

Helen Wilson Roe

■ Biography

Date of birth: 1st December, 1964
Place of birth: Clevedon,
North Somerset

Helen is a gifted artist whose paintings show people in tragic situations, but also show their hope and courage.

Helen moved from Clevedon in North Somerset to Bristol when she was six months old and grew up in

Southmead, then went to Yate and Marshfield, north of Bristol. Helen remembers that the estate in Southmead where she lived was quite tough but she liked it because of the diverse mix of people. Her parents, however, were troubled with racism because of their “mixed race” marriage – her mother is Black Jamaican and her father is white British. Helen moved back to Bristol when she turned seventeen and later to Easton, which is a multicultural area.

Helen went to St. Theresa’s Roman Catholic School in Southmead, then to Ridge Primary School, Yate and later to Chipping Sodbury Grammar School.

Helen was a latecomer to art. She always had a talent for drawing, but her mother had to struggle to persuade the school to let her take Art ‘O’ level. Even then, the art teacher was not encouraging and this knocked Helen’s confidence. She did not paint again until she was in her thirties! A supportive English teacher called Miss Millgate encouraged her ability in English and kept in touch with Helen. She came along to Helen’s first art exhibition years later.

In 1994 Helen saw a television news bulletin which showed the murder of thousands of people in Rwanda, Africa and this completely changed her life. She went to the library and discovered that 800,000 Rwandans had been brutally murdered. This was genocide. She was upset that such a thing could be allowed to happen and making sense of it became important. Helen realised that painting was the best way for her to communicate this little known story. This led her to making her first ever painting with oils called *Rwanda Road Rage*.



Helen at the *Making Sense: A Rwanda Story* exhibition, Birmingham City Museum & Art Gallery, 2004.

Photo courtesy of Helen Wilson Roe

Helen went to the University of the West of England to learn more about painting and to develop her Rwandan work. She was disappointed to find that her style of art and the subjects she wanted to paint did not seem to be welcomed at the university. Even though she achieved her degree in Fine Art, she realised that if she was going to develop as an artist she would need to teach herself.

Helen felt that she had a calling to visit Rwanda. She arrived there in 2002 and met survivors and visited massacre sites. People told Helen their stories which she felt a huge responsibility to paint. It took ten years to research about the genocide and a year to complete the thirteen paintings. Although she was offered £10,000 for one, she turned this down and gave all the paintings to the Rwandan Embassy in London.

Helen's artwork has been exhibited in Bristol, London, Birmingham and Brighton. Prince Charles saw one of her paintings and asked to meet her!

She has created murals for the Bristol Eye Hospital, the Bristol Children's Hospital and St. Nicholas of Tolentine School in Easton. Bristol City Council commissioned her to produce a public sculpture in Bloy Street and also to create artwork for an I.T. project, which appeared on buses and at bus stops.



A detail from Helen's powerful painting *Four Avega Women* (part of *Making Sense: A Rwanda Story*).

Photo courtesy of Helen Wilson Roe

After co-ordinating art projects for Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery and the Watershed, she became the Arts Development Officer for Kuumba, St. Paul's.

In 2007 Helen became the Abolition 200 Culture Manager for Bristol City Council. This means she is working on projects to commemorate the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

Helen's message is:

“ If you have a talent use it or if you can make a positive difference believe in yourself and do it. Don't let others hold you back but carry on and move forward. ”

Helen Wilson Roe

■ Teachers' Background Notes

Helen is a gifted artist whose paintings reflect the dignity and courage of people in tragic situations. Her images raise awareness about their suffering and offer hope.

Helen moved from Clevedon to Bristol when she was six months old and grew up in Southmead, Yate and Marshfield. The estate in Southmead where she lived for 11 years was quite tough, but Helen liked it because of the diverse mix of people including Jamaicans, white British, Asians and Polish. Her parents, however, were troubled with racism because of their “mixed race” marriage – her mother is Black Jamaican and her father is white British. Helen had many friends in the neighbourhood but she felt isolated moving to Yate, especially as there were very few Black families living there. Marshfield was also lonely so Helen moved to Bristol when she was seventeen and eventually to vibrant, multicultural Easton.

Helen attended St. Theresa's Roman Catholic School in Southmead, which was then run by nuns. They had a strong impact on her because although they were strict they were always fair.

Helen was a latecomer to art. She knew she could draw as a child but thought that everyone else could too. Despite having a talent for drawing, her mother had to struggle to persuade the school to let her take Art 'O' level. Even then, the art teacher was not encouraging and this knocked Helen's confidence. She did not start painting until she was in her thirties. She did however have a supportive English teacher called Miss Millgate who encouraged her ability in English. Miss Millgate kept in touch and came along to Helen's first art exhibition years later.

When Helen was eighteen years old she went to Filton Technical College and passed some more exams. School had not developed her talent for painting and at first she didn't know what she could do with her life. She became a single mother of 2 children living in Easton with no money. It was at this time in 1994 when she caught sight of images of the genocide in Rwanda, Africa on the news that her life completely changed.

