

He paints portraits of people and pets, landscapes and even a favourite view

By Bill Hicks

WITH A middle name like Angelo, Glasgow-born Michael LaValette shouldn't fail with his new business — as a commissioned artist.

A former airline steward, he lives in Larbert with his Spanish wife Lidia and children, Jacques (9) and Marina (4), and for the past nine months the 39-year-old has been sketching and painting portraits and landscapes.

However, he insists his middle name came about purely by chance.

"My parents, Ivan and Margaret, named me after a close friend," says Michael, whose talent was spotted at primary school.

"They didn't have a middle name for me, so he suggested Angelo, although I'm sure no-one could have guessed I'd have it on my business card years later."

In Primary One at Glasgow's Notre Dame, Michael was asked to draw an umbrella.

"I was five, but while everyone drew a run-of-the-mill broom, I sketched mine from the inside out," says the self-confessed perfectionist.

Impressed

"My teacher was so impressed she called my mother to show her and it led to me being chosen to draw all the school posters and classroom art work. People always asked if I was going to be an artist when I grew up."

The family moved to Stenhousemuir when Michael was 11 and after attending Larbert High, he went on to study at Glasgow School of Art.

"A large percentage of art students don't become artists, but I always intended to pursue my dream, albeit later than I'd expected," says Michael, who graduated with a degree in silversmith and jewellery design.

"During my art school days I painted a picture I titled *The Gateway To God During The Passing Of Michelangelo*.

"A black and white road represents the right and wrong way in life. The road is on top of a mountain with drops on either side. Through the arch, which has a half-finished Michaelangelo painting called *The Crucifixion Of St Peter* on top, is water, but it represents the spiritual and only road to God."

The painting, which he's refused to sell on a number of occasions, grabs you the moment you walk into the family sitting room.

After answering an advert for a job as a steward with Air 2000 in 1993, two years later Michael met Lidia, who

But this Michael Angelo's never been in the Sistine Chapel



Michael Angelo and Lidia with the *Gateway To God* painting he refuses to sell.

was part of the airline's cabin crew.

"I spent 16 years in the industry, but kept painting. When Lidia's parents celebrated their golden wedding I did a pencil drawing of their wedding photograph for them," reveals Michael.

It was a secret Lidia had trouble keeping.

"I had to 'borrow' the photo from their wedding album, but Mum began searching for it when a local magazine asked to print it in celebration of their anniversary," says Lidia.

"I bluffed through her questioning, and when we presented the drawing to Mum and

Dad she thought it was going to be a picture of us as a family. It then clicked where the missing photo had been and her eyes filled. As for Dad, he didn't recognise himself at first."

Redundancy

When the rumblings of redundancy rang at Air 2000, Michael's feet ended up back on terra firma.

"My senior cabin crew post was phased out so I took the redundancy plunge to concentrate on my art," he reveals.

Now he's commissioned to do all kinds of work, such as

portraits of family members, pets and landscapes.

He cites a painting he did for his dad as among his finest.

"He'd seen a painting called *Girl With A Pearl Earring* by 17th Century Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer," explains Michael.

"It reminded him of his mother Olive when she was a young woman so he asked if I could do a copy. It's probably the most emotional I've done.

"Another commission was for a pilot who wanted a landscape of where he lives. It had to include himself and his

wife walking their spaniel, but the problem was I'd never met her and had to work from photographs.

"It also had to be finished in such a way that the figures didn't dominate the painting too much. It was a challenge but it worked in the end."

Take a peek down the bottom of Michael's garden and you'll spot his shed — but it isn't just any shed.

"I used part of my redundancy money to have it built as a studio," says Michael, who spent eight hours on his feet painting a commissioned mural for a customer just before Christmas.

"It cost £6000, but it's insulated, has power and is double glazed. I can

turn my hand to most forms of art, including pastels, oils, landscape or portrait. However, a lot of people ask for drawings or paintings of loved ones and pets that have passed away.

"I recently completed a pencil sketch of a much beloved cat that had died for the mother of a girl I went to school with.

Favourite

"I'm currently working on another commission of a Highland landscape for a woman who is about to retire. It's one of her favourite places."

Michael's never been to the particular spot but modern technology has helped with his painting.

"I went on to YouTube and paused a video of the exact viewpoint I wanted

to capture," he smiles, "then developed the painting from there."

Starting from £80 for a graphite pencil sketch up to £500-plus for a one-off oil painting, Michael is offering two lucky Sunday Post readers the chance to have their own work of art commissioned up to a value of £120 each.

"Most people have photographs from generations past lying around and there's no better way of bringing part of your own history alive by having it drawn or painted," reckons Michael, who says one thing sets him apart from his 15th Century, Italian namesake.

"I travelled the world over twice, but I've yet to see the inside the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican."

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