

## Workshop on the Web

### Celebrity interview with. . . . . . Jean Draper



**Jean - I know that your official entry into the world of textiles came with your degree but I'm guessing you got started long before that. Where did the initial inspiration come from?**

At home, when I was small, making things was a natural way of life. My mother was a skilled needlewoman who made clothing for herself and for my two sisters and me. She also knitted, crocheted and embroidered. Even though there was not a lot of money, we were beautifully dressed and she made our home comfortable and well-furnished. Because my mother had taught me to sew from a very early age, I was reasonably good at it in school and consequently was not put off, as so many other girls were, by those early needlework lessons with all that unpicking. In grammar school, aged about 13, I failed miserably at Latin and was demoted to the 'B' stream where the choices, instead of Latin, were cookery or needlework - I chose the latter. Failing Latin was the beginning of my subsequent stitching career.

I trained at Stafford College of Art and then London University for my teaching degree. In art college in those days, we did two years of art - painting, life drawing, anatomy etc. for our Intermediate exam and then specialised for two more years. My specialist subjects were Fashion, (Main) and Hand Embroidery (Additional). NB **Hand** Embroidery - machine embroidery was separate, although we learned a little. But this was the dark ages!



*Indian Summer* (1983)  
34 x 50 cms. Hand Stitching

My first teaching job was at a girls' grammar school in Ilford, Essex. I then was invited to return to my old Art College to teach. I had never enjoyed teaching Fashion (except for Fashion History), but began to find teaching embroidery far more satisfying and exciting. At this point, I was beginning to make my own work on a regular basis.

My next job was a lecturership at West Midlands College of Education (later West Midlands College of Higher Education and later still part of the University of Wolverhampton), in Walsall. I eventually became Head of Textiles within a very lively and impressive Art Department. This was a very formative experience, mainly for two reasons: firstly being engaged in training teachers, on a teaching degree course, continually forced me to examine and adapt my own teaching methods and skills; secondly working with a competitive and highly motivated group of colleagues meant that one had to be sure of one's ground and be prepared to argue a point, if necessary. The Head of Department, Francis Smitheman, was a very supportive and clever man. He constantly challenged his staff and never said no to an idea, but asked one to think it out, write a paper to be presented at a staff meeting and argue the case. He enabled me to grow both as a teacher and as an artist. I took early retirement from this position 21 years ago and, since then, have worked in a free-lance capacity as a maker, lecturer and tutor.



### **What would you consider your career highlights?**

It is hard to say. I consider myself to be a fortunate person in the people I have met who have influenced and helped me. Good things have happened to me, career-wise throughout my life:

- My election as national Chairman of the Embroiderers' Guild.
- My work has been exhibited internationally both with the 62 Group as well as privately, by invitation, at other galleries. One highlight was being selected to be in a small group of 62 Group artists exhibiting at 'Collect' at the Victoria & Albert museum two years ago.
- Invitations to teach internationally have been an honour and the lasting friendships made across the world, through textiles, are very special.
- People have purchased my work and this has been a thrill, which I never take for granted, and have made pleasing comments about it. My work is in many public and private collections and I am particularly honoured that I have two pieces in the Embroiderers' Guild Museum Collection.
- My work has appeared in many books and magazine articles.



## What does membership of the 62 Group and the Practical Study Group (PSG) mean to you?

The 62 Group is an exhibiting group I have admired tremendously since they were formed in 1962. I have been a member of the 62 Group since the mid 1970s. At a very personally difficult time of my life, I had set myself the challenge to produce a coherent body of work and to apply for membership of the Group. I managed to do this and being accepted into the Group was thrilling and very encouraging. It did a great deal for my self-esteem at the time. The continual challenge to make good work and to go through the selection procedure for each and every exhibition, is a bit nerve-racking but keeps me 'on my toes' and work-focused. Being judged by one's peers is not easy, but has positive benefits. Being in the 62 Group has meant that my work has been seen by many people, both here and abroad. Most of the free-lance teaching and lecturing opportunities that have come my way have been as a result of my work being seen in these exhibitions.

