the River
Sailing
Bird of Prey - Owl
Jock Stein
Alex Ferguson
The Kelpies
Glen Finnan
German Shepherd
Arran
The Owl
Protecting the Nest
Dunlop House
Two Girls
Jamaica Bridge
Have a Drink on Me
Portencross Castle and Old Harbour
Ballerina
Loch Tummel
Bamburgh Castle
Camera de Lobos
Crail Harbour

Doon the Watter, The Waverley
Elgol Loch Coruisk, Skye
Doon the Watter, The Waverley
Waverley
Rocky Shoreline, Arran
The Firth of Forth Road and Train Bridges
The Cockerel
Monarch of the Glen
Venetian Canal
The River in Autumn
Neilston Church
City Road Gate, St Andrews



The Cavalier



Flower and Vase
1912



Dusk on the River
1912



Sailing
1912

Flower and Vase

Dusk on the River

Sailing



Bird of Prey (owl)

Jock Stein

Alex Ferguson



The Kelpies



Glen Finnan



German Shepherd



Arran



The Owl

Arran

The Owl



Protecting the Nest
2011

Protecting the Nest



Dunlop House
2011

Dunlop House



Two girls
1914



Jamaica Bridge
1914

Two girls

Jamaica Bridge



Have a drink on me

Portencross Castle and Old Harbour



Ballerina
1910



Loch Tummel
1910

Ballerina

Loch Tummel



Bamburgh Castle

Camera de Lobos



Crail Harbour



Doon the Watter, the Waverley



Elgol Loch Coruisk, Skye



Photo by Robert, the Waverley

Doon the Watter, the Waverley



Waverley
185



Rocky Shoreline, Arran
186

Waverley

Rocky Shoreline, Arran



Firth of Forth, Road and Train Bridges



The Cockerel
1917



Monarch of the Glen
1875



Venetian Canal
1907

The Cockerel

Monarch of the Glen

Venetian Canal



The River in Autumn
2011



Neilston Church
2011



City Road Gate, St Andrews
2011

The River in Autumn

Neilston Church

City Road Gate, St Andrews



