

Art in Action: A symphony of creativity in Oxford's countryside

By Karen Dabrowska



Ashraf Hanna, originally from Egypt, turns out magnificent ceramics with linear carvings, happy to have joined over 400 artists, craftspeople, practical class teachers, fine arts lecturers, musicians, dancers and performers who took part in this year's Art in Action, inspired by the simple principle that people are fascinated when artists and craftsmen openly demonstrate their skills and discuss their work.

In 1977, 51 artists and musicians took part in the first Art in Action, which attracted fourteen thousand visitors to Waterperry House near Oxford. The event is now an annual showcase for hundreds of demonstrators from a wide range of disciplines including painting, sculpture, drawing, ceramics and textiles, attracting over 22,000 visitors.

Waterperry House is an ideal venue. Visitors enjoy the gardens with their lawns and shady sitting-out areas for rest

and refreshment in between hundreds of the sights and sounds on offer. Given that the first complete work of art could be said to have been a garden, 30 acres of spreading lawns, floral walks, landscaped beds, fields and orchards add to the beauty and peace of the four-day event held in mid-July. The 600 volunteers who help to organise and staff Art in Action are students of philosophy at the London School of Economic Science.

Watercolours with varying themes



Watercolours with varying themes



Mexican paper cut-outs



Ashraf, who studied theater design at St Martins, has been displaying his talents at Art in Action during the past three years. Last year he was the winner of the prestigious Best of the Best Prize. His wife Sue, a sculptor whose stand was opposite Ashraf's, introduced him to clay ten years ago and he became a skilled, self-taught ceramicist. He lives in West Wales with two dogs, four cats and 14 buggies. "Whatever moves, crawls, flies, we look after it", he told Islamic Tourism.

Coiled, soldered, sliced, melted, ground, polished, pierced,

created! Top contemporary British designers in the metalwork and jewellery section, included Joff Hopper, 'British Artist Blacksmith of the year 2007', who demonstrated hot forging techniques to create sumptuous steel sculptures,

Nigel Graham, who used traditional hand tools only, to produce dazzling jewellery designs and Maiké Barteldres, from New Zealand, showed her unique skill of molding molten silver around pebbles and stones and fashioning them into stylish jewelry.

There was a new marquee for artists from Oaxaca in Southern Mexico, a region that has a long and rich tradition of art and craft. this ancient state, some of the most important cultural elements of the ancient indigenous civilisation have been preserved.

Oaxacan art flows directly from the spirit of its creators, from world known artists to simple indigenous artist families.

Juan Alcazar the Director of the Museo de los Pintores Oaxaqueñas, the main art gallery in Oaxaca. Juan displayed his water colours, oil paintings and etchings. His work reflects the mythology of the area. There were also displays of papier mache creating installations, beautiful boxes using gold leaf, with subjects such as the Virgin of Guadeloupe and silk shawls.



Mexican weaver working in front of the public



A touch of class with antique lamps

Other highlights included:

- Glass designer Kathryn Pearce who brought her collection of contemporary blown glass inspired by colour and light. Her range included functional glassware, sculptural pieces and jewellery
- Sculptor Simon Allison and his amazing pieces which featured bronze plants cast directly from life which formed the centrepieces of some magnificent fountains
- Calligrapher Paul Antonio who demonstrated a wide range of calligraphic scripts from historical to modern as well as non-English scripts including ancient Egyptian cursive hieroglyphs
- Illustrator Hannah McVicar who grew up on an organic herb farm and has combined this with her passion for drawing to create beautiful floral illustrations.
- Ceramicist John Stroomer who specialises in the often volatile and elusive crystalline glaze, a technique which is widely regarded as one of the most challenging glazes a potter can endeavour to master. He has been making pots for more than 25 years.

Traditional cabinet maker and antique restorer Nick Over's view that : "It requires years of experience and training, combined with a love and interest in period furniture, to produce something that will grace," summed up the essence of the woodwork tent. Cabinet maker and antique restorer, his traditional dressers and cupboards in warmly blended woods grace many beautiful, welcoming homes. Jim Steele of Southam, Warwickshire a traditional Windsor chair-maker

par excellence demonstrated aspects of the making of this classic, and displayed seven variations of the original chair. The Pear Tree Teashop served its distinctive home cooked fare, while the main refreshment tent and other one-stop points, offered ice cream, hot and cold drinks, pancakes, Belgian waffles, and substantial snacks. Children, rejoicing in the freedom and space, also got a good look-in with storytelling sessions and greatly enjoyed the demonstrations of glass-blowing,

Ashraf Hanna: Specialist in ceramics with linear carvings



as the nature-fired painters, printmakers, illustrators, calligraphers, textile demonstrators confirmed.

"Once a year I am being reminded why I do what I do. And every year I take away a little piece of Art in Action to keep me going till next year." said metal worker and jeweler Maike Barteldres.

"Art in Action is in a different league - not just because it is bigger, but because it's better - you have a great range of artists and work - and the atmosphere is entirely different and special." explained glass worker Andy Dickinson.

Jewellery designer Stephanie Buddle has always found that this event lifts her spirits. It is like an alternative world of calm and creativeness where the cruel outside world no longer seems important."

