

**Back to Basics** with Martha Alexander, features writer for Artists and Illustrators Magazine.

*Returning to painting and drawing after a long lay off can be a daunting but ultimately rewarding experience. In this series Martha Alexander will be trying out a range of practical courses and sharing her experiences.*

First things first, I have a confession: I don't spend that much time painting and drawing anymore. This might come as a surprise given my job involves writing about art but, in truth, it's been a while since I put all of these ideas into practice, let alone took an actual course.

However, I've resolved to put some time aside every month to dedicate to my art and I'll be reporting on my progress, to give you an idea of the many wonderful and intriguing options out there. For this first instalment, the concept of Art Afloat really appealed-it's a sketching workshop set on a recently refurbished Dutch barge, the 17 metre long *Le Coq*.

Art Afloat is run by Roy May at Bisham Abbey Sailing and Navigation School. Based in Buckinghamshire, this course offers artists of all abilities the chance to spend a day painting and drawing while gliding down the Thames under the watchful eye of tutor Suzi Kennett-Brown.

It was only when I was on the train out to nearby Maidenhead that I began to question what I was actually doing. For some reason I had a vague sense of confidence, loosely based on the fact that I once did a brilliant portrait of Michael Jackson when I was 13 – and isn't writing for a living sort of a picture-making process anyway?

It was only when I realised that I would be working alongside a group of artists and a highly-qualified art teacher who would inevitably want to see my work that I began to feel rumblings of blind panic.

Thankfully, I needn't have worried. Roy, Suzi and all the other students could not have been more encouraging to me. Having said that, I felt that Suzi had her work cut out. Aside from a brief introduction from Roy about the do's and don'ts of spending the day on a river, we jumped straight in.....to the art, that is!

I settled at the front of the barge, with my only instruction to draw what I saw by breaking things down into shapes. It was then that I was reminded of the golden rule of drawing was to identify shapes thoroughly first - I had fallen into a trap of the lapsed draughtsmen, better known as 'to-look-but-never-see' syndrome.

Being advised to see properly is a very tough skill to master. My brain was flooded with visual information as the landscape passed by me: the river, the other boats, the locks and the architecture and animals on the banks.

It sounds ridiculous, but it was a case of literally separating the wood from the trees and trying to see things in blocks of colour and form, rather than being bogged down by the intricacies of a detailed vista. I found this difficult but Suzi took it in her stride.

When you have been out of practice for a while like me, it can be daunting and even frustrating when accomplished artists say joyfully, “Anyone can draw!” I secretly hoped that that promise would not arise on the day, lest I disproved the theory. Suzi did say it, but it was also a maxim widely promoted by everyone else on the boat – so much so that I began to believe it.

A tutor’s biggest asset can be their enthusiasm. I complained about my childlike sketches and Suzi said nice comforting things like, “Picasso spent his whole life trying to draw like a child”. She also described my style as distinctive, which is certainly true!

Time always passes incredibly quickly when you are engrossed in drawing on a gloriously sunny day. The good news was that downstairs Roy and Suzi had laid out a huge lunch around a proper dining table (boats are always much bigger on the inside than you expect). We tucked into lunch and a glass or two of wine for good measure – my justification being that it might make me lose any creative inhibitions.

At lunch, we shared our work, too. The other students and I felt that what they had produced in that short space of time was impressive. I was a bit embarrassed about my own haul, partly because I kept abandoning things that were going wrong: trees that looked like sheep, sheep that looked like pigs.

In the afternoon, we graduated to watercolours and although I was rusty, I was game. Suzi talked me through how I could apply various techniques to my compositions, and I did get a sense of satisfaction from actually doing something that I have been spending plenty of time writing about.

Working in watercolour reminded me how quickly theory could go out of the window: against my better judgement, I kept overloading my brush because the colours from the Art Afloat ‘starter kit’ were so bright and juicy. I couldn’t help myself! Eventually I began to get the balance right and resisted the temptation to overwork my painted sketches.

Hopefully, I am living proof that anyone can revitalise neglected skills. I was terrified by each completely blank page of my sketchbook they provided me with, but once I’d accepted that I could just turn over the page and work on something new it all seemed better.