

Adult Day Classes at the Royal School of Needlework

Moyra McNeill *Royal School of Needlework*

123 The Royal School of Needlework was founded in 1872 by a group of prominent ladies with the object of "restoring ornamental needlework for secular purposes to the high place it once held amongst the decorative arts", and was closely linked with William Morris, Edward Burne Jones and Walter Crane who supplied designs to be worked in the "Artistic Room" for execution in crewel wools. As well as this the School had its own studio where girls were instructed in drawing by such notable draughtsmen as Lord Leighton, then President of the Royal Academy, and the architect C.F. Bodley. The studio provided designs for sale in the School shop and for special commissions. The founders, who were determined from the outset that the School should be self-supporting, quickly discovered that popular and readily saleable designs had to subsidise the more discriminating taste and requirements of the few; the eternal dilemma of Art versus Commerce.

It is necessary to set the scene with these historical notes because the Royal School of Needlework is still Janus faced. On the one hand it is a shop and a workroom where designs and commissioned embroideries are still produced to the customary order and conservation of textiles is undertaken. On the other hand, it offers embroidery classes sponsored by the I.L.E.A. which form an Adult Education Department devoted entirely to one craft, embroidery. These classes range from recreational classes in the evening and during the day to "intensive" day classes which are an interesting development from an educational view point. These classes were first mooted in 1966 by Lady Reigate, the Chairman, as a need was felt for a serious day class for those who wished to make a deeper study of embroidery than was possible in a recreational class. After some discussion in the Schools Teaching Branch Committee it was decided to introduce an all-day class to be held on Mondays in the 1967-68 session where, as an experiment, one subject would be studied by the whole class per term,

giving approximately sixty teaching hours per subject. Besides working in class, students were expected to extend both practical, design and investigative work at home. Not only were students required to develop their own designs, but history of the subject including visits to galleries and museums was visualised as an integral part of each course; it was intended that the students would be given a much richer and wider impression of the span of embroidery than the more usual two hour class permits.

The first enrolments, for Gold Work, indicated that there were students who, without the lure of an examination qualification at the end, still wished to make an intelligent and thoughtful study of their craft and who were willing to devote their time, in and out of class, to its development.

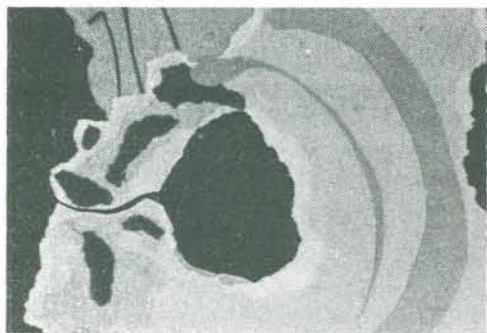
After the inception year the class was moved to Wednesdays and proved so successful that in the 1972-73 session two intensive day classes were instituted on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Perhaps surprisingly, attendance is exceptionally good, from an average enrolment per class of twenty two, and it is not unusual for several students to have a record of full attendance over all three terms.

What motivates the students to be so keen and to work so hard? Many are women who have had some form of further education, college graduates are not unusual, who perhaps see the class as a beginning of re-activating their minds after bringing up a family and linking this with a hobby that has always been an interest. Some students work part-time and are therefore geared to more strenuous activity than a recreational class might offer. Other students are retired from an active working life and feel free to develop their own interests. It is not unusual for teachers to enrol for maybe one term only as this may be a unique chance of studying with a specialist in a particular field. Foreigners in Britain for a limited period are also often one or two term students.

Students know that there is only one

term for a subject and this, together with the inference that it might never be repeated, makes them produce in one term what would take more than a year in less pressured circumstances. Therefore it would seem that competition with limited time is the students' goad to achievement.

From the teacher's point of view, tutoring a group for one term only can have both rewards and frustrations. The obvious rewards are the keenness of the students and the quantity of work they contrive to produce; although the range of ability is often as wide as in any field of adult education, the students in these classes seem ready to meet the tutor well over half-way and often generate ideas that are new developments of the craft. Design concepts relating to composition, colour and tone, texture and source material have to be taught in order that students can produce designs and although some students find this the most onerous part of the course, as not all of them are in sympathy with modern trends initially, there seems a willingness to try which is not always apparent in similar classes. After being asked to experiment with such current media as cut and torn paper, stuck string and pasta which to some adults seem very redolent of the primary school, it is interesting that a request has been made by a group of 'regular' students for drawing classes as they now realise that this is the root of observation and therefore design.



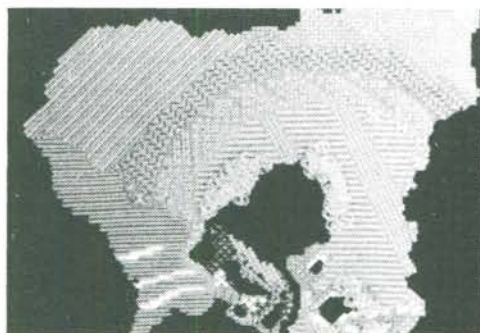
Torn paper design: Mrs Patti McCreery

Another benefit of teaching for a known and limited number of hours on one subject is that a structure can be planned giving both pace and drive to the teaching, and the students' good attendance record may well stem from the consciousness that if they are absent they will miss part of that structure.