Helen could not believe it when she heard so many people in Rwanda had disappeared. She went to the library and discovered that the number was 800,000 and that they had been brutally murdered. She was upset that such a thing could be allowed to happen and making sense of it became important. She realised that painting was the best way for her to communicate about the genocide. This led her to making her first ever painting with oils, *Rwanda Road Rage*.

Helen went to the University of the West of England (UWE) to learn more about painting and to develop her Rwandan work. To get on the course, Helen first completed a painting and decorating course in St. Paul's and then an Interior Design course at Trowbridge College, Wiltshire. The painting and decorating work involved climbing scaffolding and wearing a safety helmet. Helen enjoyed this and the firm she worked with was very proud of having the only female painter in their team.

Helen was disappointed to find that her style of art and the subjects she wanted to paint were not welcomed at the university. She felt that she was expected to paint pictures about her mixed race heritage but Helen wanted to make images about the things that moved her. She achieved her degree in Fine Art but realised that if she was going to develop as an artist she would need to teach herself.

Helen felt that she had a calling to visit Rwanda. She was penniless after graduation so she started painting murals, selling paintings and working as an Operating Theatre Technician at the Bristol Eye Hospital. Trying to get funding was frustrating but her perseverance finally paid off.

Helen got in touch with BBC Producer Kate Broom, who knew about Rwanda, and was encouraged to go there. Helen had to travel alone and although she was nervous, at the same time she felt a spiritual need to be there. Helen arrived in Rwanda in 2002 and met survivors and visited massacre sites. The contrast between beauty and horror was shocking. The smells, colours and landscape of the country were beautiful but it was upsetting to see badly injured people. People told Helen their stories and she felt a huge responsibility to paint what she heard. It took Helen ten years of her life to research Rwanda and a year to paint the thirteen paintings. Although she was offered £10,000 for one, she turned this down and donated all the paintings to the Rwandan Embassy in London.

Helen's artwork has been exhibited in Bristol, London, Birmingham and Brighton. Prince Charles saw one of her paintings and asked to meet her! She has created murals for Bristol Eye Hospital, the Bristol Children's Hospital and St. Nicholas of Tolentine School, Easton. Bristol City Council commissioned her to produce a public sculpture in Bloy Street, Easton and also to create artwork for an I.T. project, which appeared on buses and at bus stops. After co-ordinating art projects for Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery and the Watershed, she became the Arts Development Officer for Kuumba, St. Paul's. In 2007 Helen became the Abolition 200 Culture Manager for Bristol City Council.

Helen's message is:

“If you have a talent use it or if you can make a positive difference believe in yourself and do it. Don't let others hold you back but carry on and move forward”.

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■ Suggested Activities

These are suggested activities based on Helen Wilson Roe's biography. The activities in bold print have a detailed lesson plan on following pages.

Foundation Stage/ KS1 Activities	KS2 Activities	KS3 Activities
<p>Interview Invite Helen Wilson Roe to visit the school to be interviewed by pupils about herself and her art.</p>	<p>How diverse is our community? Pupils devise and conduct a survey about their community.</p>	<p>Hospital Design and create a piece of art work for a hospital with a particular audience in mind – sick child, maternity ward etc (Art).</p>
<p>HUGE paintings View Helen Wilson Roe's Rwandan paintings. Pupils to create own huge paintings.</p>	<p>Talents Read Helen's message about talents. Discuss with the pupils what their talents are and how they can use and develop them.</p>	<p>Genocide Research and consider the reasons for the Rwandan genocide. (History, PSHE and Citizenship).</p>
<p>Local art Investigate local art. Take pictures and discuss what the pupils like and dislike. Pupils can design art for a specific place in the community – wall, library etc.</p>	<p>Hospital Talk about pupils' experiences of hospital. Discuss what art work they would have liked to see. Design and create an art piece for a hospital.</p>	<p>Racism in schools Explore the statutory duties of race equality in schools. Read and discuss own school's race equality policy and procedures. (PSHE and Citizenship).</p>

*See the resource list for details

■ Lesson Plan: Art in the local community

(FS – CLL/CD, KS1 – DT)

Learning objectives

- To express feelings and preferences in response to own work and that of others.
- To learn about the work of one artist.
- To learn that Black and minority ethnic (BME) people have contributed to the field of Art.

Key words/phrases	Resources	Organisation/Grouping
Descriptive words	Biography/picture of artist	Whole class
Question words	Camera	Group
Why/because		

Suggested activities

- Talk about Helen Wilson Roe and show her picture.
- Take pictures of art in the locality of school environment.
- Discuss what we like or what we don't. Encourage pupils to give reasons to justify their preferences.
- Visit or look at example of Helen's work. Talk about her work and discuss whether it would improve the environment.
- Create own art piece, building on the discussion about the style of Helen's work.

Plenary

- Pupils to share work that they have created.
- Encourage pupils to show and justify preferences.

Learning outcomes/Success criteria

- Pupils can show and justify preferences.
- Pupils have created their own art piece.
- Pupils know that BME people have contributed to the field of art

Assessment opportunities

Language of observation.

