

When Andrew and Emma Craig opened the Skoon Art Café in 2005, they could scarcely anticipate the level of success they now enjoy, as each year hundreds of tourists are attracted by both the vibrant and captivating artwork, and the fresh, homemade food prepared daily throughout the year. Originally named for the phonetic pronunciation of the old Scottish capital (Scone), which Andrew had been using as a domain name from which to sell his paintings online, the Skoon Art Café was the first of its kind upon the island, offering a comfortable, relaxed alternative to gallery spaces and a place to enjoy art, food and traditional music.

It's early in February when I visit Skoon and Andrew has been busy putting a fresh layer of paint on the café walls in preparation for the summer season. Sitting down in the living room with a cup of coffee from the Gaggia coffee machine, and with a fire crackling away in the background, it's easy to see why Andrew feels so comfortable here, though I'm curious to know what attracted him to Harris in the first place.

'I had never been to Harris before I met my wife Emma,' Andrew explains. 'Her Mum is from Lewis and shortly after we met we were up at one of her cousin's wedding and we travelled down to Harris for a week after it. When I was in my teens I had my heart set on Arran or the Mull of Kintyre as a place to live and paint, but as soon as I came to Harris I fell in love with the place. We got married in Scarista church in 2001 and immediately started to look for a place where we could set up Skoon.'

Prior to moving to the Isle of Harris, Andrew had been painting landscapes and seascapes throughout the West Coast of Scotland. It was not until he moved to the island, however, that he found the perfect setting to pursue his fascination with the effects of changing light upon the landscape and the sea. Talking about his decision to settle permanently on the island, Andrew tells me:

'It was all to do with painting for me; I had been to Islay, Jura, Mull and Arran and painted landscapes and seascapes there and had loved it, but the idea of being here, where there is such a dramatic and diverse landscape from east to west and north to south, I just felt that I could never be bored here, there simply isn't enough time for me to do all the things I want to do.'

In addition to the natural beauty of the island, which would provide Andrew with a constant source of artistic inspiration, Harris was also the ideal location for Andrew and Emma to set up the art café as an innovative approach to attracting curious passers-by and exhibiting art without the formality associated with galleries.

'We didn't want to use the word 'gallery' in the name,' Andrew tells me, 'people have pre-conceived ideas about what a gallery should be like and although 'café' is in the name, by putting the word art first, it allowed us to define what the café offered. Since then it has become quite a popular thing to have an art café, but back in 2001 when we were plotting and planning, there wasn't anything like that. And by creating an art café here, where there was no business before, it meant that we were free to do what we wanted: it's a fairly limited menu, with simple food that we make ourselves. The two ideas did come up at the same time and we saw the café as a way of drawing people in to look at the art and the art as a way of drawing people in to have a coffee and a cake, so the two help each other considerably.'

Right from the very beginning the cafe proved to be far more successful than either Andrew or Emma had thought possible, with the result that Andrew moved out of the café and set up his studio in the renovated byre a short walk from the house.

‘When we bought and renovated the house, the side of the building that is now the café was more or less a ruin. We designed the place around our best estimates of maybe a couple of dozen customers a day and the plan was for Emma to do the cooking/baking and I would do the painting, but it was just never as simple as that. We were busier than we thought from the outset and creating the studio in the byre was a great way to separate the two elements of the business... The addition of a couple of children also helped make the decision. It apparently isn’t wise to have hot coffee, soup, oils, turps and toddlers in the same room...’

I’m keen to see Andrew’s working space, and so he takes me over to the byre to have a look. Inside the small, well-lit space the walls are hung with oils and canvases in various stages of completion, and a third of the space is taken up by a drum kit, guitars and other musical instruments.

‘It’s a bit of a rehearsal space as well,’ Andrew explains. ‘A few of us get together now and again to play traditional Scottish music. Although the band doesn’t perform out and about any more, we still enjoy getting together as often as we can.’

It’s interesting to note that for Andrew, The Skoon Art Café is a meeting place for three of his passions in life; art, food and music, and his enthusiasm for all three clearly comes across; he’s doing this because he loves doing it....

Since Skoon operates as both a café and an exhibition space for Andrew’s art, I’m curious to know which side of the business is more successful than the other.

‘If you look back at the last 9 years of trade that we’ve had, they’re both quite equally matched, the two of them hold their own, but I do think they need each other; some customers come for a coffee and leave with a painting, others come to look at the art and buy a coffee. The two are now intrinsically linked.’

