



Threads Through Time

As the Royal School of Needlework celebrates its 150th anniversary, we take a reflective look at the enduring role the charity and its collection play in keeping the art of hand embroidery alive.

It's well-known that the Royal School of Needlework has a global reputation in training excellence in hand embroidery. Their degree course is the only one of its kind in the world. From the outset, Chief Executive, Dr Susan Kay-Williams is keen to dispel a myth: the RSN is not for the elite; rather, it trains and produces the elite. It's a clear statement of intent that goes right to the heart of their operation.

The Founding Principles

Established in 1872, the charity's two founding principles are still pertinent today. The first centred on keeping the art of hand embroidery alive. Back in 1872 their founder, Lady Victoria Welby, recognised that unless positive action was taken knowledge of the

specialist techniques would be lost. Berlin wool work had become popular, but this brash and chunky form of simple canvaswork could easily be done at home. Its accessibility and mass appeal threatened to de-skill embroidery.

The second founding principle was to offer suitable occupation to educated, middle-class women who had become destitute through no fault of their own. These days the RSN attracts men and women from all walks of life and continues to prove embroidery can provide a sustainable career.

In the 19th century there wasn't the safety net of the welfare state system if you had no family to fall back on. Potential candidates were given nine days to prove their skills – although if they failed to make the grade after three days, they would be sent away. For those considered to

have potential, the best they could achieve was 'good general worker'. Once in the workroom, they could earn a living.

They worked in teams to produce the large pieces of art needlework that their founder wanted to be seen in galleries and stately homes. Designs by Edward Burne-Jones could easily span six feet. In 1876 the RSN sent 160 pieces for the Philadelphia Centennial exhibition. These included substantial wall hangings designed by Walter Crane.

To ensure commissions could be completed in time the principle of collective working was adopted: 'never a seat shall grow cold'. So, when one person got up, someone else sat down and continued, but the finished piece would look like the work of one person. It's a commercially savvy approach that's still used on larger studio projects today.

Challenge and Change

Although the founding principles have weathered the years, it's not always been plain sailing for the charity. In her spare time, during lockdowns, Susan began researching a book on the history of the RSN. This has included going through all the minute books. There are clearly points in their recent past when they came perilously close to not being here.

At the beginning of the 1960s, a review by the Ministry of Education identified that many aspects of the curriculum hadn't adequately kept pace. They deemed the two-year certificate was no longer a suitable qualification for teaching and insisted a costly full-time head of training be appointed. The loss of income and extra expense resulted in the closure of the training school.

It also forced change. An apprenticeship was developed that married learning traditional techniques with the practical skills needed for the workroom. It meant more formal consideration was given to the development of commercial embroidery skills; previously these had been covered through on-the-job training.

Crisis hit again in the late 1980s. Again, money was the root cause. The charity was based at Princes Gate in Kensington. Although basic remedial work had been carried out in the early 1950s, the building was dilapidated and needed thousands of pounds spending on it. In fact, Anne Butcher, Head of Studio & Teaching, can remember a net hung across one of the rooms to catch any bits that fell off the ceiling!

The Queen Mother was the RSN patron. Phonecalls from her offices resulted in space being offered at Hampton Court. Although at the time it was under civil service rule, and they were horrified by the idea of paying customers coming to the Palace. Alternative accommodation hastily purchased in Covent Garden for the commercial arm proved costly and unsuccessful. Narrowly avoiding collapse, the RSN re-trenched to Hampton Court. The operation became smaller, and the re-build began.



Staying on Course

When Dr Susan Kay-Williams joined the charity 14 years ago, it did not need anyone else who could stitch. Her focus was on balancing the books: significantly more was being spent than was being brought in on an annual basis. Her helmsmanship has steered the charity to sounder financial waters without compromising creativity. Many aspects of the training programme have been revamped to ensure offerings are still relevant and viable without losing sight of the founding principles.

