

# Stitch and Learn

## Maggie Grey

I had an exhibition at the Harbour Gallery in Jersey last year. It is such a lovely gallery and I exhibited with *Diversity*, a very talented group of local artists. The gallery frequently brings in a visiting artist (often from the UK) who then gives classes, talks and demos over about a week. Part of the visitors' remit is to meet with local schools and their teachers.



This was a very special occasion for me – meeting with a group of sixth-formers (17-18 year olds) during which I introduced them to some thoughts about translating designs to stitch.

The girls were such a delight and their teachers were full of great ideas and certainly knew how to put them across.

## The Harbour Gallery

In fact, it was two art teachers, Pat Robson and Elizabeth Le Gal, who got the gallery going by setting up, in 1998, the Art in the Frame Foundation. Pat, who runs the Gallery and heads up the Foundation, trained in the UK as a textile art teacher. She has a great track-record of involvement with teachers and students and one of the Foundation's mission statements includes the following:

*'To work in the field of art and craft education by promoting and enhancing the curriculum with opportunities of workshops and talks from highly skilled and regarded tutors in various fields of art and craft for primary, secondary and adult students.'*



The gallery also offers GCSE and A Level Art and Art/Textiles courses with some excellent work being produced and excellent results achieved, as you can see from the pics on this page. Pat says that Wednesday evenings at the gallery, with this group, were a focus of activity and inspirational creativity.

Many WoWies will recall that Pat organised *The Jersey Textile Showcase* for 10 years. I taught there many times and St Helier was a hive of industry with people rushing around town with sewing machines – or often tutors with ironing boards under their arms. Sadly, it came to a stop two years ago when sponsorship became unavailable.

Art in the Frame still runs at least six sets of textile workshops each year. 2017 features Amanda Hislop, Beverley Speck, Naomi Renouf, Cas Holmes, Kim Thittichai and others.



It was lovely to work with teachers and their charges again and it brought back some very happy (and a few traumatic) memories as it was precisely this work that catapulted me into computer-aided design back in the early 1990s. Clive had recently begun to help me with the CAD classes that Val Campbell-Harding and I were running at residential colleges such as Urchfont in Wiltshire and Missenden Abbey in Buckinghamshire. Believe it or not, people used to bring along their desktop machines (complete with huge monitors) and the technical challenges were immense. So Clive's skills as a DOS-jockey were much needed. Arising from these experiences, we were given a POEM embroidery machine which was fiendishly difficult to program – over to Clive once again. He quickly mastered it and one of his favourite demos was stitching spirals over a piece of my dyed fabric. The people who marketed the POEM were very involved in the field of education, as CAD design was part of the school curriculum. It was being steered into textile teaching, as a CAD embroidery machine was cheaper than a computer-driven lathe. So we acquired a more accessible CAD-driven sewing machine and found ourselves running in-service courses for mixed classes of boys as well as girls. I remember graffiti being a popular design source for everyone and they seemed to enjoy the experience. This was one of my designs (below) entitled *Mag the Tag*. She was given a poodle so as to appear less threatening.



Through this work, we became involved with a wonderful organisation, NATHE (National Association for Teachers of Home Economics), and helped them at many educational shows and residencies. This resulted in being able to try a variety of software packages and sewing machines and we worked with them to produce a series of art resource books for the Royal College of Art (RCA). This was high-profile stuff, rubbing shoulders with top artists in the RCA canteen. However, without a doubt, our favourite aspect was being involved with the students and that is what struck me so forcibly when revisiting the past in Jersey.



## Anne Kelly

This set me wondering what was happening today and who else was involved in working with schools and teachers in the art and textile departments.

Anne Kelly tells me that before she became a freelance textile tutor and author, she used to work in secondary schools and was Head of Textiles for several years. She says:

'One of my favourite projects was a collaboration with a group of other textile departments from around the south of England. This resulted in an exhibition of our work (see below) at the Royal Ballet School in London's Covent Garden. Students produced work based on natural forms, designing and making their garments for display and a charity fashion show at the end of the year. The results were astounding and the students certainly merited their high grades at assessment.'

Anne now goes into secondary schools by invitation and loves to reconnect with that age group. She feels that they often get a bad press but are generally positive, enthusiastic and extremely talented. Anne is always impressed by the standard of work in schools and feels that it gets better year on year, despite cuts and the squeezed creative curriculum.

A delight of 2016 was to discover herself featured on the Assessments and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) examining board's examination paper. 'I felt like I had come full circle!' she said.



