

Artist in the Woods: Clare Melinsky

Clare Melinsky is an artist and printmaker renowned for her linocut illustrations, as Fi Martynoga reports.

Picture an oak spreading over a gravelly track that leads off a wooded road just after a low stone bridge. There is a backdrop of ashes and willows lining the burn that give way to birch and an occasional conifer that fringe the old quarry which forms her back garden. This is the woodland habitat of an exceptional artist, Clare Melinsky. It would be lovely to say that Clare does not just live in the woods but also works in wood but that is not quite true. Although her style is absolutely that of the old woodcuts that, a couple of hundred years ago, illustrated both 'chapbooks' for children and grander books alike, she has long since given up the struggle of actually working on wood. "It's too physically demanding" she says, "so I turned to lino, which can give the same, muscular, effect without the intense effort."

Clare is an illustrator. She is also a gardener and the plant world informs much of her work. Her linocuts have been hugely popular for decades and it would be unusual if you had not seen them somewhere. Years ago she used to work for the *Radio Times* and produced some memorable banner headlines for Christmas and Easter editions. She designed a set of commemorative Saint Columba and Saint Augustine stamps for the Royal Mail in 1997, the 40 front covers for the



Above: Hedgehog mount; The Holm.
Overleaf: Garden in Winter; Catkins.

entire works of Shakespeare published by Penguin Books in 2004, the front covers for a new edition of all the Harry Potter novels in 2009, has appeared on labels and packaging from milk to cider, and has created posters, postcards, and innumerable book illustrations.

Linocut is a technique that requires a steady hand to make clean cuts that will print clearly when the lino block is inked and put in the press. She first does a rough drawing to show her client, then transfers the image on to a piece of flooring linoleum. The cutting is done with v-shaped and u-shaped gouges, working in the knowledge that the final print will be a mirror-image of what is laid down on the block. All the processes are done by hand.

Clare works with an economy of line, distilling her close observation into robust but such well-informed images. This is nowhere better demonstrated than in her plant illustrations.

They are stylised, rhythmical, elegant but also convey the essence of the plant with real accuracy. If you look closely at the illustration of hazel catkins, you will see that it forms a beautiful pattern on the page but it also speaks of that tender moment in late winter when the lambs' tails of hazel break free.

You can almost feel the pollen falling off the page.

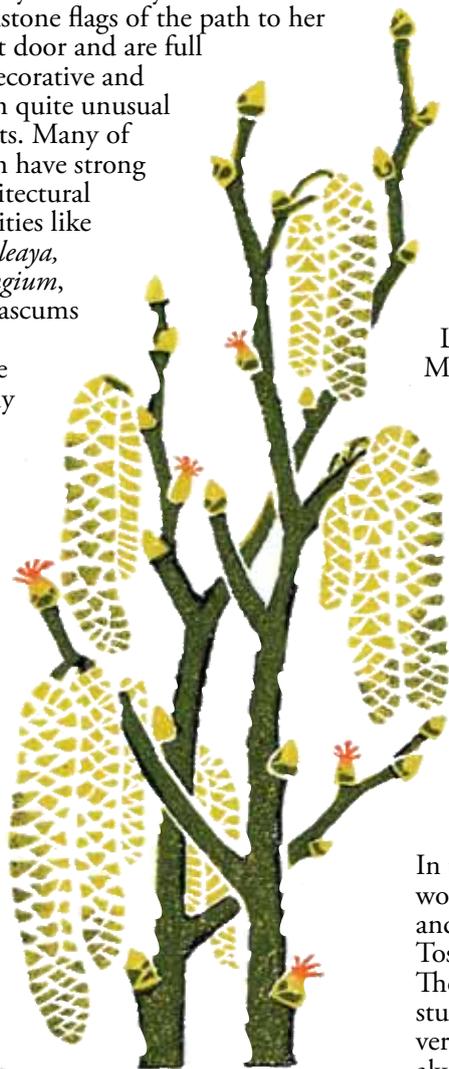
Clare gets many commissions. Something she has often been asked



to do is to illustrate people's own patch, frequently the houses and gardens in Dumfries and Galloway where she lives. These are large and complex designs which always feature trees. It is striking how true to life the trees look: the tufts of pine needles,

the dark pillar of a yew, even the patterned layering of a *Cupressus leylandii* in the print she made for The Holm. A year or two ago, Clare did a whole series of lino-cuts which feature trees and wildlife for a commission from the Beatson Hospital in Glasgow. They were then digitally enlarged and printed on to laminate panelling to line four 20-metre corridors. They bring a sense of the natural world into the anxious atmosphere of a specialist cancer treatment facility and must soothe many a troubled patient.

Clare does not seem to need soothing. She is wonderfully self-contained and purposeful. When she is not drawing and cutting her lino blocks, she is tending her remarkable cottage garden. The principal beds symmetrically line the red sandstone flags of the path to her front door and are full of decorative and often quite unusual plants. Many of them have strong architectural qualities like *Macleaya*, *Eryngium*, verbascums and some lovely



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1/100 Clare Melinsky



flowering agapanthus. But there are old fashioned pinks, wine-coloured scabious, full-bodied irises, astrantia and, in the autumn, gorgeous pink nerines.

This demi-paradise Clare shares with her husband, Ronald Turnbull, a well-known writer whose guidebooks are familiar to many a walker. Like Clare, he is indefatigable, but he exercises himself on the hills, whereas she tends to stick to her home patch, chronicling the life of the countryside she has lived in for forty years. She originally studied Theatre Design at the Central School of Art in London, now called Central St Martins. After graduating, she did some linocut printing on textiles and found herself immediately called on to illustrate a book cover for one friend and some advertising material for another. "It was a light-bulb moment", she says, "I would be an illustrator. I love to make details really authentic and enjoy researching to get that proper sense of time and place. Often the view from my windows or round my village is what informs my work, and my garden plants, of course."

In the last few years Clare has offered workshops each February in the lofty and pleasing space above Thomas Tosh, a cafe and emporium in nearby Thornhill. She keeps numbers of students small so that she can offer very individual help and classes always sell out. "There is time to make lots of work and to experiment

with colour as well", she says, "and I supply all the equipment."

Some of the commissions Clare has undertaken over the years have required her to illustrate whole series of plants. One set, *The Cally Florelegium*, executed for the then owner of Cally Gardens, appear as both black and white and coloured images. Comparison of the two forms of the work shows the real strength of Clare's lines and her unfailing instincts about whether to depict details like leaf veins or whether an overall shape is the key to the essence of a plant. There is a distinct Japanese feel to some of them which springs from Clare's study of *Hanga* prints and also from her own visit to Japan in cherry blossom season a few years ago.

A selection of Clare's prints are available for purchase from her website or when she opens up her house for Spring Fling, the annual open studios event in Dumfries and Galloway. Have a look for yourself and you see that it is small wonder that Clare Melinsky was invited to be part of the prestigious Central Illustration Agency, from which most of her clients come. If you want to look for one of her images closer to home, pick up the RS book, *A Handbook of Scotland's Wild Harvests*, and you will see one on the front cover, and a splendid one it is!

claremelinsky.co.uk
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Fi Martynoga is a writer and environmental campaigner based in the Scottish Borders.