

Looking Glass Landscapes

In the early days of the Croatian Naive the artists were all peasant-painters. Poor farmers tilling the soil for their families' survival, encouraged to paint the hardship of their daily lives as a way of showing the world the harsh reality of their existence through a self-taught art. As a result, the early paintings of the tradition are bleak: dour in colour, depressing in content, forceful in representing deprivation, oppression, hopelessness and death.

Such art is powerful, but it can be hard on a soul that longs for more. And so, when I look at the evolution of the Croatian Naive I can see how those painters, first encouraged to paint 'what they saw,' might begin to paint the world in more expressive ways - interpreting it through memory and with longing. Until they were no longer painting the hard winters outside of their windows only, but the blossom filled springs that haunted their dreams.

Leading, over time, to the land and landscapes which had been backgrounds to the ploughs, peasants and drama of earlier paintings, taking on greater prominence and evolving into interpreted and imagined landscapes that owed more to the artist's imagination than to the view outside their door.

At the time I was first introduced to the Croatian Naive, I knew nothing of this however. All I knew was that in encountering Ivica's bird and butterfly landscapes for the first time I felt the possibilities of landscape painting like I'd never felt them before. From being an illustrator of animals and figures, I felt for the first time the deep pull of a tree's roots and the onward draw of painting the far horizon. Perhaps it was the whimsy of the wings that spoke to me, or perhaps it was the sorrow in the bird's eye - but the need to explore the landscapes that mean the most to me through spiral, flower, fine detail, colour, totem and stretching sky has influenced my work ever since.

In addition, Ivica's own garden and his tending of that garden have given me a greater insight into the practical needs of the peasant-painters who balanced their painting lives with seasonal tasks. To paraphrase Ivica when I asked why he did so little painting in the summer, 'I have been in the garden digging because it needs to be done and the sun is warm. The paintings will wait.' Words which continue to send me out into the garden every spring and summer, to practice patience and feed my soul in a different way.

And every year, this seasonal shift reminds me that while my painted landscapes may owe more to my imagination than the view outside my window, it is only by regularly walking into the land outside my door and by digging my fingers into the warm earth under a summer sun that I am kept rich in the inspiration needed to paint my glass bright all the winter long.