

'Writing with a Needle'

Sara Impey reports on the conference 'Texts and Textiles' held at Jesus College, Cambridge

IT WAS WITH much trepidation that I submitted a proposal for a paper to this conference, and a corresponding degree of amazement when it was accepted. The two-day event took place last September and attracted over 70 academics and practitioners from as far afield as Australia, Greece, Denmark and the United States. It was organised by the University of Cambridge's Centre for Material Texts, which is part of the Faculty of English.

The Centre's current research focuses on 'the material text in material culture' and encourages study into the material or physical form in which texts are produced and disseminated and the ways in which they interact with literary cultures and historical contexts. This encompasses books, manuscripts and other documents, but the Centre broadens the interpretation to include many different aspects of material culture that convey the written word, including textiles. The aim of the conference was 'to investigate the ways in which words and fabrics are stitched together in language and literature, and celebrate the many ways in which textiles carry hidden narratives in their warp and weft'.

Relationship between text and textile

The range of subjects could hardly have been more diverse. Some speakers explored the cultural and historical significance of certain textile processes and artefacts and their relationship with text. For example, cotton rags were once

used in paper-making and stitch is used in constructing books. There were papers on early modern embroidered bookbinding, courtship and birth tokens from the 17th century and 18th-century silk-weaving pattern books from Norwich. Bridget Long, a member of the British Quilt Study Group (see page 18), contributed a fascinating paper on the language of patchwork in the 18th century, of which she is making a special study.

Phrases relating to textiles are interwoven with our everyday speech: we talk of 'losing the thread', 'spinning a yarn' and 'the fabric of society'. Many of the speakers were literary academics who examined the role of textile-inspired language in various texts, including that of the poet George Herbert and the novelist Herman Melville, as well as analysing metaphors relating to spinning, weaving and braiding in Ancient Greek epics and Old English poetry.

The 40-odd lectures were split into groups of related subjects which ran simultaneously, so we had to pick and choose and inevitably some had to be missed. I particularly enjoyed a talk on how knitting blogs foster a 'convergence culture' of mutual support and friendship that crosses national borders, much of which also happens in the online quilting community. There was an entertaining lecture on the codified and abbreviated language of knitting patterns which has remained virtually unchanged for the past century, but which may soon perhaps be superseded by instructional apps and YouTube videos.



Definition by Sara Impey. 198 x 79 cm. Silk, wholecloth, machine quilted

Sara is a member of two textile groups. To find out more about these groups and Sara's work visit:

Quilt Art: www.quiltart.eu

Anglia Textile Works: www.angliatextileworks.co.uk
And keep an eye out for Sara's new book *Text in Textile Art*, which will be published by Batsford in August.



Alison Stewart

In her textile artwork, Alison explores her struggle with dyslexia, raising questions about the way in which we rely on the written word to communicate.

In a body of work for which she has coined the term 'Newsfabrics', she has developed her own visual system of communication in which the textual element has been removed. She uses reverse appliqué, free machine embroidery, found fabrics and embellishments to replicate the layout of actual newspaper pages. The words, which to her form a barrier to comprehension, have been replaced by fabric and thread. So familiar is the conventional newspaper format that viewers find themselves instinctively trying to 'read' the columns and headlines, so that the colour and pattern of the fabrics and the texture of the stitching become alternative means of interpretation, almost like a personal invented language.

Alison was awarded The Textile Society Undergraduate Bursary in 2012 and is currently studying for an MA in Fine Art at the University of Chichester.

www.alisonstewartartist.co.uk

Times 'Newsfabric' 4 by Alison Stewart. 40 x 60cm. Newspaper,

found fabrics, scrim and thread, reverse appliqué and free machine embroidery

IMAGE © ALISON STEWART

Text on textile

Four of us were textile practitioners, grouped under the heading 'Writing with a Needle'. Lindsay Holmes is a costume-based artist who works in partnership with Keats House. Her paper described an exhibition in 2011 that explored the relationship between John Keats and Fanny Brawne. Anyone who saw the film *Bright Star* will know that needlework and fashion were central to Fanny's life. Lindsay's artworks combined textiles with text from the Keats archive. Items

such as shoes and garments were made from unusual materials like paper, and visitors were encouraged to handle them and try them on.