One of the main frustrations is that having brought students to a certain pitch, there is no follow-through, and the often heard remark at the end of a term "I am only just becoming aware of the potential of" can be double edged.

When selecting staff the aim is to seek tutors who are practising designer/craftsmen and specialists in their own field, but for some tutors the one-day-a-week-for-one-term is financially impracticable. Therefore, the School has been lucky to be able, over the past few years, to arrange classes in a wide range of techniques like gold work, canvas work, patchwork, applique, pulled work, blackwork, quilting, bead embroidery and machine embroidery but wider themes have also been offered such as Figures in Embroidery, Dolls, and Embroidery on Dress. An experimental four term course was held on the History of Embroidery tutored by Miss Joan Edwards which was extremely successful but also extremely strenuous for both students and tutor.

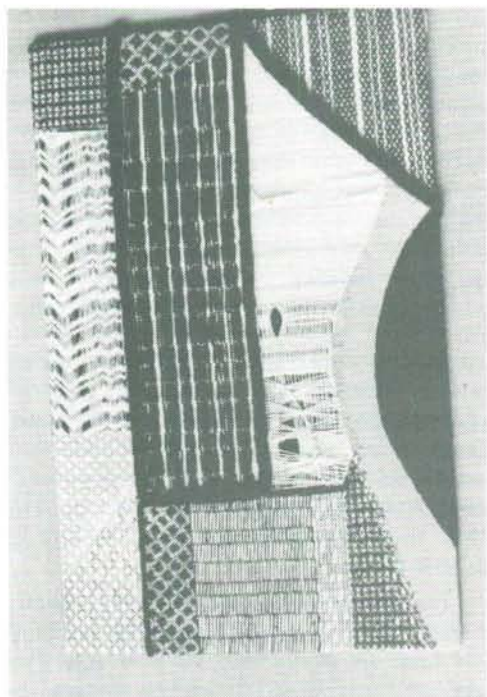
What of the future? These classes obviously fill a need both in adult education and embroidery, and also fulfill the original aims of



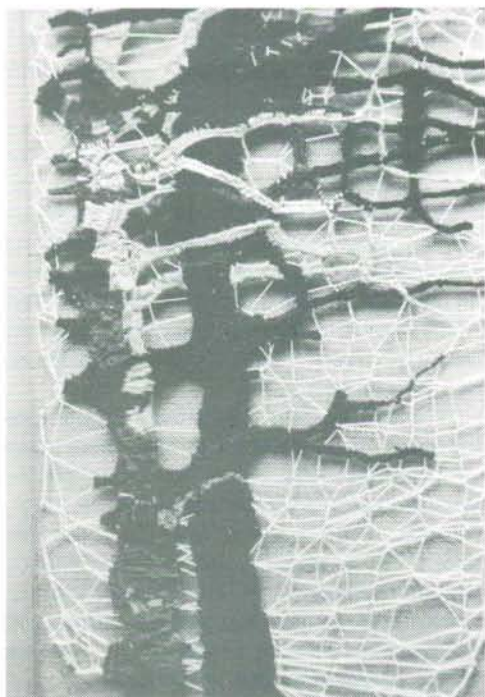
Same design interpreted in canvas work

125 the founders of the School "to restore embroidery to its former high place amongst the decorative arts". Nowadays the aim is also to exploit embroidery in all its many

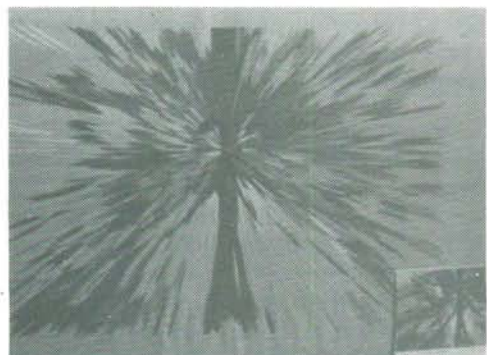
facets by an experimental approach, so that it maintains a position of a lively decorative art, at times rising to the exalted heights of fine art.



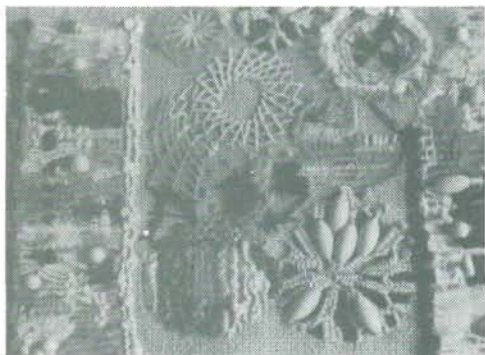
Experimental panel in mixed techniques including blockwork, pattern drawing and applique: Mrs Frost



Trees worked on a basis of free knitting in free needle-weaving: Mrs Mande



Interpretation of a colour photograph in stichery: Mrs Beris



Experimental needle-weaving sampler: Mrs Cox