Recent issues posed by the pandemic could have knocked this careful planning off course. Rather than panic, they took a moment to re-group. As quality is their by-word, they were only comfortable translating face-to-face classes to online versions once confident the technology existed to back up those standards. High-definition visualisers were key as they make the essential close-up demonstrations possible.

Other opportunities were explored. In 2020 a short course called Technical Tuesdays was launched. Over three terms of ten weeks, participants learnt a repertoire of thirty Jacobean crewelwork stitches with the opportunity to see key pieces from the collection for context. It quickly became a winning format. There was no dilution of training in core technical skills. Multiple classes could be run with different time slots thus allowing more students access and from anywhere in the world. Last year a blackwork version was added, with plans to include goldwork in the future.

Space to Breathe

It's been a tumultuous couple of years. When Dr Susan Kay-Williams is asked what they are doing to mark the RSN's 150th anniversary, the answer is quick and unequivocal: 'Breathing! We are still here!' That said, with her next breath, Susan goes on to outline new initiatives for the future...

Beyond the expansion of Technical Tuesdays, they are keen to take a deeper look at the role of stitch in positive mental health and well-being. It's not a new area. They've known about the link since World War I and have promoted initiatives like 'Stitch a Selfie' through schools. Their teaching has offered many a much-needed link, but maybe there is more, something just as rich: the provision of a safe place, a sense of community and connection.

Another major area is the digitisation of the collection and key parts of the archive. The collection consists of over 5,000 textile items and is being added to constantly. Realistically the collection should be better known but sadly even the most significant pieces are kept in storage and aside from exhibitions are only accessible to those attending Hampton Court.

A digital version would open the collection to a wider audience, especially as online access and viewing has become altogether more acceptable. They had hoped to secure funding from the National Lottery. Constant changes to constraints and criteria around the application process have thwarted progress. Reluctantly they have opted to pursue other avenues.

In the meantime, the RSN collection plays a vital role in enriching and inspiring student experience across the board. They pride themselves in their teaching of the traditional techniques and preventing skills being lost. Studying, handling and even

working on items from the collection gives unique historical perspective to develop and deepen understanding. Often resulting in individual pieces being coveted.



No Ordinary Scrapbook

When asked to select her favourite piece from the collection, Susan shows no hesitation as she plumps for *The Grove Book*. It was put together by a lady called Georgina Annie Grove in 1919. While travelling round Europe with her soldier husband, she collected fragments and bits of textiles. Hundreds of these snipped samples were collated and stitched into a specially made book.

It's packed with countless fabulous pieces, and often appears at exhibitions because it can be displayed at a relevant page. The book is also huge, requiring two hands to carry it. It even has its own cushion for support. It probably includes their oldest piece: a small woven fragment possibly from around 600AD with characters that have immensely long fingers. Clearly Georgina's weapon of choice was scissors because there's a bit of an 18th century French gentleman's waistcoat and part of a stole that have obviously been cut off!

The front cover of the book is worked in Casalguidi, which suggests Georgina was an accomplished needlewoman in her own right as it's not the easiest of techniques to master. It is known she died around 1923/4. The book was presented to the RSN by her husband in 1924. Information thereafter about Georgina and the samples is sketchy. Take the charming piece of canvaswork showing a man and woman playing musical instruments, it is simply labelled: 'English. Early 18th Cent.'

It's a source of frustration and delight for Susan. She views it as the book that keeps on giving; it throws up questions that fuel her curiosity. Where did the samples come from? What were the circumstances? The details? It holds such a special place, she will be hosting an online talk to unpack *The Grove Book* on 9 March 2022. You can find more details on the RSN website. →



A French Fancy?

Anne Butcher started as an apprentice at the RSN in 1982. Even with a wealth of experience to draw on, she is equally quick to select her all-time favourite. She is effervescent about a stunning four-panelled screen that's around 4 feet high. Again, it's one person's work, also donated and again they have little idea about the stitcher's background or training. Although Anne's expert eye detects it was embroidered by someone with talent.