Homework task or Parent/Carer involvement

To find pictures or works of art from magazines, newspaper etc. liked by family members.

Helen Wilson Roe

■ Lesson Plan: HUGE paintings (Art)

Learning objectives

- To respond to paintings by an artist using descriptive language.
- To experience painting on a large scale.
- To know that Black and minority ethnic (BME) people contribute to the field of Art.

Key words/phrases	Resources	Organisation/Grouping
Portrait	Biography and picture of	Whole class
Hue	Helen Wilson Roe	Individual pupils
Shade	Pictures of her Rwandan paintings	
Features of faces	showing how big they are* (on CD)	
	Mirrors	
	Large pieces of paper	
	Skin colour paints	

Suggested activities

- Share Helen Wilson Roe's biography and look at her Rwandan paintings.
 - Discuss detail in the faces, skin colour, hue and shading.
 - Encourage pupils to look at their faces with mirrors and describe detail.
 - Provide pupils with large pieces of paper and skin colour paints to paint a picture of their own or another's face.
 - Display paintings in the school hall or corridors. Label display with descriptive language used in activities.
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Plenary

- Respond to Helen's paintings telling the pupils a little about the reason for her paintings.
 - Respond to pupils' paintings, sharing positive and constructive comments, drawing out and extending descriptive language.
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Learning outcomes/Success criteria

- Pupils can use descriptive language to describe theirs and others' faces.
 - Pupils have created a large painting.
 - Pupils know about Helen Wilson Roe and her contribution to Bristol.
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Assessment opportunities

Descriptive language.

Homework task or Parent/Carer involvement

Invite parents/carers to come and see the paintings.

*See the resource list for details

■ Lesson Plan: How diverse is our community?

(Geography, Literacy, PSHE, ICT)

Learning objectives

- To ask questions about our community.
- To develop questions for a survey.
- To conduct survey, collate data and present findings.
- To celebrate diversity in our community.
- To know that Black and minority ethnic people contribute to the area of Art in the country.

Key words/phrases	Resources	Organisation/Grouping
Diverse Diversity Survey/questionnaire	Biography and picture of Helen Wilson Roe	Whole class Small groups

Suggested activities

- Read Helen Wilson Roe's biography and picture.
- Discuss the meaning of 'diversity' and 'community'.
- Pupils to discuss how to conduct survey.
- Groups of pupils to construct questions to include in a survey to discover how diverse our community is (ethnicity, languages, origins, etc).
- Put together survey. Carry out survey over a period of time.
- Collate and interpret data using ICT.
- Present findings as a display celebrating diversity.

Plenary

- Discuss the findings with pupils. Evaluate the process and consider how they might do things differently next time.
- Consider the benefits of diversity and celebrate.
- If diversity survey includes languages, learn some words of greetings in another language.

Learning outcomes/Success criteria

- Pupils have worked through the process of devising, conducting, collating and evaluating a survey.
- Pupils can talk about the benefits of diversity.
- Pupils know about Helen Wilson Roe and her contribution to Bristol.

Assessment opportunities

Questioning.

Homework task or Parent/Carer involvement

Help with survey.

Helen Wilson Roe

■ Lesson Plan: Racism in School (PSHE, History)

Learning objectives

- To know the legal framework of the school's policy and procedures for race equality.
- To understand the impact that racism can have on individuals.
- To know that Black and minority ethnic people have contributed to the field of art.

Key words/phrases	Resources	Organisation/Grouping
Racism	Biography and pictures of	Whole class
Legislation	Helen Wilson Roe	Pairs
Harassment	'Reporting and dealing with Harassment	
Discrimination	in Bristol Schools' folder *	
	<i>Racism Not in my School</i> postcards *	

Suggested activities

- Read Helen Wilson Roe's biography.
- Take pupils through the recent history of legislation regarding racism. Race Relations Act 1976, murder of Stephen Lawrence, Macpherson Report, and Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000.
- Consider the question 'What is the experience for Black and multiple heritage pupils in our school?'
- Pupils in pairs to read own school policy and procedures, ask questions, record suggestions and ensure understanding.
- Discuss what personal responsibility each person has in responding to a racist incident.

Plenary

- Clear up any misunderstandings or questions.

Learning outcomes/Success criteria

- Pupils have a clear understanding of the reasons for legislation regarding harassment and its implementation in their school.
- Pupils know about Helen Wilson Roe and her contributions to Bristol.

Homework task or Parent/Carer involvement

Share understanding of school's Race Equality Policy and procedures with parents/carers.

*See the resource list for details

Helen Wilson Roe

■ Resources

- Photographs of her work included on CD. Use the photo of her painting one of the faces, as it shows the size of her paintings.
- Reporting and dealing with Harassment in Bristol Schools' folder. (Copies in all schools and on Bristol City Council website. (www.bristol-cyps.org.uk/services/eit))
- *Racism Not in my School* postcards (copies in all schools).
Phone the Equalities Team on 0117 353 3308 for more copies.

Contact details

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Willing to be contacted by teachers for further questions? Yes

Willing to come into school to talk to pupils? Yes