The PSG (now called the TSG, Textile Study Group, from this year), is a very different Group but very rewarding to be involved with. We meet, for a weekend of serious working together with a tutor, twice a year. The energy and support shared within the group has a very positive influence on my work and exhibiting in PSG exhibitions is a bonus. An additional beneficial, but scary, feature of membership is that the Group appoints an eminent artist/teacher to be our Assessor and each member has to submit an extensive body of work for assessment/evaluation every five years. The assessment takes the form of an interview with the assessor and then this is followed with the assessor's written report. The pic below, *Canyon Walls*, is Jean's chosen piece on the PSG website [www.textilestudygroup.co.uk](http://www.textilestudygroup.co.uk).



## You were an incredibly hard working Chair of the Embroiderers' Guild and raised its profile considerably. That must have been a frantically busy but very exciting time - what memories?

I stood for election, first to the Executive Committee and then as Chairman of the Guild, because I wanted to try to repay the Guild for the wonderful teaching and exhibiting opportunities that the organisation had offered me over a number of years. It happened to be at an incredibly exciting time for the Guild when it was possible to envisage how the Guild could grow and take its place as a vibrant, leading arts organisation with a new home which would house the Museum Collection, would show historical and contemporary exhibitions and which would be an embroidery study centre for both Guild members and visitors. Lottery money and support was available through a number of funding bodies and with a great deal of hard work the plan was on track. The enthusiasm and involvement with members was rewarding and I have wonderful memories of their fund-raising efforts. Sadly, for various reasons, the project faltered and the decision was made two years ago that the Guild would not proceed. For me this news was devastating and it has been hard to come to terms with it. Hopefully the Guild will regain confidence and rebuild its strength.

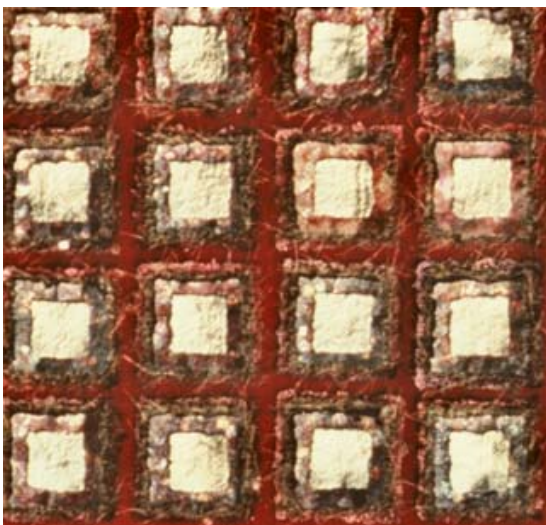


**Your work has been an influence on so many people and its appeal is across the board, from the wider art field to the more traditional hand stitcher. It is to be found in prestigious collections all around the world. Could you talk a little about how you find inspiration and the reason why hand stitching is your preferred means of expressing that inspiration?**

As I explained earlier, I learned to sew at an early age and having needle and thread in my hand is very natural and even essential. I regard hand stitching as a personal means of expression - as individual as handwriting. Having received an art college training, drawing comes naturally to me and I constantly draw to record information for my work. Sometimes the drawing process is a lengthy one, or it may be a swift response to things seen, accompanying jotted notes which are both reminders of possibilities, make connections with what I regard as my style of stitching and are always seeking to develop my ideas. I always carry a sketchbook/notebook with me wherever I go. There are many ways of drawing and for a number of years now I have made drawings that emulate the way I stitch - in a mark-making manner. I also stitch the way that I draw - the two activities are mutually dependent and intertwined. My style is now so developed that I actually see in terms of stitch and manipulated fabric - which I suppose has become the recognised appearance of my work in recent years. My drawings and notes are supplemented with photography, but this is never the foremost means of recording. Drawing enables me to investigate, to understand and personalise what I see.

However, in order to develop an individual style, ongoing subject matter - a personal response to some aspect of life - is essential. For 40 years, my passion has been for places visited, both near and far, which have very personal memories (perhaps with particular people) and which have evoked an emotional response in me. Although my work has changed and developed over the years, this has always been the underlying passion. The first widely exhibited work was based on the British landscape which, over the course of time, became more and more atmospheric and almost abstract, hopefully expressing a sense of place.

