

# CRAFTSMAN MAGAZINE

## Legends of our time

A profile of the Celtic artist Courtney Davis

Text by Michael Ball

Driving into Abbotsbury on the South coast of Dorset is like driving into a page out of an Arthurian legend, which is appropriate as the person I'm on my way to meet is Courtney Davis, an artist whose designs evoke the spirit and style of the Celtic illuminators of more than a thousand years ago.

Courtney lives with his wife Dimity and his two children, five-year-old Blaine and four year old Bridie in Salway Ash, a village near Bridport. His small studio is immediately opposite the house, which is convenient as Courtney often works from six in the morning to eight o'clock at night in a converted eleventh century tithe barn, which he uses as his studio. On the windowsill there are genuine relics of St.Bridgit, St.Patrick and St.Columba, each one protected in a small wooden frame. These ancient relics share the room with some decidedly modern companions - a photocopier, fax and computer. Courtney uses the computer to create layouts for book pages and to work on his web site celtic-art.com, but admits to having something of a love-hate relationship with it! All of Courtney's paintings are still produced entirely by hand.

Courtney is currently working on 'Celtic Illumination', one of more than thirty-six books of his work that have been produced over the last twelve years. The amount of work in some of these books is staggering. One of his latest releases 'St.Patrick - A visual Celebration' has 128 pages with a colour illustration on every page. Most of the images are very detailed but he works incredibly quickly and often manages to complete one illustration a day.

Each image starts with a simple pencil sketch before progressing to a full-size rough drawing. This rough is then taped to the back of a glass drawing board, which is positioned with a light source behind it. Courtney then paints the completed colour image using this rough as a guide. Most of the designs are painted on watercolour paper or artists' board using no more than six or seven colours of artists' gouache. The distinctive speckled effect that is a feature of many of Courtney's designs is applied over the gouache using technical drawing pens and brushes. This description makes Courtney's work sound like engineering drawing, but this couldn't be further from the truth. Courtney often feels that he is being guided. He tells me "When I start a picture I don't necessarily know what I'm going to draw - often the image will change as I'm working on it. It's taken me a long time to learn to just go with the flow of the picture rather than trying to plan how it's going to develop."

Courtney also manages to find time to create work for exhibitions. This year sees the start of the first major travelling exhibition of Courtney's designs. The exhibition will open in Oslo before moving to France and the United States. However, this sort of success didn't fall into Courtney's lap, but has come through consistent hard work against the odds.

Looking at Courtney's designs today, it's hard to believe that he has had no artistic training, but went straight from school into a job working in a grocer's shop. Unfortunately the job didn't last long. Courtney was born with a back problem, and lifting heavy boxes of fruit and vegetables exacerbated these problems. Courtney was forced to look for other work. He took a position as an apprentice gold engraver and jewellery designer using diamond cutting tools to engrave designs on wedding rings. He soon discovered that he had a natural talent for the job, and found that his designs were in demand. He might have stayed with this job for the rest of his life, but a dramatic series of events occurred that turned his life around. In 1974 with worsening back pain. Courtney went into hospital to undergo major corrective surgery on his spine. He was lying in the hospital bed after the operation when he found himself looking at his own body from the other side of the room and saw another operation being performed, this time not by the surgeons, but by a group of ethereal monks. This experience and the death of his father soon afterwards lead Courtney to question what he really wanted from his life. He decided to quit his job as a gold engraver and joined a Buddhist temple in London.

Courtney began to draw in his spare time, producing mainly figurative images, but adding borders inspired by Celtic designs. To bring in a bit of extra income, he began to paint old furniture with designs inspired by Art Nouveau and the Pre-Raphaelites for sale at craft fairs and a gallery in the Kings road, Chelsea in London. He soon found that people were prepared to pay money for his paintings and created a range of cards and prints. Instead of sitting at the stall doing nothing, he would often set up his easel and start painting. Courtney told me "One of the first shows I did was at Lambeth. I'd had some black and white prints made and I was sitting there painting in the coloured details by hand. People kept asking if they could buy the black and white images to paint themselves, but I had to say 'no' as I didn't

have enough printed up to sell. The next day I rushed out and had a load more printed - people were virtually fighting each other in the aisles to buy them - I couldn't believe it!" Courtney continued selling his work at craft fairs for six or seven years. Although his craft fair experiences were seasoned with the usual peppering of rained out days and low sales, he attended several shows where his work sold very well. "The best fair I ever did was Art in Action. The standard of work was very high and the visitors came with money, and were prepared to buy. I was camping there for the weekend and I still have this picture of me covered with five and ten pound notes after the show!"

In 1984 Courtney was working as a screen printer and sign writer during the week in Reading, Berkshire. He began to create a series of black and white pictures that would become his first book 'Merlin the Immortal' and published the book himself, one page at a time. "Once a week, when I got my wages, I would go down to the local printer and have a hundred copies of one page printed, then the next week I would go in and get the next one printed until I had the whole book!" He compiled the pages himself and took them to be hard-bound, then took on the challenge of marketing and distributing the book.. Every day for weeks on end he filled a rucksack with copies of 'Merlin' and took a bus into London from Reading to show the book to booksellers around the capital. Within a few months a paperback version was produced from the success of the original.

Another successful avenue of work came about through meeting Colin Wilcox, the owner of music business, New World Cassettes. Colin came to visit Courtney and bought five pictures 'straight off the wall' to be published as cassette covers and commissioned him to produce more.

With one book published by himself, Courtney approached the book publishers Cassell who accepted his proposal for what became The Celtic Art Source Book. Since then Courtney has produced at least one book every year. These have ranged from inspirational books like his 1997 release 'Celtic Pilgrimages' to books such as 'Celtic Iron-On transfer Patterns' aimed at craftspeople and artists. Courtney has spent a lot of time researching Celtic designs, and some of his work has involved recreating 'lost' images from early Christian manuscripts. Many of the early books were stolen from the monasteries by the Vikings who stripped the covers of their gold and jewels and threw the pages away, some were found by local farmers who would sometimes dip these holy books in water as a way of blessing the water, but of course this would dissolve the ink and cause the vellum pages to stretch and distort. Recreating work like this involves detective work and intuition in equal measures. Sometimes only dots will remain giving a clue to outlines and figures not seen for hundreds of years. Celtic Illumination, published in 1998 featured many such images drawn from nearly thirty manuscripts spanning five centuries of religious iconography. His latest books include the Celtic Art Workbook series, 'Celtic Beasts', and the visually stunning 'St. Patrick - A Visual Celebration'. He is currently working on 'A Treasury of Viking Designs' due for release later this year.

Some of Courtney's larger books involve a huge feat of organisation. "I tend to work forwards from the beginning and back from the end and work towards the middle!", he tells me, and somehow 'working towards the middle' seems to apply to many aspects of Courtney's life - working towards the middle ground between ancient traditions and modern techniques; between life with his family in rural Dorset and his life as an artist with exhibitions around the world; and between earning a living and following his heart.

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