The remaining three of us – Alison Stewart and Rosalind Wyatt (see panels, above and page 14) and me – all spoke about our own independent work. Since most of the academic speakers had sophisticated PowerPoint presentations, I was relieved that Rosalind, like me, had brought along actual objects: in her case a quill pen and a brush to illustrate the physicality of handwriting

"The meaning ... tends to fade from one's mind while actually stitching"

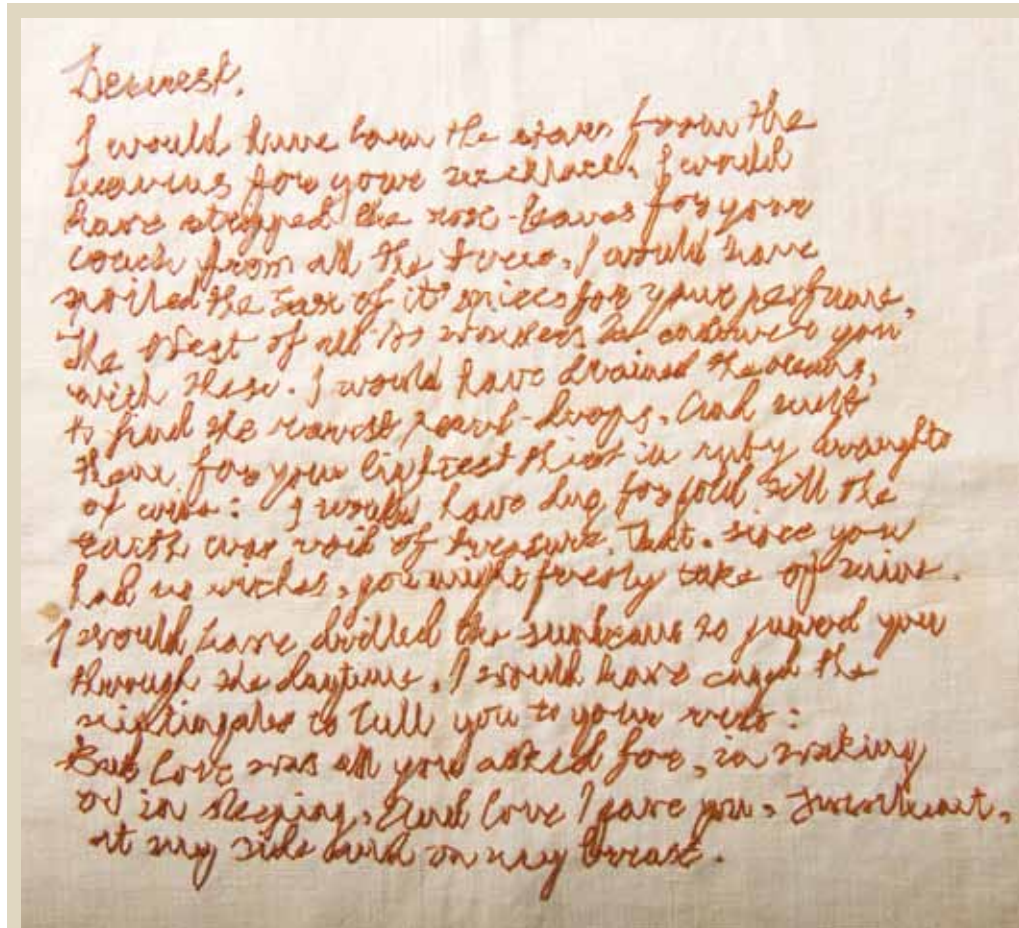
and how her work has developed from calligraphy to writing with a needle. I simply lugged a selection of my quilts along and did a show and tell, though I did read from a prepared script to avoid running over time.

Because the audience comprised non-stitchers, the focus of my talk was on content rather than technique. For the last nine years I have incorporated text into my work, using free-motion machine quilting to create the lettering. My work is intended to be legible and I try to integrate the text within the

A shorter version of this article appeared in *Contemporary Quilt* October 2012 – the newsletter of The Guild's Specialist Group Contemporary Quilt (CQ). To find out more about CQ and how to join, visit: www.contemporaryquilt.org.uk

overall design. I've always interpreted the idea of text on textiles in an explicit way, using it to comment on social or personal issues, often (I hope) with humour. From ecclesiastical embroidery to Victorian samplers to friendship quilts, text has tended to add seriousness, commemorative importance or sentiment to stitched textiles, raising their status to objects of ritual, documentary records or treasured keepsakes. I enjoy undermining this by trivialising the content to draw attention to the process of stitching, sometimes using this process in a playful way to explore aspects of language. I hoped that this would be relevant to the conference.

