

Peggy Angus – the full story

Peggy Angus was an artist and designer, most well known for her industrial work and design lines for wallpaper. Not quite a well-known artist, despite the Guardian Newspaper article on her legacy, this may be due to the systematic removal of her art from the houses she decorated, and she herself kept no records of her prints. She died in 1998 at the age of 88, after a long and full life. Here's what I discovered about her story.

Her Early Life

We always start at childhood, to see what kind of things shaped the person someone became. Well Peggy Angus came from a large family. She was born in Chile in 1904, in the same year as the poet Pablo Neruda, and was the 11th child in the succession of 13. This was difficult to navigate, considering the age differences between the siblings; Peggy and her two younger sisters were often referred to as 'the three kids' by her elder siblings. This was also impacted by the fact that the social climate of the time was changing. The Edwardian age was quickly moving away from Victorian ideals, and women's rights were becoming forefront in the political landscape. This didn't mean Peggy was deprived as a child however, as Peggy recalls herself that her father would give her sugar lumps and bounce her on his knee during meal times; a very picturesque view away from the usual stories about childcare in the 20th century.

She was raised surrounded by industrialism, and described herself as a 'railway child.' Despite this Chilean upbringing from her birth, Peggy Angus herself was Scottish, and soon sent away to Scotland for schooling. This meant thousands of miles between her and her parents, a distance which members of her family often found hard to cope with. However, it made Peggy a person willing to travel and follow her own mind. She turned into a well-educated child; indeed, her father's own journals are kept in the Scottish National Library, clearly indicating it ran in the family, Peggy was set up from the beginning to be a teacher to others, and to be a welcoming force in choosing your own way and finding your own thing to do in life. As a girl, Peggy became interested in travellers and the idea of a 'gypsy,' and had absolutely no prejudice against them. She could often be found drawing portraits of the local Romani community in London, and was described by them as a 'likeness taker.' This is strange choice of words, but only helps to serve the image of Peggy as a leading artist, being able to capture a soul in a moment.

However, the entire family later hit a status of poverty, and during the war, the family was surviving on knitting machine earnings. Her elder brothers had been killed fighting in the action of the war, and her sisters were scattered across the globe. This left a gaping hole in the family structure, and meant only a limited amount of income could be garnered by those who were left at home. This experience, one which she described herself as so much different to that of her childhood, was one which hardened her into a determined and motivated person, desperate to never go under.

After the war was over, Peggy took a trip to Russia, and was intrigued by the revolution going on there. This trip helped to compound her own political beliefs: Peggy believed in communism, and later on actually sold the newspaper 'The Daily Worker' (an extremely left-wing publication founded in the 1930s) during the second world war period. Peggy dressed in whatever she liked, never minding the fashion, and dyed her own leggings and made printed tops, paling everyone else in comparison. This kind of cultural and social mixing pot was usual for Peggy, as her own beliefs could not possibly be made by anyone else. She seemed a free spirit across all nations, and nothing was going to hold her back. To add onto this, people that knew Peggy describe her as having a certain disdain for America and anything

to do with it; with her own children banned from consuming its media. Yet, she often advocated that she was South American to anyone who doubted what she was saying and thus used their nationality freely when it suited her. She was a woman who could use the truth and its facets to suit her needs.

Yet Peggy's political beliefs crossed over with her religion, and upon being probed into the question of why she believed in communism, she replied that it was the way Jesus lived when conducted in its purest form. This set her up for life, as everyone who knew her remembers her as being a very generous woman who cared for others, and she wasn't afraid to get both herself and others stuck into demanding work when they were around. All in the name of improvement for her loved ones. She could bluntly express everything she believed in to anyone she met, and encouraged them to do the same. However, this didn't stop her from being friendly with what she said, and she had the incredible ability of being able to laugh at herself whilst she was at it.

Peggy constantly practiced what she preached, and was instrumental in finding a home for a conscientious objector and his pregnant wife. Her direct conversations and open opinions were used to beneficial effect, and she often asked people why they were not protesting against something. This extraversion was unusual in an artist of the time, as well as today, as creative people are usually seen as extremely introverted, only able to communicate through their art. It is this energy that leaves Peggy's impression on people's memories.

As an Artist, and at Furlongs

In Eastbourne, she rented the house 'Furlongs', and began living there in 1933. There she established an important gathering place for her contemporaries. She often hosted for Eric Ravilious and his wife Tirzah, both of whom were marble wallpaper designers. During the early 1950s, Peggy was constantly looking to improve her cottage at Furlongs, and was keen for the cottage to become a hotspot of activity. She asked a family friend of hers to improve the building simply because she was taking an architectural course, which seems a little laughable when you really think about it, but there is such a world of artistic ability available it may have very well seemed enough from Peggy's point of view. Her belief in her vision, and in other people to help it, was everlasting. If you were a visitor to Furlongs, you had to help around the house, and every visitor could be found either fixing something, or painting. If you wanted to create at Furlongs, Peggy was extremely accommodating and set everything up for you. Despite Peggy's relatively poor state, she never stopped giving.

