

## **The centrality of employability in the BA (Hons) in hand embroidery for fashion, interiors, textile art.**

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This paper explores how and why the Royal School of Needlework (RSN) has put employability at the heart of its degree programme and the student experience. The RSN believes fundamentally in experiential learning to give students a practical grounding and has practice as making at its heart<sup>i</sup>.

The team behind developing the RSN degree course chose its name carefully; it had to convey to potential students its breadth, while also enabling those unaware of its existence to discover it when searching for textile or fashion courses on the UCAS website. In practical terms, the three elements of the course name are explored through the students' first and second years with project briefs that challenge students to explore each of these options, as we believe it is important that students do not jettison particular routes too early. In this way they can review their own initial ideas about preferred direction and begin to learn how they might keep future options open.

The course begins with technical learning of hand stitch but for this we do not expect any prior knowledge. This is what the RSN can teach. The RSN encourages 'the slow perfection of skill, the constant endeavour that allowed someone to become better and better at what they could do with the materials'<sup>ii</sup>. However, when selecting students what we are looking for is the artistic or conceptual approach which will enable students to take their stitch in many different directions.

In order for the student to gain the widest possible experience that will equip them for future employment, the second year degree programme includes a Live Project. The Live Project is a participative programme involving all students. By establishing a live project this avoids the need for students to have to find work placements as a specific part of their course. The focus of the Live Project varies each year. In 2016 students worked on a textile art project, their response to the touring exhibition *What do I need to do to make it OK?* The students' response was then exhibited at the Crafts Study Centre, part of UCA Farnham, on the day that a symposium about the wider exhibition was held and which the students attended. As part of this project the students had sessions with the exhibition Curator and the Canadian artist Dorothy Cauldwell who was one of the featured artists.

In 2015 the Live Project comprised the embellishment of a dress designed by Nicholas Oakwell with 200,000 ostrich fronds in 18 shades from red to black which was displayed at the GREAT Britain exhibition in Shanghai in 2015. The dress then went on a world tour before being worn by Cheryl Fernandez Versini on the last night of the X factor last year.

These projects instil real-life experience in students which might include working to a third party brief, tight timetables, coping with repetitive working, budget criteria, group working on a project to look like the work of one person and even working on a project that might not be in the preferred area of the student's interest. In some ways one might consider that this is

the antithesis of a personal approach to craft as defined by Dormer. 'When craft is practised as a disciplined piece of knowledge it is inevitably an act of self-exploration in the sense that one learns about oneself through searching for excellence in work'<sup>iii</sup> But I do not think the two are mutually exclusive as this approach helps instil a professional attitude to embroidery and helps the student determine the extent to which they wish to be a solo-artist craftsman or a maker and embellisher in a different context.

The RSN has over the years built relationships with potential employers and especially in haute couture. This last academic year these links led to all three years of students being offered the opportunity of working for a high-profile company including Hussain Chalayan, Giles Deacon, Jasper Conran, Zandra Rhodes and Alexander McQueen. Such opportunities provide students with very worthwhile experience, even if participating in the frenetic pace of pre- Fashion Week activity might actually help some students decide fashion is not for them as a future career. So, we actively encourage RSN degree students to take these opportunities. There has been one further, unplanned, benefit; when brought together with students from other, less practically-based courses, our students are often asked how they should go about a particular task. This encourages our students, giving them a confidence boost and helping them to achieve more<sup>iv</sup>. Or as Bruce Montgomerie Professor of Design Craftsmanship at Northumbria University put it: 'The RSN has attracted a younger generation to learn a skill that sets them apart from their peers.'<sup>v</sup>

In addition to the planned live projects the RSN prides itself on accommodating special requests and taking opportunities that might offer students particular experiences to enhance their CV. In the past couple of years this has included: three-students creating pieces for a site-specific exhibition at the Jane Austen House Museum; two students creating miniature pieces for a room set designed by Liberty's for the V&A Museum of Childhood and most recently working on the creation of a four-metre-high White Walker for the launch of the 5<sup>th</sup> Series of *Game of Thrones* on DVD with the Embroiderers' Guild and Fine Cell Work. We rarely know when these opportunities will arise but the flexibility of the curriculum means that students can accommodate these items in their Research and Experimentation units so long as they can record and reflect on their learning from the experience.

The RSN also invites practitioners in stitch to come and speak to students as part of a two-day professional development seminar and in some cases the speakers offer workshops too. Those who are invited represent careers in stitch and textiles from many different perspectives, in the last year these included Stephen Wright of the House of Dreams Michelle Carragher, senior embroiderer on *Game of Thrones* and people from the Craftivist Collective.

The tutors consider all requests for external opportunities and review them in terms of likely student learning experience, how the request fits into the student timetable and the suitability of students for this initiative. Requests may come from a range of third parties including the RSN's own Studio. Students know that they might be selected for these opportunities based on their skills, speed of work, care of work and even willingness to sign and abide by confidentiality agreements while the work is in preparation. Equally they might not be considered if they have poor time keeping, a sloppy approach or are very slow. RSN Degree students were among those chosen to work on RSN Studio projects including the wedding dress of Jo Jo Cohen, designed by the late L'Wren Scott; the Oscar dress for Naomie Harris in 2013 and even the wedding dress of the Duchess of Cambridge.

All of these areas are offered to the students, along with a focus on the value of hand embroidery and its worth as more than something only found in the backroom atelier. Indeed, through this multichannel approach to hand embroidery of giving students the opportunity to work on collective projects as well as their own pieces it enables RSN Degree students to develop 'integrity of enquiry, sensitivity and knowledge of cultural issues, confidence in using artistic strategies and the thought processes which inform the making practice and thus push the boundaries of the discipline further.'<sup>vi</sup>

As a result of the RSN approach, our students are sought even before they graduate, this summer we have second year students working at Zandra Rhodes, Giles Deacon and Jasper Conran and during her final year one student embellished the cloak for Benedict Cumberbatch as Dr Strange in the forthcoming Marvel film, but with the advent of High Definition, she did not need to make one, but rather more than 10.

So, in summary, the RSN considers it vital to put employability at the heart of what we do and back that up with opportunities for students to get live experience, but more than this, the RSN is proud that we approach making with both a historical and a 21<sup>st</sup> century approach, taking the skills from the past and making them appropriate tools for the future.

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<sup>i</sup> Frayling, Christopher (2011) *On Craftsmanship* Oberon Books, London p 11

<sup>ii</sup> Miller, Daniel (2011) *Power of Making* in Ed D Charney *Power of Making* V&A London

<sup>iii</sup> Dormer P (1997) *The language and practical philosophy of craft* in Ed P Dormer *The Culture of Craft* Manchester University Press, Manchester p219

<sup>iv</sup> Feedback from RSN Student at Giles Deacon 2014

<sup>v</sup> Conference on design education 2013

<sup>vi</sup> Astfalck, Jivan (2005) *Differences and Resemblances: The Reconstruction of Signs* in L Jonsson *Craft in Dialogue* IASPIS Stockholm p102

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