

Meike Dalal-Laurenson

BA [Hons] Constructed Textiles

I hear that you are editor of Echoes, The International Feltmakers Association's journal. How long have you been doing this job?

Please note that since December 2007, our journal has appeared under the more apt title of 'Felt Matters' and I have been editor for the last five years.

How did you become interested in feltmaking?

Along with our move away from London to a more rural setting and self-sufficiency in mind, we acquired a flock of four Shetland sheep to graze the paddocks. Spinning led to feltmaking, a more productive end product in my view.

Why do you think that feltmaking is a good medium?

During my constructed textile B.A. [Hons] degree at Farnham, I realised that I could create a piece of fabric much faster by felting wool rather than weaving it. Wool is ecologically sound and felt is so versatile.

What do you like to make with felt?

Depends on the purpose in mind. Hats are good for exhibitions but scarves sell better. I would like to make more wearables like jackets and waistcoats but they need time and energy; I would not want to sell them and I don't need that many clothes.

Is a lengthy process?

Depends on the size and weight of the felt you want to produce ie a fine scarf or a floor felt. It also depends on whether you are starting with raw or processed wool, whether you want to dye the fibres yourself or buy in ready dyed wool, whether you are sampling or progressing on to the actual making. At my annual 'Art in Action' workshop, each of the four 3-7 year olds can produce a small table mat sized piece of felt, ready to frame, in one hour.

Have you done much research on the history of feltmaking?

One of the aims of our journal is to cover the history of feltmaking and I am always on the look out for news from around the world. Our March 2008 issue included a review and images of some detailed 8th century Shoso-in felts which were shown at the Nara National Museum in Japan. This took several months to organise including seeking permission to publish images of works belonging to the Emperor.

I believe that the IFA make strong links with feltmakers in other countries. Where have you been in your travels abroad to meet other feltmakers?

The Netherlands, France, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Spain, Turkey, Switzerland, South Africa, Australia, Nepal, India

What have you learnt from these links?

Feltmakers have arrived at various methods, make use of lots of different types of wools and there is a rich fountain of knowledge and skills to be shared. Getting to know people also meant that they are willing to contribute to our journal and act as a point of contact to feltmaker visitors from other countries.

Has it effected your own work?

Sometimes the purpose of my visit abroad is to run or participate in a workshop, attend a conference or show myself as 'Artist in Residence' as I have done in Germany and Denmark. At other times I have merely attended exhibitions. It is very stimulating and encouraging to meet up with other like-minded makers, an eye opener at times - these are the benefits as I see them.

Being seen and getting known also means that one is more likely to be invited to exhibit or contribute by way of giving a lecture or workshop. I always like to rise to a challenge. It certainly has an effect on my work.

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Do you think that embroiderers could learn something from international exchanges?

A fascinating idea which should be explored. I believe that embroidery in England is very inward looking. This is something that I have picked up along the way and I wonder how the craft is seen in other countries.

What do you see as the future directions for The International Feltmakers Association?

To build upon the association's achievements to date, expanding its international status & to continue to promote feltmaking as an art form that is open to all, regardless of their level of ability.

Considering the journal, our aims are:

- to be of benefit to members
- to educate and disseminate written & visual information.
- to cover every aspect: traditions, history, new work from college students, from an ethnological and/or technical point of view. [The more countries contribute, the better.]

Have the IFA got a website?

www.feltmakers.com

How do you regard embroidery and what sort of an image do you have of this art/craft form?

Over the years, my knowledge of embroidery has broadened out a bit from cross stitch to the work of Alice Kettle, from hand to machine embroidery. I am actually quite interested in the different techniques and have bought quite a few embroidered tops.

Have you been to an exhibition showing contemporary embroidery? Do you know about the Embroiderers' Guild?

I have supported some local shows and come across the Embroidery Guild stand at the Knitting & Stitching Shows. There is always embroidery at 'Art in Action' and at the annual Society of Designer Craftsmen show at the Mall Gallery. I am actually a member of the local guild and enjoy the company of textile lovers.

Could you envisage using it in your own work?

I actually commissioned someone to design a cushion for me to embroider decades ago. I still treasure the paper design which shows our last very colourful cockerel which had to be converted to curry because it got too aggressive. The cushion is in memory of that event.

If so, why, if not -why not...

I feel that any stitched embroidery has to be meaningful and not just be decorative. I prefer to 'embroider' written accounts which I can do as editor of 'Felt Matters', the quarterly journal of the International Feltmakers. There is often a need to embellish the reports that come in and my work is concerned with seeking some exaggerated details to catch the interest of our readers.

However, there is another piece of work for which I considered embroidery. It concerns woven fragments of fabrics. My poem (right) tells the story.

The pieces are held onto Dupion silk, stretched over wooden battens and displayed. I wondered whether they needed to be embroidered but felt that the fragments on their own were precious enough.

Trekking along
The Lower Himalayas
To pick up the pieces
Buddhists' prayer flag
Dye fading
Blue Tartan strips
To tie some sticks
Deep magenta crimplene
And reddish orange
- Sleeves once
Tiny textile shreds
Torn as loo paper
Dainty floral prints
Too tired to hold a load
Stitched to share my revival

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From your viewpoint, where do you think embroidery should be going at the beginning of this 21st century. Do you think it still has a purpose? If so, in which areas?

I think it still has a purpose. This is a big question and I hope that my considerations, as stated above, can be seen as one area where embroidery has a place. It would also be helpful to link it to the definition of 'contemporary lace' - the work only has to have a hole to count as lace.

What about embellishing a piece of fabric? Where are the limits? When does a stitch become embroidery? How many stitches are needed now when nobody has any time and there is talk about minimalism?

Saturday, March 22, 2008

Email interview for the newsletter with Liz Ashurst, president of the New Embroidery Guild