## Cas Holmes

I'd noticed the name of Cas Holmes on the list of Jersey tutors. I know that she runs community workshops and had a feeling that she would be a great person to talk to about the subject. As it turned out, it was a subject close to her heart and developed into a very interesting interview which I have reproduced here, in full.



**How often do you work with school groups – tell us a little about what you do with them. How is this funded?**

I run workshops and projects in schools by invitation. My earlier work was mostly primary based and community orientated. I worked for a community arts team 'Spiral Arts' as well as in partnership with other artists. The funding would come from various sources including the Arts Council, local councils and businesses and indeed, specialist project funding within education. This early work more generally focused on my adapting my skills for given projects. I still pursue this work. However, in the current climate, funding streams are more difficult to acquire. In more recent years with my profile developing as an artist and writer, my work has been included in coursework papers for arts and design. As a result, my work has become more secondary based with the specific objective for the students to have access to my work and learn from working with me in the classroom. The pic on the right was taken at an art and environment project at Broad Oak nature reserve in Kent.



**What is your view of mainstream teaching of textiles? Do you think that there is any realisation in schools (and syllabus setters) of the role that textiles play in the economy of the UK? A huge amount of our GDP comes from industrial applications – quite apart from the niche businesses, like classy knitwear and clothing.**

I have been privileged to teach alongside dedicated and talented teachers who work exceedingly hard to develop the skills base of their students in preparation for the world of work. This world is dependent on new talent emerging from education to feed the continual changes in the creative industries. Yet, in terms of priority, it seems as though, in many cases, art, design and technology and the creative subjects, are being sidelined. Teachers often feel the funding is now weighted towards science and languages generally as opposed to creative subjects within the curriculum.

One of the teachers I worked with stated that textiles is being further marginalised within the creative subjects and that fashion colleges are no longer interested in A level textiles; they prefer students to have studied Art. (Fashion students often outsource their making – so no practical skills are required.) Teaching of textiles needs to be relevant to the 21st century, as part of art, design and technology. It is how textiles are perceived in the future that will determine its survival, and its relationship to issues of sustainability and design as relevant to small-scale and industrial applications in the face of rapid changes in the global market.

Many teachers I have worked with have expressed their concern that, with the pressure of EBacc\* dominating the educational climate in schools, alongside falling budgets, the teaching of creative subjects, including textiles and art, are under competition from academic, financial and timetable pressure.



*Secondary School Project: An installation at Bradbourne School, Kent.*



### **What is the benefit of having a practising artist in the school?**

The inter-relationship between artists and schools offers a better appreciation of the roles that art and textiles offer to the world of work, community, health and leisure and helps students to see that it is a viable career option. Nautical Threads, a recent project with Dover Arts Development, led by Clare Smith, saw artists, teachers and students working together. This supported the Artsmark and Arts Award programme and formed part of teacher and peer group training. This, in turn, led to a collaborative project which also engaged writers and musicians and resulted in a series of exhibitions in Kent at the end of the project. One of the lead teachers on the projects, Petra Mathews-Crow, who hosted the lead-in workshops at her school stated:

*Having a practising artist in school working alongside teachers and/or students is invaluable. They bring different skills and knowledge beyond those accessed in school and help invigorate subjects, inspiring and up-skilling teachers and students whilst also illustrating potential career options in a real and tangible way. Having the artists Cas Holmes and Tania MacCormack working on the Nautical Threads project helped to enrich the experience for all involved. They brought a wealth of knowledge and skill which enabled the process, from starting points to final outcomes, to be fresh and exciting.*



Additional comment from Clare Smith:

*I think that the benefit of having artists in schools is that they can inspire learning, raise aspirations and, above all, make learning enjoyable to boost confidence.*

*Artists can bring a fresh perspective and this encourages critical thinking and helps children learn to develop skills such as explaining judgments and taking part in conversations with others who may think differently.*



Photos from the Nautical Threads project.

I must record my thanks to everyone who helped me put this article together, especially Anne Kelly and Cas Holmes. Cas also provided these useful links.

### Useful links

<http://www.dadonline.eu/projects/nautical-threads/>

<http://www.dadonline.eu/updates/nautical-threads-layers-lines-images/>

### Images

4 from Nautical Threads

1 from Broad Oak Nature Reserve, Art, Education and Environment

1 from Secondary School Project; Installation Bradbourne School, Kent

### Notes

\*The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) is a performance measure for schools, awarded when students secure a grade C or above at GCSE level across a core of five academic subjects – English, Mathematics, History or Geography, the sciences and a language. It is not a qualification in itself. By introducing this performance measure, the Government hopes that more pupils will be offered the chance to take a broad core of more traditional academic options.

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