Though he has described himself as being essentially self-taught, I ask Andrew about his artistic background, and whether he developed his style in college, or as a result of his own experimentation, trial and error:

‘I toyed with going to art school and got accepted in a few places, but maybe I was stubborn, or arrogant, or probably both, but at 18, I just didn’t want to be told how to do things. At that time I was already working and enjoying painting in oils and I wasn’t interested in the history of art or in what anyone else was doing, I just wanted to be left alone to do it my way.’

Independent, innovative and informed by the love of his chosen medium, Andrew has succeeded in pursuing his own path to artistic success, first through online sales of his work, and now from Skoon, which came about partly through his frustration with the fees involved in exhibiting in galleries:

‘I was selling to galleries for a while but the commission rates involved, especially in London, where I was working for a time, were very high and some galleries even charged you for the frames if a

customer wanted your picture framed. After a while I just thought, this is crazy, I need to go out on my own, and that's when the idea of setting up Skoon originated, first online, then physically.'

Now that he has his own space, Andrew is one of the few artists living on the Isle of Harris who has chosen to exhibit exclusively from his own venue. His reason for doing so, however, is totally in keeping with the personal approach that is so much a part of the Skoon experience:

'I love the idea that I meet the people who are buying my work. I get to meet them and talk to them and I know where the piece is going, it's a nice thing to do and it adds a personal touch and value to the time spent on the work and to the relationship I have with the buyer. For as long as I am here, I would prefer to sell exclusively from Geocrab.'

Since Andrew also sells his paintings from the café's website, I'm curious to know if those people are customers that have visited the café, or whether there's a market for paintings of Harris for people who've never visited the island:

'I find it strange that people buy my works online who've never been to Harris, and that does happen,' Andrew replies. 'They've no intention of coming here, and you could take that as a compliment, because they just like the painting, but I do prefer it when someone comes to the café and buys one of my paintings. It usually means they have fallen for Harris, in the same way that I have, and they understand why you're here doing what you do.'

Another factor that sets Andrew apart from many other artists living on the Isle of Harris is his decision not to make or sell prints of his paintings. While this means that Andrew may be missing out on a potentially lucrative sales opportunity, it also means that his customers are receiving a completely bespoke, unique piece of art. Once again, it would seem that Andrew's motivation for painting stems from a genuine passion for art and for his own personal process. When I ask him about his refusal to sell prints, Andrew responds:

'I've never sold prints of my work and for as long as I can sell originals I will continue to avoid it. There may well be money to be made, but I came here to paint and I enjoy the process of painting too much. I could spend the winter doing two or three paintings and then try to survive by selling prints of them, but I'm not interested in that. I paint mini oil paintings that I sell at the same price as a print would cost, so a buyer can spend the same, but leave with a unique original oil painting, instead of a copy. Whether talking about art, music or food, I feel the value of having something original has been lost over the years and thankfully there seem to be enough people out there who agree.'

I ask Andrew if he feels that his inspiration and artistic output has been influenced by his move to Harris, and whether his obligations to the café have had a negative or positive affect on the time he has to work in the studio. Speaking about Harris, Andrew says:

'I think Harris is a great place to move to if you've got the drive and the incentive to find a way to live here, and thankfully for me painting is something that I'll never tire of. Before we moved here I was working part-time, and so I didn't have as much time to paint as I would have liked but there was a fear in the back of my mind that if I was to allow myself to paint full time, I would struggle to find the incentive to start and stick with it. A great thing about the café being so busy is that it actually stops me from painting during the summer: I'll gather ideas and work on studies and small canvases during

the summer but I won't move onto the big canvases until the winter, and it's great because come October/November I have all these studies and ideas to work with. So I'm more appreciative of washing dishes and making scones in the summer than you can ever imagine,' he laughs, 'because it stops me from painting and allows ideas to develop in my head.'

As with many artists who own galleries or exhibitions spaces on the island, the summer season is often so taken up with meeting and interacting with tourists that it can be difficult to find the time to be creative. While this is also true for Andrew, he tells me that the winter in Harris is his preferred time of year in terms of the quality of light and the aesthetics of the landscape:

'Winter is definitely the busiest time of year for me creatively, there's something about the light in winter that has a very special appeal for me. The colder light gives a clearer representation of a view and gives you a far greater clarity than the warmer light and high sun position you get in summer. When the sun is lower in the sky it adds so much texture, shadow and definition to the landscape that you just don't get at other times of year. A long, hot, sunny, summer's day can be pretty rubbish, actually' he says, laughing.

