



PORTRAIT OF A LIFE'S PASSION

Portrait artist Paul Matthews tells Joanna Davis about his passion for painting animals and people

FROM the moment Paul Matthews sketched a curious whiskered otter on a riverbank as a child, he knew he wanted to be an artist.

The animal lover grew up in Hammersmith, London surrounded by pets, even keeping a Little Owl called Maggie as a teenager after the family moved to Bournemouth.

But life got in the way, and it was only when Paul took voluntary redundancy as a Dorset County Council graphic artist in 2011 that he could focus on his passion. Paul, of Puddletown, near Dorchester, is now a full-time people, wildlife and pet portrait artist.

And the gamble to take redundancy has

paid off – he has won critical praise for his striking works of wild animals that seem to be trying to leap and claw their way off the canvas.

The Arts Institute, Bournemouth graduate was runner-up in the *Frozen Planet* section of the BBC Wildlife Artist of the Year 2012 competition for his vivid portrait of a polar bear.

The portrait was praised by the judges for its detail, particularly the bear's fur and the fogging clouds of breath billowing out of its mouth into the cold air.

Paul said: "As a child I entered drawing competitions in the sand on Bournemouth beach and used to do well but my dad told me off because he said those

competitions were for the holidaymakers! "But to now be a full-time artist and runner-up in a national competition like Artist of the Year is fantastic."

Paul also won the Chester Zoo award in 2014 for his painting of a chimpanzee. An Amur tiger and a lynx both received People's Choice at the BIC/SHARDS exhibitions.

Paul's work has also found a special place in the hearts of pet owners.

He is regularly commissioned to paint portraits of pets, mostly cats and dogs, but Paul says he is happy to turn his hand to anything.

He did a portrait of a border collie called Merlin for a pet owner in his village. Sadly, the dog died around a month after the painting was completed.

Paul said: "Merlin's owner really loved the painting. After he died she told me she still talks to the painting because it is a presence that reminds her of him."

"The best part really is the handing over of the painting. It's brilliant."

"Luckily I've never had any bad reactions."



The hardest thing about portraits of both people and animals, Paul says, is capturing the subject's character.

Determined to see the subject through his own eyes, Paul takes his own photos of the subject he is commissioned to paint or draw, to supplement the picture given to him by the owner.

"The biggest problem for me is always getting the character exactly right along with the true likeness."

"Even if you are painting what you think looks exactly like the dog in the picture you've been given, people want it to look exactly like their own pet so you have to really see the animal."

"You don't want to be producing something that people don't recognise."

Paul's love of painting and sketching wild animals regularly takes him to Africa.

This year he will be visiting Zambia to capture more wild creatures on his canvas.

He said: "The difference between working from a photo of an animal and working on a picture of the animal right in front of you is

that you can capture the atmosphere of the moment."

"This year I'm particularly interested in seeing and drawing more hunting dogs – when you spot them it's fantastic."

"They're such a rare animal and it's interesting to be working on something more unconventional."

"Although I do lions, so many other people do, and you have to find something that's a bit different."

Paul and his partner Ann Soderberg make a fantastic team, he says, because she is a keen photographer and he can use her photos to finish off his sketches.

"Even though I can do the sketching quite fast, a lot of the time the animal moves."

"It's great that Annie has a passion for photography because her photos really come in handy!"

* Paul will be exhibiting as part of Dorset Art Weeks, from May 28 to June 12, and is producing a 2017 calendar. His works vary in price from £80 to £1,050. See paulmatthews.com for more information.

