

Winsor and Newton factory visit By Catherine Malcolm

I recently won a competition in the SAA magazine - my prize was a two person VIP trip to the Winsor and Newton factory in Harrow plus a goody bag of art equipment. I attended the tour yesterday and thought other MKSA members might like to hear about it.

The tour took place at 10am on Tuesday 19th January and I invited my friend Iain Bromley, an art teacher from London to be my 'plus one'. Also attending the tour were SAA member John Jarratt and his 'plus one' Andrew Clarkson.



Cathy & Iain outside the Factory

Embarrassingly, Iain was delayed by traffic for half an hour, so the rest of us got suited and booted in our white lab coats, safety glasses and audio headsets, then toured the museum while we waited for him to arrive. The Winsor and Newton museum contained some fascinating early art material such as archaic paint boxes and displays of raw pigment. During the half hour wait we learnt about the history of paint, including the progression from the use of bladders to collapsible metal tubes as containers, which revolutionised painting. We saw the original equipment used by an 18th century apprentice to mix up fresh batches of paint for his 'master' every day, which included scales, copper pots, pestle and mortar plus pigments bought from the apothecary.



Pigments in the Museum

The museum also included extensive information about brush making and Royal patronage of watercolour and I could have spent all day there, but eventually Iain turned up and our tour guide, Carla, urged us to proceed.

Due to strict security measures, I was only allowed to take photos in certain areas of the complex. First, we visited the colour mixing factory where acrylic paint is mixed under a vacuum to eliminate air bubbles and then milled on a triple roller chocolate folding confectionary machine that Winsor and Newton engineers specially adapted to disperse the oil and make paint the correct consistency. The gorgeous milled paint looked like lava as it undulated across the wheels and seemed so inviting that it was difficult to resist the urge to plunge my hands into it!

Next, we visited the quality control lab where we watched a spread / viscosity test plus a 'Hegman' test to check for correct milling and consistency. We also saw a graded wash test, which ensured that all tubes of one particular colour matched each other. I was amazed to discover that all of these tests were rigorously carried out by hand – for some reason I had presumed that a computer must sort everything out, when in fact it is done by human eye alone. Very labour intensive, but admirable!

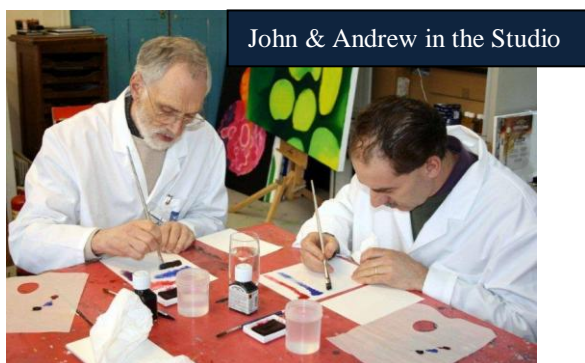
We then visited the preps area where workers mixed the paint binders. It was amusing to see that they still used the same kind of small hand held copper mixing pots favoured by the 18th century apprentices in the museum exhibit. Carla informed us that although the Winsor and Newton team had tried other, more updated methods, they had found that nothing did a better job than a good old fashioned copper pot. Apparently, the factory equipment ranged from these basic hand held pots and 19th century modified confectionary machinery to state of the art, high tech equipment – it all depended on what gave the best results.

As we passed the dedicated research and development department, we heard the fascinating story of how William Winsor and Henry Newton began the business in 1832 in Mr Newton's house. According to Carla, the only paint now produced solely at the Winsor and Newton factory is the elusive Rose Madder, the production of which still follows the original recipe invented in 1806 by George Field. In a room filled with pink powder, we discovered that it takes six weeks to turn 200kg of root into 10kg of powder and the whole process from root to pigment to paint takes approximately three months. It's no wonder that one small tube of rose madder paint costs about £35!

After a quick visit to the filling room where we watched tubes being filled by very modern computer controlled machinery (no copper pots here), we passed through packaging and despatch and into the 'studio'. At last we were allowed to get stuck in to the glorious pigments that surrounded us and we made the most of our play time, testing new pigments and experimenting with paint texture and transparency. Carla informed us that the studio often housed school groups and tour participants and after half an hour of 'play' we were presented with our hotly anticipated goody bags, each containing a selection of oil paints, acrylics, watercolour paper and a couple of brushes, but sadly no rose madder.



Iain & Cathy in the Studio



John & Andrew in the Studio

Overall, it was a fascinating and absorbing day. Thanks to Carla and the high quality museum exhibits, I came out of that factory feeling as though I had learnt a great deal about the process of paint making whilst having enjoyed playing with colour and being on the receiving end of a present, – I can't think of a better day out – can you?

Therefore, I would now like to say a big thank you to Winsor and Newton for being so hospitable, for offering the tour as a prize in the first place and to the SAA for promoting it – thanks!



Leaving with Goody-bags!