

Soft Rock 5

Project 1

Groam House Museum

Volunteers 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.

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Wendy Sanders

Groam House Museum
Project Co-ordinator



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MAOINICHTHE LEIS
A' CHRANNCHUR**



The first wall hanging

This felt panel was made by a team of volunteers from Groam House Museum under the guidance of textile artist Ruth Black, with assistance from a few other people dropping in and out. This album shows the various stages that we went through in creating the wall hanging over five action packed days working in the Masonic Lodge hall in Fortrose.

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. Most of them are volunteers at Groam House Museum.

- Ruth Black
- Susan Bound
- Liz Broxton
- Hannah Cameron
- Rita Fabling
- Jean Hogben
- Pat Kemsley
- Maureen Kitchingham
- Carola Martin-Smith
- Donald Matheson
- Wendy Sanders
- Eileen Smillie
- Val Southern
- Megan Stubbs
- Kimberley Taylor
- Tricia Tickner
- Evelyn Topp
- Su Wompra

Session 1, 14th January 2015

We started off by looking at a 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.



Everyone was asked to choose two colours of dyed merino wool fibres, a dark shade and a lighter contrasting colour.



We needed some more knotwork designs, so Rita set about scaling up some motifs from the book while others started laying out fibres in preparation for felting.



The dark colour was laid down first on the bubblewrap with all the fibres running in the same direction, then the lighter colour was added on top at right angles.



The next stage was to wet the fibres with warm soapy water.



Then a layer of bubblewrap was placed on top and gently pressed to make all the fibres wet and flat.





People worked at different speeds so there was quite a lot of variety of activity at any given time.



A fair amount of soapy water ended up on the floor!



The next stage involved tracing all our knotwork designs onto a special fabric using a marker pen.



Once the designs were traced, they were pressed onto the pieces of felt to use as a cutting guide. The moisture in the felt meant the pattern adhered to the surface to allow reasonably accurate cutting.



We were using the tables that were available in the hall - they proved to be an awkward height for people - a bit too high to sit at comfortably, but a bit too low to stand at without leaning over and getting a sore back.



Some people had to leave early, so some panels of felt were left for me to cut back at the studio using a laser cutter. By the end of the day we were able to lay out the cut pieces to get an idea of how it was going to look,



Session 2, 22nd January 2015



This time, we set up a new purpose-built felting table with height adjustable legs. These were set to their highest position so people could stand comfortably at the table.

The table has a waterproof cover, and on top of this we laid a layer of bubblewrap. We spread out a sheet of ice wool as our starting point and then started laying down white merino wool fibres - all running across the width of the table. The table measures 120 x 240 cm (4ft x 8ft). It took about 20 minutes to cover the whole table with an even thickness of fibres.



Then a second layer of fibres was added at right angles.



Once the two layers were complete we added some textural pieces - silk fibres, bamboo fibres, coarser wools, strands of mohair yarn and even some hair from a Highland cow!



Then we stood back and admired our handiwork!

It looked really lovely - all soft and fluffy, but it couldn't stay like that. The fibres were carefully covered with a large sheet of organza before we poured on the soapy water to wet it all down. It took about 10 litres of water to get the fibres completely wet. The organza meant that nothing moved about while we were wetting it - and if anything did move, it is sufficiently transparent to see that it is moving.

However it all stayed in place and after a few minutes of gentle rubbing we were happy to peel off the organza.



This was then replaced with a large sheet of bubblewrap - bubble side down.

Then the rubbing began.....



And more rubbing.....

until we were satisfied that everything was fully wetted and the felting process had begun.



We played "put & take" with our cut-out pieces from the previous session till we were happy with the layout and then we transferred them to the white felt.



The next stage was to make small snips with scissors through the top layer of each piece of coloured felt to expose the darker layer below. This would give the impression of the "overs & unders" which are typical of Celtic knotwork. It caused great hilarity as people struggled to work out which way to cut. The favoured method seemed to be laying small pieces of string at each intersection and always cutting parallel to the string.



