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## Drawing, Stitch, Translation, Archive

Janis Jefferies

The Constance Howard Resource and Research Centre in Textiles was founded in 2002. Inspirational textiles teacher, Constance Howard, established the Collection in 1980. Constance joined Goldsmiths as a teacher in 1945 and founded the acclaimed textile courses which closed in 2008. Internationally respected, she remained involved with the College until her death in 2000, when she donated her textiles collection to the College on the basis that it would be stored in perpetuity. . It is important to note that modern, historians have relied – often of necessity – on documentary or visual sources to research textile history. We have explored how tacit knowledge of material and affective relationships can be traced through the words we think with<sup>1</sup> with a view to asking: How can our engagement with textile sources extend our knowledge of the past? What can textiles communicate that other sources cannot? This paper looks at Howard's legacy of innovation in the textiles arts and how contemporary practitioners are delving into archives to re examine stitched based work constructing a dialogue between drawing and stitch, provoking a discussion around 'translation' and Jacques Derrida idea of the 'subjectile.'<sup>2</sup>



Education



The Centre provides facilities for studying and handling the material collection and houses an excellent library for reference purposes. We are able to offer 'tailor-made' group visits with specialist staff. We ask that a broad indication of areas of interest be given in advance.

We welcome bookings from students, academic staff, individual researchers, schools, especially sixth form groups and independent parties who wish to access the collection and library.

<sup>1</sup> G. Lakoff & M. Johnson, *Philosophy In The Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (Basic Books, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledg, 2001), 307.

## INTRODUCTION

In March 2003 the Constance Howard Resource and Research Centre in Textiles opened for the first time to the public. The Centre was awarded a Resource Enhancement grant (Arts and Humanities Board 2002-2005) and is supported by Goldsmiths College, University of London. It has attracted widespread interest from a range of artists/designers, researchers, friends and museum curators.

The collection was originally established in the 1980's by Audrey Walker, named in honour of Constance Howard. This collection is rich, eclectic and idiosyncratic. We have over 4,000 pieces of textile, some very special commissioned teaching samples, Japanese techno-fabrics, early example of stump work and tiny fragments of lace and embroidery. There are thousands of slides documenting the pioneering history of textiles at Goldsmiths work from its initial beginnings in the late 1940's to the present day.

### The Material Collection

The material collection is centred around Constance Howard's personal and prized textiles which she bequeathed to the Centre in 2000. We have her invaluable teaching notes and many experimental samples created by her students at Goldsmiths during the period 1952 to 1975. The bequest is a landmark in the history of British twentieth century textile art. It tells a unique and distinctive story of creative risk and innovation.<sup>3</sup>



*Study area CHRRCT*



Constance Howard's importance extended far beyond Goldsmiths. Arguably, she was the most influential British pioneer in the field of textile design of her generation. She is remembered professionally for the colossal impact she had on contemporary embroidery, and for her achievement in developing a belief in the scope and possibilities of textile work in the second half of the twentieth century. She is remembered as an innovator, and as a revolutionary. When Constance Howard began, embroidery and textile design were seen by many people as

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<sup>3</sup> The Center also organized the annual Constance Howard Memorial Lecture series. Narelle Jubelin did the first one ( see Catherine Harper, Narelle Jubelin. *Textile: the Journal of Cloth and Culture* Vol 1, Issue 3, 2003: 210-229) and Anne Wilson in 2007 (<http://www.annewilsonartist.com>) and also Yinka Shonibare 2008. [www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/constance-howard/archive](http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/constance-howard/archive)

comparatively minor crafts. That they have since become important artistic *genres* in their own right, owes a huge amount to Constance's work and example. But success and achievement does not come in a simple package, and in Constance's case influence and personality were of a piece. As well as a remarkable artist, she was an inspiring teacher and extraordinary character.

Let me say now a bit about her early life. Constance was born in Northampton in 1910, the daughter of a schoolmaster. There was little money in the household for education or anything else. Nevertheless she was able to study art at evening class from the age of ten, and developed an early an early passion. In those days, however, opportunities for girls and young women of ambition were limited. After leaving school at 14, she was denied a grant at the Royal College of Art – on the grounds that the money would be wasted, because she would end up getting married.

In 1947, she joined the staff at Goldsmiths College at a time when this academy was struggling to find its feet again after the dislocations of the Second World War. Mary Quant, who studied at Goldsmiths in the 1950s, recently described the College to me as 'the best club in town', and you get something of the feel from the engaging memoir written by the then Warden, Sir Ross Chesterman. It was a club of many talents, but they were however rough-hewn ones, and the atmosphere was one of busy bohemian individuality – one into which Constance fitted well. At Goldsmiths, she flourished. Starting as a part-time tutor, she went on to establish a department of Embroidery in the Arts School, and to become principal lecturer in charge of textiles and fashion. During the years that followed, textiles at the College came to influence the field everywhere – partly because of her energetic prosletysing and vigorous example, which helped to nurture the idea of embroidery as an art form and vehicle for artistic self-expression.