For example, my quilt *Definition* (see page 12) was made for an exhibition entitled 'Concepts and Meanings'. I took this theme literally. Using stitch to define stitch, I wanted to create an air of absurdity and to highlight in a visual form the arbitrary relationship between words and meaning. The viewer is invited to analyse the word 'stitch' via a series of instructions, starting with the dictionary definition and etymology and then looking at its usage and a list of words associated with it. The instructions become increasingly ludicrous, such as: 'examine it from every angle'. For this, I stitched the word *stitch* upside down, on its side, in mirror writing and with the letters jumbled up. (I had a lot of fun doing this.) Finally, it is repeated over and over again, until it loses all its meaning. The meaning also tends to fade from one's mind while actually stitching, because the process occupies all one's attention. The word *stitch*, therefore, becomes just a series of marks on cloth – which of course is all it is!



Stitch Love Letter, detail, by Rosalind Wyatt. Hand-stitched 'handwriting' onto linen
IMAGE BY MLR PHOTO, MARTE L REKAA

Rosalind Wyatt

Having trained as a calligrapher, Rosalind is fascinated with words and the formation of letters, and taught herself to write with a needle. She painstakingly hand stitches examples of handwriting from old letters or other documents, following a paper copy, finding that this process retains the rhythm and spontaneity of the original writing and allows her as an artist to experience afresh the thoughts and musings of the writers, breathing new life into their stories.

The textile has become of equal importance to the script, and she works directly onto garments or other items associated with the person or the period such as handkerchiefs and even shoes. She is currently working as the creative director of a three-year project entitled 'The Stitch Lives of London: a Modern Day Bayeux Tapestry', which is a collaboration of artists, writers, researchers, curators, historians, architects and designers. An art textile installation, it incorporates donated antique clothing and other artefacts, combined with contemporary stitch. It tells the story of London in fabric and thread, documenting key moments in its history and celebrating its diverse population.

www.rosalindwyatt.com

I was also trying to communicate the enjoyment of working with fabric and thread, which all of us as quilters must feel or we wouldn't do it, and how words on fabric are open to wider interpretation than their literal meaning. This enjoyment, the time taken, the memories and cultural associations of the textile artwork, are some of its 'hidden narratives'.

In our different ways, Alison, Rosalind and I all 'write' with a needle. Those of us who choose to do so are fortunate that we can still create 'material texts'. In an age of digital script when handwriting is fast disappearing, the stitched word remains as a direct and physical link between viewer and maker.
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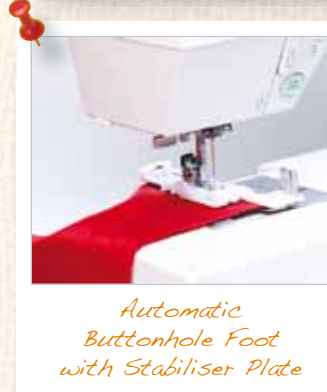
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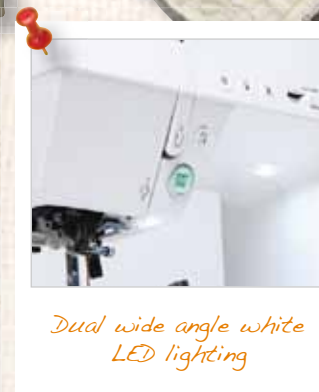
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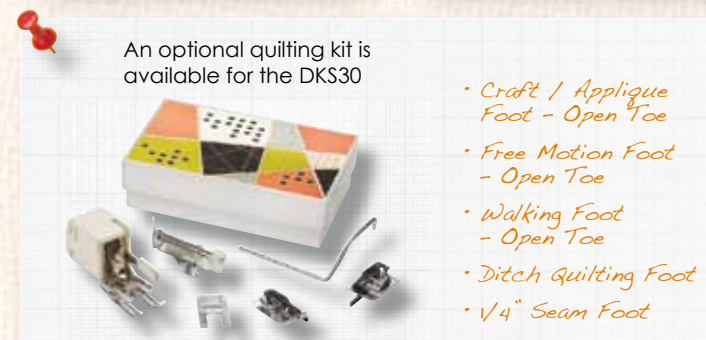
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