

Soft Rock 5

Project 3

Culbokie Friendship Group





Groam House Museum - Rosemarkie



Detailed drawing of the Nigg Stone by George Bain

Introduction

Over several months during 2015 five groups of older adults based on the Black Isle took part in Soft Rock 5, the latest in a series of outreach projects organised by Groam House Museum, Rosemarkie. Working with Inverness-based textile artist Ruth Black, each group learnt the art of felting, and using various techniques completed their own unique wall hanging using the work of George Bain and the imagery found on local Pictish Stones as inspiration. Over the later part of 2015 the five banners were exhibited in various locations locally, finishing their journey on display at Celtic Connections Festival 2016 in Glasgow.

Thanks must go to the group leaders, volunteers and participants whose enthusiasm and commitment made the project such a success, and without whom these beautiful pieces would not exist.

The project was made possible by funding from Heritage Lottery, Museums Galleries Scotland and the Highland Council

Wendy Sanders

Groam House Museum
Project Co-ordinator



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MAOINICHTE LEIS
A' CHRANNCHUR**



The third wall hanging

This felt panel was made by a team of volunteers from Culbokie Friendship Group under the guidance of textile artist Ruth Black. This album shows the various stages that we went through in creating the wall hanging over five action packed days working in the Culbokie Church Centre.

The wall hanging design was inspired by the work of George Bain, who in turn was inspired by the complex Pictish and Celtic designs of the early Christian and pre-Christian sculptured stone monuments that abound in the north and east of Scotland. Bain studied the stones and Celtic manuscripts of the same period and worked out methods for constructing Celtic designs in the same style. These methods are explained in his book "Celtic Art - The Methods of Construction".

The following people contributed to the making of this panel.

- Janet Bird
- Alli Bisset
- Ruth Black
- Barbara Crocker
- Mike Crocker
- Ann George
- Sheila H Graham
- Norma Grant
- Jean Hackett
- Rosalind MacNaughton
- Margaret Magson
- Miriam Moore
- Carolyn Morrison
- Andrea Rodway
- Maureen Rose
- Alastair Rose
- Judith Rose
- Joshua Rose
- Elaine Slinn
- Eileen Smillie
- Claire Stringer
- Clare Tickner
- Jacqueline Torode

Session 1, 9th April 2015

We started off by looking at the wallhanging that had been made by the previous group so that everyone had an idea of what we were aiming at. Then we looked at the mock-up of the proposed design. There was going to be plenty of scope for creating variations within the design, so volunteers were asked to give some thought to this as they were working on the next stage. After this it was down to choosing colours.



Everybody was asked to choose two contrasting colours of Merino wool fibres with which they would make felt for the knotwork panels around the edges of the panel.



I can't remember what was actually being discussed at this point, but everyone was having fun!



Each person spread out a sheet of bubblewrap and started laying down their fibres - darker shade first. Small tufts of wool were separated out from the combed tops and spread thinly onto the plastic. These pieces had to be just a bit more than 30 x 60cm so there would be enough felt from which to cut out our designs later in the day.



With the base layer complete, people started laying down their second colour. For this layer the fibres had to run at right angles to those of the first layer. This serves two purposes. It ensures even shrinkage as the felting progresses since the fibres always shrink along their length. It also facilitates the felting as there is greater potential for the fibres to tangle together.





When the two layers of wool fibres were complete we started adding some bling. I had brought along a selection of different fibres - Angelina, silk, mohair, nylon etc. which would add some sparkle and textural interest to the felt.



The non-wool fibres don't felt so have to be trapped in place with a fine web of wool before we poured on warm soapy water to start the felting.



Once the water was poured on, the fibres were covered with another sheet of bubblewrap and pressed firmly to spread the water and get the whole piece completely wet. Everyone worked at different speeds so we had to be careful to keep the water where it was supposed to be.



A splash of soapy water on top of the bubblewrap made it easier to slide one's hands around and the serious rubbing could begin. The purpose here was to felt the fibres just enough that they would hold together, but not take the felting the whole way as we wanted to felt them onto the background at the next session.



After a few minutes of vigorous rubbing the whole felt/ bubblewrap sandwich could be turned over and the rubbing process repeated from the back.



When each piece was sufficiently felted that the two layers held together the felt could be bundled up and the soapy water squeezed out. Novice felters are often rather hesitant at this stage, worried that it will all fall to pieces - but it all worked according to plan and by the end of the morning we had the required pieces of half-felt.

At lunchtime I dismantled the table, adjusted the height of the legs and reassembled it a sitting height.



We needed eight rectangular knotwork panels and four square ones. Each design had to be traced onto a sheet of translucent non-woven fabric that would serve as a cutting pattern. This special fabric can cope with being wet without distorting so is ideal to use at this stage. The tracings were done with spirit based marker pens so the ink would not run.



This project took place during the school holidays so Joshua came along to help his Granny - he did a great job with tracing the designs.