Constance's most celebrated commissions in this period included a large hanging (The Country Wife) for the Country Pavilion of the Festival of Britain in 1951, two hangings, for the Northampton Museum and Art Gallery, and embroideries for the Lincoln Cathedral, Eton College and Makerere University, Kampala. As well as working in textiles, Constance did much to build the tradition at Goldsmiths that gave the College its leading role in art and design across a wide range. She was a prolific writer of books – her earlier publications included *Design for Embroidery from Traditional Sources* (1956), *Inspiration for Embroidery* (1966) and *Embroidery and Colour* (1976).

Following her retirement in 1975, Constance Howard was awarded her MBE for services to embroidery. Her standing continued to grow, partly on the basis of visiting lectures in Europe and the United States, and through her authorship of a number of key texts. In 1977, she published *Textile Crafts*. In 1979, *The Constance Howard Book of Stitches* appeared, and over the next few years Constance researched and wrote what was to become a classic four-volume study, *Twentieth Century Embroidery in Great Britain* (1982).

### **Constance Howard: Teacher, Artist, Collector**

Here are some small examples. 'The Blue Head', a drawing in the style of 'The Country Wife', an example of Constance's approach to teaching and learning through early samples of her

teaching aids, a book cover design, quotes from Constance herself and contributions from those can comment upon Constance's legacy as a teacher. Further research on the shifting methodologies of teaching and learning and learner centred practice from the 1950s to the present day is a project for other researchers to take up.



***The Blue Head*** (1968) Constance Howard

This is an abstract work. It was embroidered in 1968 in a mixture of what Constance described in her notebooks as in 'Classical and African style'. The head of a woman is stitched in luscious purples, black and olive. There is arguably an exotic element in the piece expressed through its purple and violet flat appliquéd silk and black stitched line enhanced with beads. The stitches are sharp and angular and the colour dark, rich and mysterious. Turquoise and violet were Constance Howard's favourite colours.



Drawing of the Card Players, initial sketch of ideas for The Country Wife

We have in our Collection one drawing, the ‘Card Players.’ It is very similar in style to the satellite groups in the large textile mural ‘The Country Wife’ made for the Festival of Britain Exhibition in 1951. The drawing is on tracing paper and depicts three women sitting at a table playing at cards. The drawing is stylised but I think that there is humour and sharp wit in the composition too. This wit and perception could have been lost in the pattern-like format of the composition as a whole but it has not. We see three slightly substantial ladies, one holding the cards, looking very respectable and ‘motherly’ but displaying the human characteristics of triumph, calculation and superiority traditionally not associated with the comfortable traditional image of the mother and wife.

***Design teaching aid*** (education, teaching and learning)

These are some of the teaching aids from Constance’s bequest. This is in the form of a set of black mounted images that include embroidery, cut outs from magazines, drawings, and design motifs and solutions. In this particular set Constance breaks down photographic images cut from magazines into stripes, squares, spots and dots and proceeds to describe some combinations in which they can be used. These visual aids are supported by small embroidered pieces, horizontal yellow stripes stitched in an array of different thread colours and a simplified figure of the Virgin and Child in red thread on a black ground.





*Samples on display at the Constance Howard Resource and Research Centre in Textiles*

The exploration of design, especially designs contained within the confines of the flat rectangle, were of particular significance during the 1950's and 60's. Embroidery, unless it was on dress or sometimes within the interior, existed only in a flat format. The idea that embroidery and textile had a sculptural quality was not a consideration at this point and students wishing to explore this area of stitch were advised to go to a college that dealt with dress or interior textiles. The attitude was that creative and innovative embroidery existed, for the most part, within the world of the rectangle, as did 'fine art' in the form of painting. Constance did not change this attitude but she did work to expand the possibilities that existed within those boundaries.

In founding the Embroidery department at Goldsmiths College she was able to employ innovative teachers such as Christine Risley, Barbara Dawson, Maurice and Jane De Saumariz, David Green, Professor Ann Morrell, Eirian and Denys Short and Harry and Elma Thruberon. These teachers helped to develop a courageous and innovative path for students of embroidery and lay the foundation for its change to the broader Art Textile for which Goldsmiths became famous until its closure in 2007.<sup>4</sup>

We also have in the Collection the book cover that Constance Howard designed for her book 'Design For Embroidery From Traditional English Sources' published in 1956. This cover is a mixture of painting and embroidery. The section that looks like cross stitch embroidery in the centre is actually painted and only the lettering is genuinely in stitch. This book cover and the book that accompanies it introduce us to her great output in book form of design and design for embroidery. Most of her books, although about colour and textile, were in black and white but they are remarkable nonetheless in that she saw them as a way of teaching and gaining access to an even wider public than the one that she was able to reach through her courses at Goldsmiths and other direct educational situations. The books explore design, colour, and stitch and give us a unique record of the textile artists that flowered because of the fertile situation that Constance helped to provide in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

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<sup>4</sup> For a full history of what was unique about textiles at Goldsmiths, please see the catalogue that accompanied 2000 'Waves: Fifty Years of Textiles at Goldsmiths' Part of 'The Knitting and Stitching Show' Touring; Alexandra Palace, London UK, RDS, Dublin. IRE. International Halls, Harrogate, UK. Contact: CHRCCT, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London, SE14 6NW, UK.

