

# Living the dream

**Most people dream of turning their hobby into a job, but for most it remains just that – a dream. For artist Catriona Millar, that dream has become a fruitful reality, writes Colene McKessick**

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FOR many years, Catriona Millar had an enjoyable lifestyle as a wife and mother, spending any spare time leisurely painting pieces which she would display in her home or, sometimes, sell on at local art fairs.

Having studied at art school when she was in her teens, painting was always an interest of Catriona's, and she had planned to go on to study to be an art teacher. A family move from Glasgow to Aberdeen, however, meant that her studies were dropped, leaving her to paint as a hobby.

"I did originally go to an art school when I was about 17, but I left after about a year when we moved. I always kept my hand in, always had the urge to paint, but then I got married and had a family, and when you have two young boys, it's difficult to find time to do anything," said Catriona, 52.

"I thought it would be something I'd go back to at some point and try to make something of it, and that's exactly what I did."

Deciding to take the leap from painting for a hobby to painting for a career was daunting, however.

"It's a bit like wanting to be an actor; you just think, 'oh, that would be nice', but you never expect it to happen," she said.

"When you say to people that you want to be an artist, it's the kind of thing that your father-in-law will turn round and say, 'go and get a real job'.

"But I decided that, since the boys were grown up, that that was the time to bite the bullet and do it."

Though she knew she wanted to return to studying, Catriona admits she was apprehensive about returning to a classroom environment aged 44.

In fact, it was her teenage son who persuaded her to inquire at The Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.

“My youngest son was working at Gray’s School of Art and one day, when I gave him a lift in, I happened to gaze in through one of the windows,” she said.

“I saw all of this activity and said to him, ‘oh, that looks fun, what’s happening?’, to which he replied, ‘that’s the first-year class’.

“I always thought university was for young folk, but there was such a varied bunch of people in that room. I wondered about applying for quite a while, thinking I’d be too old, but I decided to put a portfolio together anyway.

“When I was asked to go in for an interview, I felt honoured.”

Like many people returning to study after a long break, Catriona was worried her age would be held against her. Instead, what she found was an environment which had no restrictive attitudes.

“When I went for the interview, I said to the chap who was interviewing me, ‘I hope you won’t hold my age against me’,” she said.

“He said, ‘Oh, goodness no, we’re not ageist, we’ve got men of 75 in our first-year classes’.

“I found that so inspiring because that meant I was just a youngster in comparison, and I got such a buzz from seeing everyone when I went to my first class because there was such a wide mix of people.”

Catriona completed her BA Hons in Fine Art (painting) and, since finishing university, has gone on to exhibit her work across the world.

Not only is her work displayed in the Tate and V&A galleries, her illustrations featured in the book, *Fun with Spinach*, by Aberdonian Mike Robson, and on Monday, she will display her latest work at her second solo exhibition at Riverside Gallery in Stonehaven.

Having the courage to go back to university has given Catriona the opportunity to fulfil a lifelong dream as well as turn a hobby into an ideal career. Working from home, she is busier than she ever anticipated.

“When I got my degree and qualified, it verified what I’d been doing and gave me a chance to keep working and perfecting my art. You’re constantly assessed at university, so you have to keep giving your best, and I’ve tried to keep that mind frame ever since,” she said.

“I work from my studio at the bottom of my garden, which I love because I can pick and choose when I can see friends and family, and when I’m in the zone, I can stay out there as long as I like.

“I never saw it getting this big. My intentions were to qualify and then maybe become a teacher. I do get to teach now, not full-time, just one night a week.”

Catriona is full of enthusiasm for those who wish to embrace their hobbies and turn them into a career, and she has certainly never looked back.

“I never think of my art as ‘real work’ because I’m enjoying myself too much for it to seem like a job,” she said.

“It has been quite fruitful for me but, more importantly, it has been incredibly fulfilling.”

