

A vibrant African woman wears her rich colourful turban and resplendent clothes with pride. There is a regal look about her that demands respect. This is Maria, and the artist who has captured her quiet dignity and elegance knows her well and the desperately hard life she and millions of black African women live, yet as she poses for the painting, for a moment Maria sees herself as the artist sees her – a beautiful human being, an African Queen.

The person responsible for capturing such a delicate and compassionate portrait is Cotswold artist Em Isaacson. As she transposes her perception of this Cape Town woman she has come to love and cherish, she promises: “I will make you famous in England, Maria.”

The portrait of Maria ends up being hung in a prestigious gallery thousands of miles away from her home. And Em is able to write to her explaining the reaction: “There are pictures of Maria now in London and everyone thinks you are beautiful!”

I tell this story because it reveals the power of the pictures Em Isaacson creates with her amazing array of soft pastels.

Em is represented by the Brian Sinfield Gallery in Burford, one of the leading art galleries outside London, where her work can be seen all year round. It’s here where the silent voices of South African women are given a platform to shout and sing, telling stories that are not seen in print. In fact what Em does through her portraits of them is provide something words can not say. Instead like a piece of instrumental music, the rhythm of her mark-making moves the viewer in an emotional way.

Em uses each of her opulent pastel sticks as if they are threads, weaving them together to provide an impressive woven-like tapestry. Her strokes are visible, creating a textural, sculptural effect which brings her subjects alive as if they are standing before you.

I visit Em at her home near Burford which she shares with husband, Michael Isaacson, a former political cartoonist and multi-national creative advertising agency owner, responsible for the likes of P-pick up a P-penguin, The Man from Delmonte and Monster Munch television adverts. They are certainly memorable catch phrases few can forget.

I could listen to their stories for hours. Michael has plenty to share. He went to primary, secondary and art school with the late John Lennon and it was at the restaurant of Cynthia Lennon (John’s first wife) where he met Em for the first time. I add my claim to fame in the mix. I went to primary school with the talented photographer

Steve Russell who is responsible for taking the official photographs of Em’s work – including the ones shown for this article.

As I talk to this warm open couple, I realise their greatest story relates to their adventures in South Africa. It has not only given the native women a voice through Em’s work, it has given Em a new voice.

In 1998 she was a successful director of an historic woollen mill and head of the woven textile studio, working exclusively for the John Lewis Partnership which meant travelling Europe and north America. At the time Michael, who was then President of the British Advertising Creative Circle, was flying all over the world and on many occasions they were communicating from different countries.

“We had a fantastic life and a lovely home but the glitter world was losing its shine. We wanted to get out,” admits Michael, who secured a job with the New Statesman at just 19 (the youngest social and political cartoonist of his time) and produced cartoons under the name of Niky for the back page. These are now in the National Cartoon Archives.

“I wanted Michael to have a break from the industry which was changing and becoming more digital and I knew if he did give it up he

would not be able to stay in London without being in the business because he was so well known for what he did, so I booked two one-way tickets to South Africa.

“While Michael was sorting out the business, I had already resigned and was packing up our house in Hampstead which we sold

overnight. I put as much as I could in storage, gave things away and bought two enormous suitcases and off we went,” recalls Em.

Their friends said they would last a month. In fact what Em and Michael thought was a mature gap year, lasted 15. And yet something significant happened – it gave them riches that their high-flying careers could not and they are now richer as individuals because of the people they met. And it was in Cape Town, where they renovated a house and created a wonderful studio, that Em’s work started to take off.

“When we arrived in South Africa, I started again really and I had to take myself back to college, so I became my own lecturer and set myself tasks as I used to do for my degree students. I set myself a programme and stuck to it,” she tells me.

Em’s vigorous experiments and commitment paid off. Her signature women portraits were hung at South Africa’s leading gallery, The Everard Reed and in the Residence of the British High Commission. In London, Em’s eye-catching pastels have been shown alongside artists such as Paula Rego, Jacob Kramer and Jack Vettriano at galleries including The Boundary, Thompsons and The Catto.

But whilst Em rekindled her love for art and ▶

“Cape Town was a very seductive place... but I was getting more and more isolated working all day in the studio”

AFRICAN Queens

Cotswold artist Em Isaacson has captured the lives, hearts and dignity of South African women in a way that has greater power than any words can convey

‘The Gentle Child’,
by Em Isaacson



'African Queen', by Em Isaacson



'Cape Town Fisherwoman', by Em Isaacson

developed a unique style of working which was true to her own textile background, she admits she was getting homesick.

"Cape Town was a very seductive place, Michael loved the weather and swam every day; it was gorgeous and a lovely existence. But I was getting more and more isolated working all day in the studio. I saw very few people apart from the African women who modeled for me and my life was becoming very narrow," says Em.

Buying a bolt hole in Shipton-under-Wychwood—in 2009 a small cottage which is now her studio – and returning to the Cotswolds for three months of the year – was not enough.

"It just made it worse and I found myself filling my Cape Town studio with landscapes of the Cotswolds to make myself think I was there. It was only then that Michael realised how much I needed to go back home permanently."

They returned to England in the same way they arrived – selling their house, giving away virtually all its contents to their African neighbours with a one-way ticket and two large suitcases.

Three years on and Em's dream to live, paint and exhibit in the Cotswolds has come true. Having lovingly restored a 300-year-old cottage and working three days a week in her studio down the road, she is finally doing what she loves. Incidentally on Fridays she spends the day helping Michael archive his advertising and political

cartoon career ready to produce a book.

"The day I packed up my beautiful studio in South Africa I wrote in my studio diary that my life must be more than just this, I told myself that the beauty I wanted to create was through my art, where I felt happiest and that I wanted to do that in the country of my birth. I am so glad we went, but I am thrilled to come back."

"I love everything in the Cotswolds, the markets, the people, the countryside and most of all, I love painting here," says Em.

Today Em's portrayals of African women, which she continues to paint, have been admired and collected in both South Africa and the UK and are held in both private and world-wide corporate collections.

One of them is a portrait of a young African woman who turns away, head down revealing a tender vulnerability and fragility. It was inspired by a girl on a picnic Em and Michael gave for abused and abandoned children held on a beach in South Africa. The girl stood apart, too vulnerable to join in. I witness that simple beauty myself as I stand looking at a giclee print of *The Gentle Child* in Em's living room. It is the young girl's voice whispering her own story. And this is Em's precious gift – an ability to capture the lives, hearts and dignity of South African women she has come to know and love in a way that has greater power than any words can convey. And I am sure this same quiet strength will come out through the subjects she chooses to paint in future. ♦



Em Isaacson in her Cape Town studio

Em Isaacson is one of the gallery artists who feature all year round at Brian Sinfield Gallery in Burford, owned by Miranda Marks. www.briansinfield.com