

Andrew's passions

People

Sam Bond meets ANDREW WOOD, whose spiritual awakening has shaped more than his artistic career....

HIDDEN away in a secluded Cotswold valley, Uley does not seem to be the obvious place to set up an arts centre yet, in 1980, that is exactly what artist Andrew Wood decided to do.

The result was Prema, which has not only survived but thrived, gaining a reputation for artistic innovation well beyond the Five Valleys.

Originally from Buckinghamshire, Andrew began his artistic career as a student in Cheltenham.

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He moved to Paradise near Painswick but did not really enjoy the student life in the Gloucestershire town.

Unhappy at Cheltenham, he transferred to Falmouth where he discovered clay.

"I wasn't a typical student, I just worked around the clock out of sheer exuberance and love of clay," he said.

His work was experimental and figurative, he made up the rules as he went along and didn't allow himself to be handicapped by tradition.

"Unusually for a student, Andrew began selling work and on graduating was found a studio in Stoke on Trent by a sympathetic gallery.

Although he enjoyed his time in Stoke, Andrew was far too young to settle down.

In the spirit of freedom which prevailed in the 70s he bought a one-way plane ticket to California.

He took a Greyhound bus from LA to Sacramento and turned up at the art college unannounced, with only a sock full of slides as his introduction.

"Slides are artists currency," Andrew said.

On the strength of his slides, the young artist was given a place at the college and remained in California for almost a year.

He immersed himself in Californian culture, going to Grateful Dead, Taj Mahal and Jefferson Airport concerts.

After almost a year in America he returned to the English countryside.

"I remembered Gloucestershire and my time in Paradise, I thought I'd settle down and get a studio but I didn't realise it would be for so long."

He spent some time on a farm, where he learned about building and roofing in stone.

"It consolidated the Cotswolds experience for me," he said.

Some time later he went to see a derelict chapel in Uley which was coming onto the market.

Soon afterwards he heard it was being auctioned off in a Dursley pub and decided to go along on the off chance.

The locals were there swigging their pints as Andrew and the other bidders settled down to the serious business of buying a chapel.

The bids got up to £3,000 and Andrew raised his finger.

"Suddenly I was a bidder," he said.

He ended up bidding £5,100 and getting the building, despite having only £84 in bank.

He had not realised he had to get the money together within a month and managed to beg and borrow the cash from friends and family.

"I lived off selling pews for about a year," he said.

Andrew lived in the chapel in a tent he had built out of polythene and scaffolding.

The shelter became his home and studio while renovation continued.

He stayed at the chapel for about five years, working and exhibiting in prestigious galleries.

He became reasonably high-profile, with articles in respected magazines such as the Observer and Vogue.

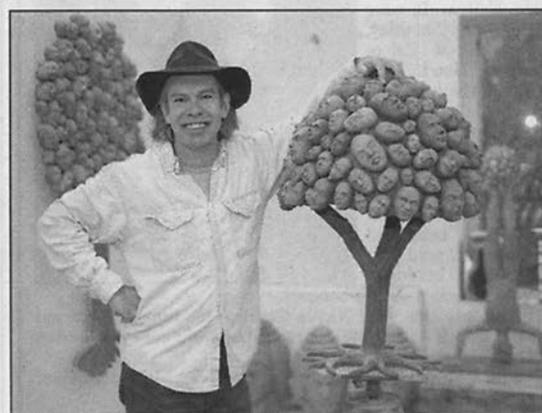
While living in Uley he became immersed in village life and local children would come to his studio, intrigued by the scattered pieces of art and motor-bikes to play with clay.

This situation, along with a life-changing discovery of a spiritual mentor in 1976, sowed the seeds for what was to become Prema.

"I discovered my spiritual teacher, Sri Satya Sai Baba," he said.

"It was a sort of wake-up call and I knew in an instinctive way that I had come home."

Returning to Uley several months later and feeling inspired, Andrew decided to



● Andrew Wood

try to convert the chapel into an arts centre.

"It sounds ridiculous but to quote from the *Blues Brothers*, I thought I was on a mission from God," he said.

Up until then, he had been the archetypal self-indulgent artist.

"I had prided myself on my impracticality and it was obvious it would cost a lot of money, where I had none."

With help he managed to set up the centre as a charitable trust. Andrew described himself as among the last of the generation of enthusiastic amateurs, saying Prema was set up at a time when such a thing was feasible without a wealth of specialist knowledge.

While most arts centres around in those days concentrated on the visual arts, Andrew wanted Prema to encompass a broader spectrum and included the performing arts in the programme.

He set about educating himself about different styles and, he claims, the centre became one of the pioneers of World Music.

Through Prema Andrew aimed to create opportunities for people in the community to become involved in the arts.

"I was very committed to accessibility," Andrew said.

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The centre won the respect of fellow-artists and the community alike.

Ten years ago Andrew left Prema to focus on his own work.

"Prema was my big, interactive sculpture and was certainly a creative extension of who I was but I wasn't in the studio," he said.

After leaving the arts centre, Andrew moved to France for a while, spending a year in the southern town of Vence concentrating on his work.

"I had a great studio in a wild garden," he said.

While living in France Andrew made frequent visits to India to see Sai Baba where he met up with a very old friend, Isaac Tigrett, who had set up the legendary Hard Rock Cafe chain.

Isaac had recently sold the chain and had ploughed some of the proceeds into building a modern hospital in the remote part of India where Sai Baba taught.

Andrew was commissioned to do a series of bas relief sculptures for the hospital, representing different sacred images.

He then joined Isaac in his latest venture, the House of Blues, where the ceramicist was hired to make 115 portraits of blues musicians.

He returned to Kingscote three years ago and has ploughed his energy, not to mention money, into a single exhibition of his work from his student days to the present.

Against the advice of his friends, Andrew decided to hold the exhibition at Stroud House Gallery rather than in a city.

Andrew has hired out the whole gallery and will be there, alongside his exhibits, for the duration.

The exhibition opened on Saturday and will remain open until Saturday, December 4.