'In the winter time when the sun is so low in the sky and the clouds are moving quickly across it in the wind, you tend to get the horizontal shafts of light that I'm simply obsessed with. It's often just a glimpse, or a split second in the sky, that leads to a month of painting for me trying to capture that moment from photographs or from sketches, and once I have that scene in my head, I'll dedicate all my available time to it, rather than going out again the next day looking for something else.'

I ask Andrew if he has any favourite locations on Harris to visit with the intention of starting a painting:

'From an artistic point of view I don't really have a favourite location. I've set foot outside the house with a plan to visit Scarista or Luskentyre with all my sketchpads and camera, and I get as far as the garden and just think, wow. I can just go down to the waterside beneath the house, get an idea, then spend days working on that instead. I just go where it grabs me. Things move so fast here and the weather's so changeable that it may look like it is going to be a nice sunset over Taransay, but by the time you've travelled over to the west side the sky has changed all together and you look back to see the glorious colours in the Bays. You just have to go with the flow and keep your eyes open.'

For Andrew, being totally immersed in the landscape and the subject he's painting is essential to his process, as he infuses all of his paintings with the sensations, the sounds and even the temperature of the moment that inspires him to paint. It is this emotional response, or dialogue, with his subject matter and his surroundings that makes his artwork so compelling, because he puts something of himself into every piece. For this reason, Andrew tells me, that he tends not to paint from photographs that other people have taken:

'People come to me sometimes with an amazing photograph that they've taken and suggest that I make a painting out of it, but that tends not to work for me. I much prefer to have been there and seen it happen and felt it happening to me; being able to smell the sea air and remember the sounds and the temperature of the day. That is what spurs you on to keep working at the same scene, day after day. I can always tell from the finished painting if that memory is there or not.'

Who does he make art for?

‘Selfish though it may sound, but it is for me. I’ll continually experiment with different grades of canvasses, canvas sizes, makes and shapes, or with different paint products and combinations that means that each painting I do is enough of a challenge to keep me interested. I could do a painting of the same beach, but by priming the canvas in black first, the whole process of light to dark is reversed. The end result may (or may not) look similar, but the process and the journey for me has been different each time, and that helps keep it fresh and interesting.’

Through looking at many of Andrew’s paintings, I’ve noticed that human structures such as houses or telephone poles are absent from the scene, as in fact are people themselves. I’m curious to know if this is a deliberate decision on his part:

‘It is, yes. The human aspect and the human history of the island is obviously important and not to be ignored, but I always preferred Geography to history at school, and from an artistic point of view my obsession has to do with light and the reflection of light upon the water and upon the land, so I will choose to remove people, pylons, turbines, cars or houses if they happen to get in the way of what interests me in the scene.’

With this in mind, I ask Andrew if his main concern when painting a scene is to strive towards an accurate representation of the landscape, or if he’s more interested in trying to evoke a sense of the place as he feels it:

‘I used to be quite obsessed with trying to get accuracy of place into my paintings,’ he replies, ‘but I realised that everybody sees things slightly differently anyway, perceiving slight variations in colour and shade, so I was better off trying to paint things as I felt and remembered them instead. Try to be accurate to that emotional response that made me want to paint in the first place.’

‘One of the best compliments I get over the years is when somebody comes in and says, ‘that is clearly one of your paintings’, rather than, ‘that is clearly Toe Head.’ There are endless representations of specific places on the island, just by the nature of Harris being such a beautiful place, so it’s a wonderful compliment when somebody recognises your style and sometimes even your mood, when they look at a particular painting.’

I ask Andrew if he feels that he’s in direct competition with other artists and other galleries on Harris:

‘There’s no question that for visitors to the island there is now a considerable amount of choice when it comes to art as there are so many artists living and working, or simply exhibiting here, but if somebody likes a piece of art enough, they are unlikely to then go somewhere else and buy another painting instead. Everybody’s art is different; there are different styles and mediums and prints, originals, a variety of price ranges and styles, and there is a fabulous range of talent. Whether other artists and businesses intend to or not, we are all helping each other out by promoting Harris as a place to visit and a place to work.’

For anyone contemplating a visit to Harris this year, they would be hard pressed to find an atmosphere as welcoming as the Skoon Art Café, or to meet an artist as personable, passionate and friendly as Andrew Craig. His innovative business model, combined with his highly individual

approach to making and selling his art on his own terms, are both examples of the unique relationship Harris has with the artists residing on it. Andrew's enthusiasm for the landscapes and seascapes that inspire his paintings, and the skill with which he translates that passion, that moment of inspiration, into finished works of art means that there will always be an audience, and a painter, for people who react to Harris with the same amazement as Andrew does himself. Besides which, the coffee is really, really good.