Three visits to India, over a period of years, had a profound effect on my work. The colours used necessarily changed as did the structure of the work as I became concerned with decoration and eventually village women and their embroidery. One of the *Village Women* pieces can be seen on the right. This was completed in 1995 and is hand stitched. The detail below was from Indian Squares (1986) Stitch with paper and gold leaf.



However, in essence, I was still responding to particular places that had special characteristics. I tried to convey this in my work. In addition, certain tribal and village techniques, as practised by ordinary people, inspired and intrigued me. By studying these, my obsession with hand stitching intensified and my one-stitch style developed.

Without those trips to India and the study of hand stitching methods, my subsequent work, based on the landscape of the American south-west, would not have been possible. The way this work is stitched relates directly to those tribal Indian embroideries and allows me to express the bareness and 'bare bones' of that rugged desert region. By changing direction of the rows of stitching and by putting a lot of tension in my stitches as I manipulate the fabric, I have been able to structure the surface of the fabric in such a way that it emulates the amazing eroded rock structures which have so inspired me. The feel of the fabric as I hand stitch, restructure and hold it is very interesting and exciting to me. I continue to make some work this way although I am forced to use more machine stitching because of arthritic pain in my hands, but picking up a needle and hand sewing is still my natural way of working, although the machine stitching seems to work well in the completely free-standing 3D work.



**ABOVE: *Sunset Rocks* (2003)**  
29 x 21 cms. Hand Stitching



The Fabric, Earth and Fire exhibition, in which you collaborated with partner Ken Jones, was a great success at the Knitting & Stitching Show in 2005 and I loved the work you both displayed at last year's show. How does it work when two artists share a life? I can imagine the times when you both have exhibitions looming must get a little fraught but it must also be good to have support and encouragement, too.

Yes, it is good working and living together - we share a common language and interests and our individual need to continue to create work is understood by each of us. We realise that we are very fortunate having our work because we are never bored, never without the urgency to make.

In the past, we have exhibited together on several occasions and have been surprised and pleased with the way textiles and ceramics complement each other. The major exhibition at the Knitting & Stitching Shows in 2005 was successful and people responded very kindly, but we didn't quite do what we had originally intended - that is make work together. All the pieces were either Ken's or mine and I was left with a feeling of mission not quite accomplished.

**RIGHT:** *Earth Quilt* (2005) 100 x 110cms. Detail shown. Hand Stitching with clay and paint.

**BELOW:** *Arrowheads* (2005) Hand and machine stitching with clay and paint.



A further opportunity arose in 2007 when the PSG instigated work called 'Dialogues' for a travelling exhibition of the same name, beginning in 2008. Ken agreed to be my collaborator for the dialogues which were necessary to produce work together, using both disciplines (ceramics and stitched textiles), together in one piece. Some of the body of work we have produced together is on show in 'Dialogues' and more was at the Knitting & Stitching Shows in 2008.

While we do understand each other and enjoy working together, it is not always straightforward and calm. Some of the work is born out of quite 'heated discussion' and negotiation.

**RIGHT: *Tall Rock Forms* (2007) Tallest approx 90 cms.  
Machine stitching and paint**

**BELOW: *3 Spiked Forms with Ken Jones* (2008) 45 x 25 cms.  
Ceramic and wood**





## What are your joint (Ken, too) plans for the future?

We have plans to continue to make and exhibit work together - our aim being to make pieces where the textile and ceramic forms are interrelated and mutually dependent. This is a little difficult as in most cases the ceramic has to be made and fired first because of shrinkage in drying and firing, and it is easier for me to shape a stitched textiles to fit what Ken has made rather than vice versa.

We both continue to make our individual work too.

However, these ongoing plans have been put on hold for a few months while I complete writing my book, 'An Introduction to Stitch and Structure', which is due to be published by d4daisy books this autumn. For more details of publication date contact [www.d4daisy.com](http://www.d4daisy.com)

