

## Ann Brain, aka Anna Phillips : A Life in Art 4th February 2024



Ann Brain, a former Chair of the AMA, came back to Leamington to talk to a small but delighted audience for the March meeting. A re-invention of self after the death of a much-loved father proved the catalyst for a name change with roots in family history: hence the alias, although this ten-times exhibited Summer Exhibition veteran is better known, at least within the AMA, by her birth name.

Ann is primarily a painter, although mixed media works and drypoint prints showcase her considerable skills as a draughtswoman. Her talent was recognised early, whilst still at primary school. An artwork on the subject of childhood memory was one of only nine prizewinners in a competition, run by the Royal Drawing Society. The

competition was open to the entire Commonwealth – just think of all that pink on an old fashioned globe as a measure of Ann's achievement.

At the time she rejected the idea of a career in art – but as a young adult at Coventry School Terry Frost, then a visiting lecturer, declared her boldly coloured geometric abstract to be the best work that was any good from the offerings of the entire class. Ann didn't find the notion of a career in art easy: yet some of that minimalism, that extraction of the essence of an idea or a view, continue to inform her work. She showed us some of her early essays in which abstraction was married to representational work. I think Patrick Caulfield softened by a female imagination and palette, an innate understanding of composition and the play of light, and with hands rather than lampshades and jugs for her inspiration. After further academic training Ann found teaching posts at two prestigious schools, first as second as Head of Art at Rugby High School. Freed from the didactic restraints of art college, but constrained by the time demands of her teaching post, Ann developed her own distinctive style from her garden-shed studio. Those early paintings, mostly portraits and still life, have a quietness and that same spiritual light found in her beloved Piero della Francesca. They did not, however, attract commercial favour. But around 1985 she had a light-bulb moment following a London gallery visit where both style and subject matter changed.

There followed an outpouring of cat and flower portraits exquisitely painted in a slightly surreal style with a very clean colour palette. Success was no less surreal, as a Portuguese diplomat commissioned two paintings from Ann with memories of his 'exquisite' table manners. Almost inevitably Ann's jewel-like paintings were snapped up as images for greetings cards and the like, and her stock went up with her pupils. On a London trip, they discovered those cards for sale in Harrods. It was, however, when she accepted the challenge of painting the landscape that her true mettle as a professional painter and her distinctive voice was fully revealed. She sums her leit-motif as up trying to say more about the mysterious, about how weird reality is. A tension underlies the superficial calm and beauty, more subtly expressed than in, for example, the paintings of Caspar Friedrich.

## Ann Brain, aka Anna Phillips Continued

Many of Ann's landscape paintings capture a magical moment of remembered experience grounded in a profound understanding of local landscape, to an extent that some of her friends invented 'Anneshire' as a replacement for Banburyshire and adjacent swathes of Warwickshire and Northamptonshire. Ann's palette runs from sombre of a dark winter's day to the clear but changing lights of the summer on arable and grass. The forms are simplified yet tied to a particular time and an appreciation of the sculptural mass of trees in summer and their filigree in winter. The sky is less important and at times appears to be the subject of the painting, rather than the land beneath. There are paintings, too, that are tied less to a place than to a feeling or a memory and are more about the form of a rural landscape. At their most extreme, they emerge as a series of dreamlike images which Ann worked through the grief of her father's death.

Ann's work has been widely collected, both locally and beyond. Undoubtedly exposure in London through commercial galleries and at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition has helped. Such exposure has led to further commissions, at home and abroad, including the strange juxtaposition in which the same painting has been displayed in a Weatherspoon pub - and used for an album of sacred music. The quality and imagery of Ann's work came to the attention of Bridgeman's, one of the premier art libraries. In consequence, Ann's paintings have found their way on to book covers, greeting cards, postcards, not to mention illustrations in books, and produced further commissions for original prints. The time passed all too quickly. Ann ended by showing us some of her mixed media drawings and prints, a new venture. She still paints, mostly in oils. The landscape continues to inspire in a way of mystery, and menace: the great unknow-able captured by her eye, heart, and brush.

Examples of Ann's paintings may be seen on Ann's own website, <http://www.annbrain.co.uk> (to a degree of colour distortion) on that of Bridgeman Art Library, <http://www.bridgemanart.com>.

**Margaret Condon**