Anne also surmises it was likely stitched for personal use, around the 1930s, and is impressed by the thought, time and planning it would have taken. It's stitched in crewelwork throughout and probably using fine French wools that have retained their beautiful lustre. It's a wonderfully detailed design with something new to see every time you look at it. There's extensive and effective use of bullion knots that Anne admires, especially as the stitch has never been a favourite - having once viewed them as maggots with woolly bottoms!

Studying the Past

In the Future Tutors programme, a practical hands-on approach to the collection is adopted. As qualified tutors, they need to be the technical crème de la crème to pass those skills to the next generation of



embroiderers. They are taught to the highest standard. Their third year is spent in the studio learning the techniques associated with restoration and conservation.

Skills, such as supporting and securing, are acquired by working directly on pieces selected from the collection. If the background fabric has deteriorated a more appropriate way to save the piece might be to use the transfer technique, where the embroidery is placed on new background silk then edged to blend it in. As they work, students pay constant respect to the life of the item. Thread shades and levels of wear are painstakingly matched. They might restabilise and patch worn areas, or complete lost motifs.

Anne extols the benefits of being able to switch between back and front so they can establish how a piece was worked originally. Methods change over time and can be at odds with current practice. They might discover how a chenille stitch was formed



in previous centuries. Or be surprised at the use of paste on the reverse. Uncovering previous techniques and trying to replicate them is hugely fascinating and a constant learning process.

She remembers rejoicing at the arrival of coloured metal threads in the 1990s. Yet they are clearly featured in a stumpwork piece from the 17th century. Although the fine silk wrapped wires available then can't be found today, historic pieces like this are still shaping new classes and introducing what's picked up from the collection to more embroiderers. Tutor and *Stitch* contributor, Jen Goodwin took the figure and dog as the basis for her



self-paced online introduction to stumpwork course. While a souvenir catalogue from the coronation exhibition in 1953 inspired Deborah Wilding's anniversary day class.

There's also a sampler in the collection that is a replica of the pattern in the Queen's coronation robe. And coronation goldwork is a particular technique taught to Future Tutors. It's worked on velvet and heavily padded using carpet felt. This surprising material is used to mould and create the height needed for areas like the muscle tone on the lion featured in the RSN coat of arms. The layers can be 1-1¼ inch thick and can be tough on hands. If any students aren't wearing thimbles, they will be when they finish.



Informing the Future

Angie Wyman heads up the degree course; graduates will likely make a creative career from embroidery. One of the first tasks she sets does not involve needle and thread. Instead, students select an item from the handling collection. They study the marks made by the stitches and draw what they see on paper in black pen. Observing surface patterns and noticing the effects stitches create are core skills to develop.

Students go on to choose another item from the handling collection, this time to research. They aim to interrogate the piece until it reveals its story. Why were the beautiful silk-shaded slipper fronts left unfinished? Was the elaborate goldwork address frame from India altered because tastes changed? What is so special about the simple cross-stitched initial done by a man?

It's a clever exercise that encourages students to be curious and engage with textiles on a whole new level. When gently prompted about their items, they talk freely,

lighting up and enthusing about something they might have casually disregarded just weeks before. These investigations make a vital connection with the past that will help shape them as the practitioners of tomorrow. ❤️



150 YEARS OF THE ROYAL SCHOOL OF NEEDLEWORK: CROWN TO CATWALK

WHAT'S ON

1 APRIL – 4 SEPTEMBER 2022

The Fashion & Textile Museum, 83
Bermondsey Street, London SE1 3XF

See selected items from the collection for yourself with this unique exhibition exploring the RSN's contribution to the world of embroidery and showcasing its remarkable history.

Open Tuesday to Saturday 11.00-18.00.

Tickets: £12.65 (adult), £11.55 (concessions), £10.45 (students), under 12s free.

Pre-book at: ftmlondon.org

