

I invite Club members to contribute articles to the newsletter.

The following piece relates to the story of a painting by Ted Coney who brought along a video to our last Club Day. Muffin has influenced and impacted on many lives (who can forget the tale of the Muffin slippers!) and each of these stories reflect the extraordinary way the little Mule continues to do so, even as we grow older.

If anyone would like to write for the next newsletter...September is the target date. All contributions gratefully received.

DAVID'S JOURNEY by Ted Coney.

The inspiration for the painting came after attending my brother David's 50th Birthday. 50 years seemed a good point to mark and I developed the idea of using a labyrinth to represent it, being one of the symbols for a life.

Several things happened to push the project along. I saw a metal toy puppet of Muffin the Mule in a museum of childhood in Edinburgh, which was identical to one I had as a child in the 1950s. I read a science fiction novel about a labyrinth of Mirrors which kept displaying different time zones.

I had already thought I would like to represent the family as different animals in a painting. I had some information about using animals as symbols for different attributes, [the lamb is an obvious one] The idea quickly formed that I could choose a member of the family which most suited each animal. My sister-in-law was not too sure about being represented by Hubert the Hippo until I told her that the hippopotamus was the symbol of the great earth mother!

I saw Muffin the Mule as an icon of the 40s and 50s, a period when my brother and I grew up, so it seemed a good idea to use Muffin and his friends to represent David's family. I also remembered that Muffin and his friends always operated from a garden in the books, so placing them in a labyrinth did not seem that unusual. The idea of using puppet animals instead of real ones was a natural development for me. I had previously used another T.V. character 'Mr. Turnip' to represent my childhood some eight years earlier in a painting about our house being in the family for sixty years.

One problem remained. Except for a few old magazine photos of Muffin, I had nothing to work from, and could not even remember all his animal friends. I was aware that the Hogarth Puppets were still publicly displayed from time to time, so I wrote to the Puppet Trust to try and obtain an address. The reply told me that Muffin and Co. still resided with their creator Ann Hogarth, who was living in Budleigh Salterton.

To cut a long story short, I was able to visit Ann and make drawings and take photographs of all the puppets. Another stroke of luck occurred on the train journey home. I met a former student whom I had taught several years before and he not only agreed to make a model of each animal but also the Labyrinth of Mirrors.

There are four sections to the painting:

Muffin/David appears in each one of them, but each time seen from a different angle [side, back, front and top]. As he progresses through the labyrinth, David [as symbolised by Muffin] meets the other animals that represent various members of the family. In the painting, the labyrinth both shows what is actually there as well as reflecting the various places that David has visited or lived in over the last 50 years.

An influence which came later was after a visit to the Cluny Museum, Paris, to see the Lion and Unicorn Tapestries. I liked the idea that the Unicorn was a symbol of both the Christ figure and also his antagonist. Also, although I've used oil paint I had tried to get the textural effect of the tapestry by staining the canvas, rather than hiding the natural surface with thick paint.

The research for the painting took place between July 1992 and June 1994 and it was produced between July 1994 and September 1995. My brother David unveiled the picture in the presence of nine members of the family in March 1996.