

“What I like about the way I work is that what I produce is very intricate and it highlights the beauty of the stitch itself.”

Judith Brown

by Rachael Chambers

It seems textiles and sewing were ingrained in early everyday life for jewellery designer maker Judith Brown, who cleverly creates an intricate collection of wire jewellery inspired by stitch.

When she was just eight years old, she enjoyed making clothes for her dolls from scraps of fabric found in her mother's sewing box. Her mother was a keen knitter and made much of Judith's childhood clothing.

“Textiles and making were just part of everyday life to me. My mum taught me many skills. When I started secondary school I remember being very proud of managing to follow a pattern, to make a school shirt, and loving the challenge of projects on my GCSE textiles course.”

Eventually, from these early roots, Judith went on to do a degree in Embroidery at Manchester Metropolitan University.

“I was really excited to be selected for this course, which was a fantastic experience with lots of drawing, visiting makers and workshops and projects, in order to learn different stitching and making techniques. We did one workshop in particular with Professor Anne Morrell, which she called “stitching without thread” where she showed that it was possible to create forms without using thread. Although it took a long time for me to put this into practice, this is where my initial inspiration for my jewellery making came from.”

However, it wasn't an instant realisation that this moment was to guide Judith to having her own business, as when she finished her degree she ventured off to teach English in Sicily for five years.

“It wasn't until I met some friends in Sicily who were making simple jewellery out of copper wire and I got to have a play with some myself in their workroom, that I realised this was something that I wanted to explore.”

When Judith returned to England she discovered she could purchase a plethora of coloured wire,

from soft pastels to bright primary colours, and so set to work experimenting with different wires and stitching techniques; this was to become the basic style of her work today and the start of her own business.

“Once I started experimenting with wire I was hooked and started looking for places to sell my work. I began with a few local galleries and events. In fact at one of my first events, a kind of impromptu arts market on the street at a local garden festival, I got to know some other artists and makers and we started our own annual local arts event, which has become more and more successful every year.

“The initial reaction to my work was great, with people commenting on how unusual it was and buying it as well. It took me a while to hone my designs and understand what sells and what the customer and galleries want.”

Having this knowledge under her belt, Judith perfected and expanded her jewellery range, moving on from the basic stitch designs to incorporating buttons, hook and eyes and press studs, as she explains; “Incorporating the vintage buttons came about because in my button tin, handed down from my Nana and my Mum, there was a beautiful, carved mother of pearl button, and it seemed such a shame that something so lovely should be stuck away in a cupboard.

“What's special about the buttons is that they have been part of someone's favourite outfit in Edwardian times or in the twenties or thirties. Perhaps something they wore for a special occasion or the tiniest buttons were probably on lingerie or babies clothes.

“My Vintage Noir range uses hooks, eyes and press studs, mostly from the 1930s to 80s, so expanding the haberdashery I used was just a natural step with my textiles background. I have boxes of Newey's hooks and eyes, and what's interesting about these is how the packaging changed through the last century, including special ‘Wartime Packs’, which are on narrower cards, or loose in

little packets to save resources. I'm always on the lookout for more hooks and eyes, I wonder how many are sitting in sewing boxes unused around the country?”

As many makers will know, having your own business is not all about the making, there are many other parts to the role, some good, some not so good. So I was intrigued to find out what positive and negatives Judith felt there were to being self employed.

“I really enjoy exhibiting at fairs, apart from packing the car and unloading, that is! When you work from home, going to a busy event in another part of the country to meet new people is a bit of a treat. What I really like is the interaction with customers and their reactions to my work, which range from delight to incredulity that my jewellery is stitched by hand. Fairs are also a great place to meet other makers, make friends, share experiences and exchange opinions on the craft world and business. The thing I most dislike is, without doubt, dealing with paperwork!”

When not at fairs Judith's work base is the studio she has set up at home – it's a lovely eclectic mix of visual stimuli and haberdashery.

“I work from home in my studio, which is a busy place with boxes of buttons and hooks and eyes, rolls of wire and, at the moment, jewellery orders sitting in trays ready to be packed up and sent off to galleries and shops. There are posters on the walls for events I have taken part in and, in my opinion, far too much paperwork!”

Judith would probably correct me on my use of the word ‘eclectic’, replacing it with ‘messy’, for in her eyes that is what she is.

“Anyone who knows me well will know that I am a bit untidy and sometimes clumsy, but when it comes to working on something fine, I really enjoy the process of producing something delicate, whether it is the fine silk thread and organdie I chose to work with on my degree course or the fine silver or coloured wires I use now.”

But for those who don't know Judith well, all they see is the beautifully constructed jewellery carefully and intimately crafted to produce wearable pieces that will be admired by many.

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Intricate -Stitched Bead pendant



Alessandra earrings



Vintage Mother of pearl bracelet



Amelia



Vintage - mother of pearl button bracelet