

One of Britain's best known painters and sculptors, Maggi Hambling is also a passionate teacher who takes her teaching as seriously as her painting. She told **PAUL STANISTREET** why jokes, silence and cross-dressing all help to make her classes work



# 'I run my classes along the lines of Dad's Army'

**F**ew artists are as closely associated with a single educational institution as Maggi Hambling – still fewer with an institution that specialises in the education of adults. Her relationship with Morley College began – somewhat tentatively, she admits – more than 40 years ago, but soon blossomed into enduring mutual affection.

'I was a substitute for a substitute on a Monday afternoon painting class in the autumn of 1969,' she recalls. 'I was with my parents in Suffolk when I was asked to do it. My father grew these very huge onions and I said, "Can I have three of these onions, Father?" On my first afternoon I set these onions on a piece of paper on a table in the centre and asked the students to draw it. As I went round the room, everybody had drawn the table with the paper and the onions on it. But one student had just drawn the onions and nothing else. I said "Where's the table, where's the piece of paper?" and she pointed at the paper in front of her with the three onions on it, and said "Piece of paper, three onions", which, of course, is completely unanswerable.'

Despite – or perhaps because – of the challenging nature of her adult students, Hambling enjoyed the Monday afternoons. She was interested in doing more teaching. 'When the person I was substituting for decided he didn't want to do it anymore, it became my Monday afternoon,' she says. 'And then the great Principal of Morley at that time, Barry Till, who was Principal for 20 years and gave his life to the place, decided I was a good thing as a teacher.'



She went on to teach two days a week and a couple of evenings at Morley, while teaching at a number of specialist schools of art, including Wimbledon, as well as at Ruskin College in Oxford. However, she found the administrative part of the job increasingly onerous. 'By the time the eighties came along you hardly ever got to see a student in an art class. All we did was sit down and have very long meetings about where the money would come from in 2020. So I gave it up. I



continued teaching at Morley because I didn't have to go to any meetings!

Nevertheless, teaching is a serious matter for Hambling. She explains: 'I believe that art is a gift of the gods, that you should honour and offer up to them, and if you have been fortunate enough to have had any great teachers in your life that have given you something it's only right that you try to pass on that wisdom to other people.'

Hambling's own great teacher and mentor was painter Arthur Lett-Haines, who ran the East Anglian School of Painting and Drawing – a private residential school at which Lucien Freud had also studied – with his partner Cedric Morris. She went to the school aged 15 armed with her first two oil paintings and was invited to come in the holidays to paint and help out in the kitchen. She was soon taken under Lett-Haines' wing. 'He said the most important things to me there in the kitchen. He said that if you want to be an artist you must make your work your best friend, so you can go to it whatever mood you are in. Whether you

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are tired, bored, happy or randy, go to your work. And that's how I've lived my life. I work every day and I never go on holiday.'

Hambling went on to study at the Ipswich School of Art, Camberwell College of Art and the Slade School of Fine Art, from which she graduated in 1969. Her first London exhibition in 1973 included portraits of people observed in pubs and painted from memory. Haines and Morris put a strong emphasis on drawing and painting from life, something to which

Hambling has had cause to return, both in her art and in her teaching.

'In my class we almost always work with a model,' she says. 'We draw and paint from life, which is important. All students these days want to become Damien Hirst, which is very short-sighted of them. My class is one of the very few places left in London where you can paint from life. If you can draw from a model, the chances are you will be able to draw anything else.'

### Important breakthrough

Despite an early flirtation with conceptual art, Hambling soon returned to painting. An important breakthrough came with a series of paintings of one person, Frances Rose, a Battersea neighbour. Her themes – she has characterised them as 'people, emotions, preserving the moment, death, life' – were evident from early on in her career. Whether Hambling is painting celebrities such as George Melly and Stephen Fry, close friends or strangers in a pub, her response to people – passionate yet unsentimental – is obvious.

It is a useful quality in a teacher, particularly one working with adults, whose motives and interests can vary so widely. 'People of all ages come to my class,' she says. 'The youngest is 18 and the oldest is 83. What I like about Morley is that people of all kinds come to classes there. Some of the people have already decided they want to be artists and are putting their portfolio together – though why they would given what they will have to pay in fees, I don't know – there are people who always wanted to paint but have never had the chance, and there are others who have painted for years and exhibit their work.'

'I run my classes along the lines of Dad's Army. I am Captain Mainwaring and there is a very tall, grand gentleman who is Sergeant Wilson. A great part of it is that there is total silence when we are drawing or painting and then we have what are called "the crits". The model has been in the centre of the room and the easels have been in a circle around the model. When the drawings or paintings are done everybody turns their work to the centre of the room and we discuss everybody's work, and everybody enters into that discussion. I think people learn quite as much from looking at their fellows' work as they ever do from listening to anything I have to say.'

How would she characterise her teaching style? 'I think you would have to ask them that. I am very serious and I crack a lot of

jokes. We laugh a lot. We have great Christmas parties where everybody has to cross-dress. It's important. It helps people to loosen up. I tell them the Christmas party is a requirement of the course. It's important that people feel free enough with one another to discuss other people's work and are prepared to discuss their own work with other people. My mother was a teacher and my sister was, so it's possibly in the blood, and having a bit of a laugh is a principal part of it.'

One thing Hambling tries to avoid is teaching 'a particular way of drawing and painting'. A second key lesson imparted by Lett-Haines was that 'there is no point in being an artist unless you have an imagination' and she makes a point of encouraging her students to experiment in order to find their own style. 'The thing I am proudest of in my classes is that there is no house style,' she says. 'I treat everyone as an individual and try to bring out each person's way of seeing. With someone like Cecil Collins, who taught at City Lit, you could always identify the work of a student who had studied with him because it all looked exactly the same. I believe very much in teaching the individual as an individual.'

Morley College and other centres of adult education are among the few places left where people get the opportunity to discover what talents they have shut inside them, she says. 'It's becoming rarer and rarer and I think that Morley and City Lit and others places like that, there are fewer and fewer of them. They provide a service for people who haven't had the chance to develop some particular desire or skill they might have. They provide an essential service for people. Morley teaches everything under the sun but in my own area, art is food for the spirit. We all feed our stomachs but unless the spirit is fed it's a bad look out and not much to do with a civilised place which this society is still supposed to be.'

After 42 years, Hambling's affection for Morley is undiminished. 'I do believe in helping Morley College become a centre of excellence,' she says. 'It's always had a great reputation for excellence for its music but there's been a flourishing arts department there for a very long time.' She pauses before adding, 'The place is completely mad, of course.' And she still enjoys the teaching? 'I suppose I would have retired by now if I didn't. I must enjoy it; it wouldn't work if I didn't.'

## Equality, Inclusion and Action in Adult Education

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Contribute to the debate at a one-day conference hosted by the Workers' Educational Association and supported by the Co-operative College, on Friday 28 October, East Midlands Conference Centre, Nottingham.

Speakers include **John Hayes MP**, Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, **David Hughes** Chief Executive of NIACE, **Dame Pauline Green** President of the International Co-operative Alliance, **Richard Wilkinson**, author of 'The Spirit Level' and more. Choose from sixteen interactive workshops.



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