We put small pen marks in each of the spaces that would be cut away, to make the cutting process easier. With the tracing complete, the pattern pieces were pressed onto the corresponding piece of felt. The dampness of the felt holds the pattern against the fabric making cutting easier.



Some preferred to work with big scissors, others with small ones. Some liked to stand up, others were more comfortable sitting.



Andrea wanted peace and quiet so she could concentrate better, so she took her piece through to the kitchen.

Once all the pieces were cut out we spread the paper plan on the table and played about with the arrangement of all the knotwork pieces. There was a lot of lively discussion over cups of tea while we figured out the best layout. Eventually we were happy and then we discussed what would go into the middle of the design.

As the wallhanging will eventually be displayed in the church, we settled on a quote from scripture - and identified a page from the Book of Kells for the centre.



We had made good time through the day and we had half an hour left. We decided to put the time to good use and make a piece of felt for the centre panel. The Kells image we had chosen was that of the Four Evangelists Symbols - folio v.12. We selected colours of wool that reflected the colours used in the manuscript - blues, golds, browns and dark reds - and arranged them randomly over the kitchen worktop. Although the colours were random, as before the first layer of fibres was in one direction with the second layer at right angles.



Again, soapy water was poured on, covered in bubblewrap and the piece was rubbed until it was felted enough to hold together. As it was quite a complex design, I took it away to cut on my laser cutter back at my studio.



Session 2 - 13th April



This morning the table was set up for standing. No colour choices were needed at this stage, we were straight in with white wool fibres. We started with a base layer of ice wool and then laid down two layers of merino with the second layer at right angles to the first.



We wanted to make our wallhanging have something of the flavour of an ancient Celtic manuscript so we added other fibres onto the top to create texture and shading. I had brought along different types of wool, some soft, pale shades of neutral toned merino wool and other fibres such as silks, metallics, bamboo fibre and some thistledown. We also had some mohair yarns.



Everyone chose a fibre or yarn and moved around the table to give a random sprinkling of these additions.



To ensure that these fibres would be fully trapped into the felt, we then covered them with a very fine web of white merino wool.



These fibres had to be spread as thinly as possible - we wanted just enough to trap the underlying fibres, but not enough to obscure them.

We were helped throughout by Joshua's little brother, James! He really was very good and kept us all happy.



We started pouring on warm soapy water. It took about 10 litres of water.



In places there was a bit too much water but we had towels at the ready and quickly spread them out to catch the drips.



After pouring on the water, we spread out another sheet of bubblewrap and started rubbing. For a piece this size, teamwork is a great thing. There was a lot of banter as we rubbed and we quickly got the initial felting done.

We moved around the table every few minutes as not everyone felted at the same rate or pressure. By moving around we could ensure that the whole piece got the same treatment.

The edges were rather uneven so we peeled back the bubblewrap and spent a little while tucking the fluffy bits underneath to try and get a reasonably straight edge.





Then the fun began - arranging the cut-out from the previous session. I had printed out a photograph of our agreed layout and the pieces were first arranged on the paper plan before being transferred to the felt. We started at one end and worked our way up to ensure that it all fitted into place.



Some of the cut-outs were quite delicate and there was a bit of manipulation needed - and some little bits of patchwork to fill in the odd hole or gap.

Finally, the central panel was positioned. Then we took scissors to the intersections of all the knotwork panels to create the "over & under" effect that is typical of Celtic knotwork.



This was intricate work and required concentration. We were only cutting through the top colour leaving the bottom colour intact. This stage is one that requires a bit of faith as it is only later that the benefit of this becomes apparent. As the felting progresses, the top fibres shrink faster leaving the lower layer exposed around the edges and at the cut intersections.



A bit more soapy water was added onto the coloured panels and then the whole piece covered with bubblewrap. This time we needed to take the felting the whole way so it was serious rubbing needed



After 45 minutes Joshua was delighted when I declared we had rubbed enough but just for this side!



Turning over the felt to rub the back required teamwork. Being so full of water, the felt was quite heavy. We kept it sandwiched in the bubblewrap as that helps to avoid distortion of the felt.



We turned the felt back over so we could see how it looked and then we rolled it up to squeeze out the soapy water.

Then we repeated the rubbing process rubbing, rubbing..... and rubbing some more. As before, we moved around the table, each working the section in front of us for a few minutes before moving one space to the right. We kept rubbing until we had done a complete circuit of the table.



Towels and basins at the ready, we got rid of a lot of water. Despite our best efforts, a lot missed the basin!



By the time we had finished we could see the colours of the design coming through on the back - a sure sign that the felting process had worked.



With each squeeze, the felt became lighter and easier to handle. After a few minutes we were happy we had squeezed out as much as we could. We transferred the felt to my large plastic box for transport and then cleared up all the mess.



We had a few days before the next session so I hung the felt over a rail in my garage to let it drip dry. While I unloaded the rest of the gear, an amazing amount of water accumulated at the bottom corners and I gave them another good squeeze.