## **Constance Howard: A teacher at Goldsmiths**

The course at Goldsmiths was very structured during the 1960's and was organized on a project system, students were given assignments, sometimes in the form of single words such as 'expansion' and sometimes much more specific directions such as 'a portrait head based on a Greek mythological figure' with three weeks to come up with something 'exciting'.

The feeling by the late 1960's was that embroidery wanted to escape from the confines of its illustrative aspect and students wanted to explore on a much more adventurous level. One of the most interesting periods at Goldsmiths was the last two years of Constance's position as head of department and the beginning of Audrey Walker's term of office. The students from this time were strongly grounded in basic embroidery and drawing and then allowed to develop their own work entirely without any dictated structure. Not all of her students loved her but even if they did not she often caused the opposite to happen and their creativity went in an entirely different direction, causing them to travel a path that they may not have otherwise walked.

## **Constance Howard: Teacher Quotes**

"People have strong feelings about embroidery - some of the examiners hated it."

"You can do absolutely *anything* with fabrics."

"Drawing is terribly important for any art. The importance of it is, you've got to look... Everybody can draw - and you draw in your own way. Draw in your own way, then you begin to understand things."

## **Quotes from former students and colleagues.**

"Constance is an icon to a generation ... especially women ... who had only just begun to discover that they had a voice. In her own words, 'I believed in people when no one else would.' The return was remarkable."

Margaret Hall Townley, Dip AD student, 1967 - 1970 and later a colleague

"I was so lucky to meet Constance when I was twenty two years old: she changed the course of my life, not only because I learnt embroidery with her but because she was extremely inspiring and supportive, encouraging me adamantly to continue with my own work."

Christine Risley, former student, Head of Textiles 1988-1990.

## **Christine Risley prize.**

Christine retired in 1990 and tragically died of cancer in 2003. Her special collection of clothes were donated to the Centre to be sold to raise the initial amount to be invested to provide a purchasing fund for the Constance Howard Resource and Research Centre in Textiles. In 2014,



Hefin Jones won the prize for 'The Welsh Space Campaign' which featured in Goldsmiths BA Design degree show. <http://hefinjones.co.uk/welsh-space-campaign/> but perhaps the most well known was Paul Dearman the prize winner in 2008.



*'To the End'. Paul Dearman (with Constance Howard). The 2008 Christine Risley Award.  
Paul Dearman, graduate BA Textiles, 2008.*

Following Constance's emphasis on drawing there is an insightful dialogue between drawing and stitch which provoke a discussion around "translation". Taking the writings of Jacques Derrida as a cue stitch, like drawing and language, can sometimes become untranslatable. Derrida argues that there is in the process of drawing, which writers like Nigel Hurlestone seek to extend to sewing where a maker can access "the support, the surface of the material, the unique body of the work in its first event, at its moment of birth, which cannot be repeated, which is distinct from the meaning and the representation"<sup>5</sup> Hurlestone argues that:

Perhaps in this gap or frissure between the origin of the first gestures, from something that is first seen or felt, to the making of marks, surfaces or images in fabric and thread where the most magical yet indefinable quality of embroidery is to be found."<sup>6</sup>

Derrida is a continuous presence in the shadow of any text, as I once argued in my 1995 essay, *Text and Textiles Weaving Across the Borderlines*,<sup>7</sup> Derrida's assertion that a "written sign

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 307.

<sup>6</sup> Nigel Hurlestone, "Drawing and the Chimera of Embroidery" in *Machine Stitch Perspectives*, Alice Kettle & Jane McKeating ed. (A&C Black, 2010), 35.

carries with it a force of breaking with its context. This force of breaking is not an accidental predicate, but the very structure of the written. No context can enclose it.”<sup>8</sup>

The point I am making is that stitch as a form of writing is subject, like all writing, to openness and excess, an infinite play that can never be foreclosed, much as the meaning or reception of a particular work cannot be absolutely determined.

**All Photos:** David Ramkalawon, photographer to the Constance Howard Resource and Research Centre in Textiles, Goldsmiths 2002-2016.

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<sup>7</sup> J. Jefferies, “Text and textiles: Weaving across the borderlines,” in *New feminist art criticism: Critical strategies*, K. Deepwell, ed. (New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 1995), 164-173.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida. 1982. *In Margins of Philosophy*, trans Alan Bass. Chicago: Chicago University Press.: 315-316.