



ANTIQUES OF THE FUTURE

A natural talent

Inspired by the flowers and plants on her allotment, **Janine Partington's** simple yet striking enamels are growing a loyal following among collectors in the know

FEATURE ANGELA LINFORTH PHOTOGRAPHS MARK BOLTON

The start of a career as a designer-maker is often fraught with conflict. Creativity can clash with commercialism until some kind of resolution is reached and either a satisfying, yet saleable, range is produced or an entirely different career beckons. Enameller Janine Partington is the exception that proves the rule. Before she had even graduated from night school her naturalistic enamel panels had a loyal following in her local area. And it was a following that grew quickly. 'I never set out to sell my work and I never really thought I'd do it full-time,' she explains from her compact, craft-filled family home in Bristol. 'I was embroidering bags and making belts and brooches and decided to take part in the local South Bank Arts Trail, selling the bags I'd made. My stand looked a bit bare, so I

took along some enamels from my first class and they sold. The next day, I took all my sample pieces unframed and again, every last one of them sold. I thought then, "There's something in this!"

That was seven years ago, and Janine has since cut loose from night school and built her own studio and kiln at home. She's also established a growing network of galleries that want to sell her enamel panels, and for the second year in a row she has been chosen by the Crafts Council to exhibit at the prestigious Origin Craft Fair in London.

Janine's enamels start life as delicate sketches of seedheads, branches and simple bold flowers, captured at the family's allotment on the outskirts of Bristol, in the shadow of Brunel's iconic suspension bridge. Her patch is an abundant, blowsy mix of flowers, produce and ponds, with

“Every one of them sold, and I thought, “There’s something in this!””



This page Janine takes inspiration from the plants and flowers that fill her verdant allotment on the outskirts of Bristol. Facing page, from left The tiles begin life as delicate sketches; finished items are mounted in simple frames





‘The excitement that someone is buying something you’ve made is fantastic’

strawberries, potatoes, foxgloves and buttercups spilling out of neat raised beds. ‘We come here with the children,’ she says. ‘They’ll potter around, and I’ll draw and photograph the plants.’

With nature captured, she returns to her studio, a tiny space crammed with powders of many hues, stencils in white card and glinting copper tiles of every size. Pots of tools sit on her workbench and pieces of her finished work sit at the back of it, a visual timeline of her enamelling which has changed from brightly coloured chirpy animals to her current, more muted, plant-based tiles.

The alchemy of enamel

The process of enamelling is relatively simple. From her initial sketches Janine cuts a stencil. The stencil is then placed on top of a pre-fired copper panel and then, like icing sugar on top of a sponge cake, Janine sprinkles her powdered enamel on top. The stencil is lifted off carefully with tweezers and the copper loaded onto a trivet then fired for a minute, sometimes longer if she’s doing more than one panel or if it is particularly large. Then, depending on the design, she will layer on additional colour. Each colour means a separate spell in the kiln and, finally, a clear glaze is fired

onto the tile to fix the colours.

It was Janine’s husband Matthew who suggested she try enamelling, although, with an artist father and a ceramicist mother, there was a certain inevitability that she would make her living in a creative way. After completing a degree in History of Art, Design and Film at Sheffield, Janine studied for an MA in Leicester. She moved to join her husband, first in Gloucester, before settling in Bristol, where they had two children, Louis and Breesha, now 11 and 8 respectively. ‘Then I wanted to get out of the house,’ she says. Matthew, a senior research fellow with the V&A at the University of the West of England, was working with enameller Elizabeth Turrell at the time. ‘He suggested I tried enamelling and has regretted it ever since!’

Janine went to Filton College, where she worked on enamel panels from the start. She soon found she loved the combination of stencils and enamelling: ‘I just wanted to get as good as I could be using stencils and different colour palettes.’ Two years of trial and error followed before she invested in her own kiln. ‘I started making and selling full-time about four years ago. Making something is really very satisfying and when you first sell, the excitement that someone is paying money to

This page, clockwise from top left Janine sprinkles enamel powder over carefully cut card stencils; Janine’s early, more colourful work; buttercups on the allotment; Janine in her studio



buy something you've made is fantastic,' she says. Vibrantly coloured puffins' and swans' heads, composed of several different layers of enamel, were among her first pieces but, although popular, they weren't commercially viable. 'The prices I could charge just didn't reflect the amount of time they took,' says Janine. 'I pared down the process to just the copper and the bluey/white glaze, and it has turned out to be my most popular work.'

It's this tightness of colour and simplicity of design that has given Janine's work such a unique appeal – just the type of thing that the thousands of visitors flocking to Origin will doubtless love. It's a high-profile show and preparing for it has meant a long, hot summer wedded to the kiln.

Once it's over, Janine is looking forward to getting a little bit more experimental. 'I'm at an early stage in my career and now there are lots of different things I'd like to try,' she says. 'And, of course, it'll be nice to spend a bit more time on the allotment, too.'

* Janine Partington enamels are available from janinepartington.co.uk. Prices start at £45. See Janine's work at Origin Craft Fair, Spitalfields Market, 23rd-29th September (originuk.org)



This page, clockwise from top left: Each tile is fired at around 800°C; a recent sculpture; Janine's moodboard contains plenty of references to nature; her new work has a much more pared-down feel

COLLECTING
JANINE
PARTINGTON
Roadshow
expert Penny
Brittain
recommends
Janine's work



'What I love about Janine's work is that it's quite unusual for someone using enamel to go for this pared-down, natural look. When fired and vitrified, enamel is very hard – almost the opposite of what she's seeing. Janine has taken the environment as her inspiration and adapted it to her way of drawing – and the glazed finish adds a beautiful shimmer which imbues the pieces with movement and light. Through her choice of material, Janine has set herself apart from the many other artists inspired by nature, and made this field her own. Her work is very affordable too. Her tiles cost from just £45 – you wouldn't get an original painting or a piece of sculpture for that price.'