Session 3 - 16th April

Today was to be spent needlefelting - a process easier done sitting down so we set up the table with the legs at the lowest setting. We covered the table with slabs of expanded polystyrene and then laid the felt on top. It was almost completely dry after the weekend of warm weather which made our task much easier.



Our first task was to arrange our stencils for the lettering. I had cut them from sheets of translucent vinyl using the laser cutter so all we had to do was arrange them. We worked out the spacing and pinned some lengths of ribbon through the felt. These were used as our baselines and were later removed.



We chose a dark wine fibre for our lettering and used felting needles to push the fibres through the stencils into the felt.



The next task was to create the tramline borders for our knotwork panels. To assist with keeping the order right for the "overs & unders" some people found it helpful to pin some ribbon guides

It was a lovely, warm, sunny day and it seemed a shame to be stuck indoors so we sat outside for our lunch.



Suitably refreshed, we returned to tackle some of the more intricate parts - here adding detail to the figure of St Matthew and below to the surrounding border of the panel.





The local craft group were meeting this afternoon and they came to join us - we fairly got through the work with so many helping.



Session 4 - 24th April

This was another day of the same process - needlefelting the detail. Again, we had a good turnout with everyone keen to add their bit.



We were having a lovely, sociable time - I just had to crack the whip a bit and remind everyone that their hands could work at the same time as their tongues!
Gradually the knotwork panels got their borders added.



This was the first knotwork panel to be finished, with all the overs and unders in place it gave everyone encouragement to get the other panels complete.



Another person dropped in to see what we were up to - and very quickly found herself with a felting needle in hand!



This is the image from the Book of Kells that we were using as inspiration for our centre panel.

Copying the detail exactly was not possible due to the medium we were using but we managed to create a good impression of the four Evangelist symbols.

By the end of the day almost all the detail was there except for St John.



Babs found the centre panel completely addictive - she couldn't stop working on it even at the end of the day when we were trying to clear the decks ready for going home.

This was a Friday and nobody was going to be using the church hall over the weekend except for the congregation after church so it was decided we would leave the table in place to let people see how it was progressing.



Standing back, we got a good idea of how it was all looking. All our hard work was paying off and the end was in sight.

Session 5 - 27th April

The last day - one final push on the needle felting for the morning and then the afternoon would be for a final wet felt to bind everything together.

Babs's husband came along to see what she had been doing - he intended just to look, but ended up staying for the whole day.



Some of the letters were thinner than others so a bit of time was spent fattening them up while others worked on finishing the knotwork detail and Babs completed the centre panel.





Even having a toddler in tow was not going to prevent Judith from contributing.



This project has been funded with assistance from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the organisation that assess how well that funding has been applied chose this as one of the projects to evaluate, so Wendy handed out forms and asked people to fill them in. It only took a few minutes out of our morning and we had been making good progress.

Standing back (in some cases up!) to have a good look now that all the detail was in place.



We turned the felt over and needlefelted from the back to ensure that all our carefully added detail would stay in place. This part needed very little concentration so conversation flowed freely.



After stabbing all over the back for about 20 minutes, we turned the felt back to the front and repeated this process. This took us up to lunchtime and at that point we folded up the felt while I re-set the table to standing height ready for the final stages.



Towels were spread on the floor in preparation for catching any drips and then we poured on lots of warm, soapy water.



Then the rubbing began.....





After some 30 minutes of rubbing we took off the bubblewrap and rubbed directly onto the felt. Then we turned the felt over before spreading it out to do more rubbing.



With the bubblewrap back in place more rubbing could begin. This is where having a tall man with large hands really helps!

After more rubbing the bubblewrap was removed and we had a final rub directly on the felt during which time we were able to feel if there were any parts that were loose. We did find a couple of loose pieces on the central panel and these were quickly dealt with using a felting needle.



The next stage was milling. This involves rolling the felt up in bamboo mats and the rolling back and forth for several minutes in each direction.



We spread towels on the table then covered it with the bamboo mats before laying the felt on top and rolling the whole thing up like a giant swiss roll. Then began the rolling..... This took teamwork as the felt is on the large side to be handled by one person. Each team had to do rolls back and forth to a count of one hundred.



Team 1.....



Team 2.....

Then change over of the mats to let Team 3 roll from one side.....



And Team 4 put in the final push.....



We pinned a tube of fabric along the back of the top edge so we could insert the top rail of a clothes rail and hang up the felt.



Then we all gathered round for our group photograph.



Everyone was delighted with the result.



At this point the final rinse had still to be done and we agreed that the centre panel would be enhanced by stitching small black beads onto the eyes of the four figures.

The final stage - rinsing

This had to be done at home as the felt was far too big to fit into a sink. A bath makes the rinsing process much easier - I could trample on the felt to rinse out the soap.



It took several bathfuls, but when I was satisfied the soap was all gone I wrung out as much water as I could.



I then spread the felt over some chairs in the garden and left it to drip dry.





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