

Engraving his mark on the art scene

Peter Furlonger describes calligraphy as like "looking through a keyhole at the cosmos". Tamzin Mackie meets the visionary artist



One thing led to another when Peter Furlonger decided to challenge himself with red and green. For an artist, combining these colours can be thorny and Peter has always enjoyed pushing the boundaries. So for a one-off glass cylinder he juxtaposed a high-octane green

with a dynamic red to evoke summer, using text from a medieval song written in Middle English, Sumer is Icumen In.

Once Summer was finished and as Peter contemplated the seasons, he embarked on Autumn and gradually, over the course of a year, the artist created an evocative quartet.

Each work was engraved, using a sandblasting technique, with verse by different poets: Algernon Charles Swinburne, John Keats and TS Eliot.

The last piece was Winter, for which Peter was inspired by his informal application of calligraphy and use of a motif - a cuckoo - for Summer. He wished to incorporate a landscape element into Winter and gained inspiration by walking in the Tyne Valley.

Peter crossed a bridge over the river and was struck by the exposed geology of the embankment which reminded him of a drawing he had made 25 years earlier and still had on file. This gave him the key to completing this exquisite series.

Explaining his process, Peter, who lives in Northumberland, says: "Form and colour are the first thoughts in realising an idea, followed by the engraving. It is only then that I think about the text and decide on an appropriate letterform."

"Summer was the original piece; the rest were thought of as variations on a theme - counterpoints to the original design. Colour, of course, expresses the climate characteristics and changes, and the text conveys something of the human element and our mixed emotions."

Peter's 25-year-old sketch dates to around the time that he began focusing on engraving calligraphy on glass.

The starting point was being asked to design calligraphy for text by Northumberland-based poet Katrina Porteous which was engraved onto a panel of glass



by artist Morag Gordon. The panel was exhibited in a show house at the Gateshead Garden Festival in 1990 which attracted over three million visitors.

Peter admired the abstract quality achieved by Morag's technique of sand-blasting glass and began to experiment with calligraphy on three-dimensional glass.

Since then Peter has become known for his distinctive work, creating complex letter-textures to highly sculptural effect. He works in collaboration with virtuoso glassmakers to produce captivating pieces, including vases, bowls and roundels.

Peter's work with glass unifies letter-form and abstraction, often harmonising different colours.

Lettering may be overlain to produce a dense texture on a piece, creating an artwork which is architectural and sculptural.

He says: "This is calligraphic glass with a decorative and constructive quality. Calligraphy is about transmuting energy into a mark, a vital mark.

"For me, my work is about the abstract



pattern... its texture and visual expressivity."

A new book, *Drawing in Space: The Art of Peter Furlonger*, showcases Peter's remarkable studio glass in addition to his stone sculptures and graphic work.

His public commissions include the roundel for the Captain Cook Memorial in Middlesbrough and the War Memorial, consisting of standing stones, at Newton Aycliffe. Peter also designs screenprints and stained glass for windows, as you can see at the Church of the Holy Name in Jesmond.

Work by Peter is held by the Victoria & Albert Museum, the National Museum of Scotland, Sunderland Museum & Winter Gardens and the Shipley Art Gallery.

Drawing in Space: The Art of Peter Furlonger (Flam-bard Press, £20) is available to order from bookshops.

