

Drink in the landscape

CHRISSY HARRIS meets Dartmoor
linocut artist Helen White

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PORTIA CROSSLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

What do you get when you cross a beautiful piece of art with your morning cuppa? Helen White has created the answer. The artist has produced a collection of mugs, each displaying a striking linocut print of some of our most treasured landscapes.

Images of Dartmoor, Exmoor and the South Devon coast all feature in her work, as well as scenery inspired by Helen's travels around the UK in her campervan.

The idea is that people can take a sip from a piece of art that instantly takes them back to a holiday or special place.

"I'm a very practical person and love the idea that I'm creating something that is to be used, something very tangible to be held and enjoyed," says Helen, who moved to her family's holiday home in Devon from Richmond, Surrey, eight years ago with husband John and daughter Maddie, 12.

"I've visited a lot of tourist places with Maddie over the years and found that in the gift shops, you could get lovely unusual artisan pieces but they can be expensive. Not everybody's got that sort of money."

Helen found at the other end of the spectrum was the usual range of cheap souvenirs.

It set her thinking and she had what John now refers to as the "swimming pool moment".

"I was watching Maddie during a swimming tournament and started playing around with ideas in my mind, for instance, somehow putting a local image on a mug or a plate," says Helen, a former marketing manager for a City of London insurance broker.

"I love the simplicity of 1930s images - the colours and the boldness. I feel that they knew where they were going with that sort of art."

Despite a high-pressured, corporate job, Helen has always allowed her artistic streak to grow and has a self-taught background in everything from pottery and watercolour to dress making and knitting.

She also has a degree in geography and was naturally drawn to the craggy, wild and geological features all around her picturesque home on the edge of Dartmoor, overlooking the Teign Valley.

With all that inspiration in mind, Helen soon began sketching and working with lino cutting.

The result was a 1930s-style, retro-looking print, which she realised which would transfer well onto a mug.

But not just any mug. All Helen's designs are sent to Stoke-on-Trent, famous for its pottery industry, where talented ceramic printers and decorators transfer the images onto top quality, fine bone china mugs.

Helen admits it was tough to hand over the final stage of creative control to a



Artist Helen White at work



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Some of Helen's landscapes on bone china mugs

factory 200 miles away, but the move paid off.

"That first mug arrived in its little polystyrene box, all wrapped up," says Helen. "To finally have something tangible was quite amazing. I knew there was a chance that it was not going to be how I thought. But, you know, you have to take a step back.

"In the end, I was very happy with it."

And she wasn't the only one. Staff from Dartmoor National Park found out about the project and bought the first collection of six mugs for their visitor centres.

From there, Helen has expanded her designs to include all 15 of the country's national parks.

A new coastpath collection is planned, which will include Devon's scenery, as well as images such as Durdle Door in Dorset.

Iconic landmarks such as Stonehenge will also feature on future mugs, along with landscapes from Scotland and Wales.

"When you look at them altogether, they

are quite something," says Helen's husband John, who helps to run the business.

"I like to think that someone like Prince Charles could sit down, look at them all standing in a row and say: 'That's my country'."

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A Royal customer would be most welcome but for now though, the couple are content to keep their "small but meaningful" Devon-born company ticking over.

The Whites say the business is very much a family affair with Maddie coming home from school and helping to pack the mugs into boxes at the kitchen table.

Helen's other children Sophie, 25, James, 30 and, Robert 28, also pitch in from their various locations across the world.

But that's as far as the global spread goes at the moment. Both Helen and John say they like the current scale of things and the fact they can, thanks to the delights of social media, build up a personal rapport with their customers.

"We really value what we are doing," says Helen. "We like to think we are doing something different and special and connecting with people in a small way.

"We came down here not to conquer the world but to live in a beautiful place and watch Maddie growing up in the countryside."

John adds: "I must admit, we're still biting our nails, thinking is this going to work? But we believe in it.

"We're happy and this gives us a lot of pleasure."

Cheers to that. ■

To find out more: see hkwhite.co.uk