Furlongs was described as a 'completely magical' place, covered in oil lamps when you first opened the door. It was also an extremely welcoming place, and Peggy always had the door open and a meal waiting for late night visitors. Everything was painted, despite there being little light or water, and it was a comforting place to be. Visitors to the cottage continue to describe the surrounding area as peaceful, with the long vistas still keeping you in touch with the centre.

Furlongs was a village centre on the Sussex Downs, and the parties Peggy held were the talk of everyone. Peggy would take her guests up into the hills and claim to summon the spirits of them; it was an evocative experience for everyone involved, particularly those of children. She would also make damper bread for everyone to share, which was the first thing that came to mind when asked about these events. Peggy had an incredible patient tolerance for everyone who visited her home, and even allowed people in when she was not there. Whilst it seems unlikely at first thought, her own brand of communism was a positive force in the lives of people that knew.

Considering her penchant for storytelling, and being able to turn every story into a drama, it's no surprise that Peggy taught others. Although Peggy was a teacher, she saw the job with a little hostility, and in the early years flitted around a few schools. She always looked to be able to design according to her own creative freedom, and did not like rigorous structure that syllabuses often contained. She was head art teacher at North London Collegiate School in 1947, and left the position in 1970, her longest running teaching position. Contemporary art was often left out of her lectures, and instead the aesthetics of any piece were studied; never mind the renaissance and its artists. Peggy also spent a lot of time in Bali, and helped a potter she knew, Ursula Mommens, establish herself as a teacher and learner in the country. She used her knowledge of the country, and everything she'd learnt in terms of art and culture, not to teach about a culture she did not belong to when she returned to her position, but to emphasise the importance of probing your roots and considering the history of art.

Peggy and Ravilious become friends at the Royal College of Art in London, and can be often seen to share inspirations. She kept memory books at this school, and often could be found doodling in them what she saw in her daily life. At first it was her tile designs that caught on in the artistic movement, and their creation was a well-loved practice for her. She soon went on to create a mural for the Lansbury Lawrence Primary School, as well as murals in both Gatwick and Heathrow airport around 1955.

As an artist, Peggy created every marble print wallpaper by hand, making sure no two pieces were exactly the same. Clients were allowed to commission designs of their own, and it would seem Peggy was able to bypass the industrial revolution and make her own living with her hand-crafted arts, the spirit of which was unusual for manufacturing after such a turn in the century. This method still sounds bewildering today, yet a lot of design companies still incorporate her work into their own collections. One notable example is that of Blithfield.co.uk, who still have a Peggy Angus collection that can be viewed.

Her Personal Life

Peggy married James Richards in 1936, and they were together until 1942. Their daughter, Victoria, was born in 1938, and their son, Angus, was born in 1939. The divorce was finalised in 1947, leaving a 5-year gap of separation between the two. This may seem a long time today, but considering the tumultuous history of divorce, and the war time period, it's little wonder there was such a gap. Yet this didn't stop the two from going ahead with it, and Peggy's art also marked a bit of a change according to it. A rather dark and mellow picture of her ex-husband is no match for her earlier or later work, and can help to show her feelings on the matter. Everyone's fortunes changed when the war ended, and Peggy could not escape this either. According to her daughter Victoria, Peggy was a distant mother, and sent her children to boarding school to keep them out of her career's way.

What the Researcher Sees

Peggy inserted herself into Sussex's history in an influential way. Furlongs is now a Grade II listed building, indicating its monumental place in Sussex's history. Her own obituary ends with the phrase, 'She was, above all, a great enabler and inspirer.' Her private correspondence between her and her family can be found at The Keep in Lewes.

According to writer Corinne Julius, Peggy Angus was a warrior. My first impression of her, as the researcher into her influential history on Eastbourne's past, I believed I had found a bit of a soft-spoken battle-axe. Yet, there's always more to a person's story than that; as made clear by this project and exhibition. The first words I heard on Peggy upon finding a wealth of information, was that she had an

overwhelming zest for life and a forceful character. It doesn't sound quite the same as the image 'battle-axe' creates, but there's still a underline there. Peggy still feels like a private person, and researching her only opened up a part of her to me I believe. Peggy seemed like such an encompassing force, you can even see that in just the words written about her, and there are quite a few if you know where to look! Sometimes her views did not align with my own, and this forceful personality that was constantly reported on doesn't quite sound enticing to me as someone's idea of free speech can very often turn to rudeness, but for a woman of the time I'm sure it was magnetic and new to see in such an up and coming age. Her inability to make up her mind about her own nationality, and of course her leanings towards communism didn't strike me as someone well rounded, yet the ideas were often described as paying off well, and serving the larger community. I'm sure to truly understand her, you had to properly know how, and from a modern perspective that is impossible.

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