Eventually, all the snips were made - not without one or two mishaps along the way but I re-assured everyone that it would all look okay as the work progressed.





Then it was more soapy water added, bubblewrap back on and rubbing - and rubbing - and rubbing.



At this point, we were joined by two young ladies from the college. They were on work placement with the museum for their Business Studies course.



Once we were certain that the coloured sections had adhered sufficiently to the background, we turned the whole piece over and rubbed some more..... and more. If you look closely, you can see the colours migrating through the white and this was a sure sign that it was all felting together nicely.

During the time that we were rubbing, one member of the team who suffers with arthritic hands, spent her time working out the designs for the zoomorphic elements in the centre panel. She really was enjoying herself, and was not as glum as it looks on this photograph!



Then we turned it back to right side up and did some more gentle rubbing without the bubblewrap. This helped with shrinking the top colours of the knotwork, leaving the darker colour below showing around the edges, and where we had snipped away for the overs & unders.



Session 3 - 26th January 2015

We started off the day by setting up the table with the legs at lowest height so it would be comfortable for sitting at. Then we covered the table with slabs of expanded polystyrene - a cheap material which allows for easy needlefelting.

The next stage was to lay out templates for positioning our text. We had chosen the wording on the first day, and Rita had carefully drawn out all the lettering at actual size. This was scanned into my computer and I cut stencils from translucent vinyl sheets.



When we were happy with the positions, we pinned ribbon markers across the felt to make sure everything stayed straight.





The felt was still damp from the previous session, so we covered the knotwork border panels with black bin bags to keep our arms dry as we leaned on the felt.

Needlefelting involves using special barbed needles to push loose fibres down into a base material - in this case, the felt that we had made at the previous session. Usually this process is done dry, but we still have more wet felting work to do and by doing the needlefelting at this stage, the fibres become much more secure than they would just with needlefelting alone.



We chose to do the text in a dark purple. Using the templates as guides we needed the fibres through the stencil holes.



For letters such as "O", "R" and "P" the stencil had to be removed to complete the circles by eye.



We had not been very sensible about the order in which we worked on the words, so towards the end of this part, we were rather on top of each other and had to take turns to finish it off.

Once we were happy with the wording, the felt was turned over and we did more needlefelting working from the back. It is easy to see where we needed to work as the fibres are poked right through the felt and stand up in little tufts. These all had to be worked back through to make them secure.





Next, we turned the felt back to right side up and started working on the Celtic knotwork panels.



Despite our careful snipping during the wet-felting stage, the overs and unders were not sufficiently pronounced so we needlefelted in the details



Spot the mistake! We decided that the odd error here and there was acceptable.



While the needlefelting was going on, others started work on felt panels to make the zoomorphic elements of the design. We couldn't have done this earlier as we needed to know how much space the text was going to take up. Two pieces were needed - one for a bird above the text and another for a hound below.



The fibres were laid out to the correct size of the design.



By the end of the day we had a much better idea of how our wallhanging was going to look.



The text came from George Bain's book - a traditional Celtic blessing that he had used as a design for a greetings card.

May your steps
return from all
corners of the
globe under
the guidance
of the star
that points to
home.

Session 4, 28th January 2015

We decided right at the start of the day that we wanted to emphasise the tramline edges of the Celtic knotwork. Although some of the darker colours from underneath were showing at the edges, it was not consistent and we felt it would look better if we spent time making it more pronounced.



I had taken home the felt panels that had been made for the zoomorphic designs and cut these out on the laser cutter because they were quite complex designs. They had to be needlefelted all over, and have the detail added.



As the detail was added it became easier to see the hound features of the zoomorphic design below the text - a computer print-out was there to keep us on the right line.

But we also needed sustenance - in the form of coffee and chocolate cake!



As we worked, the detail emerged and it was certainly worth the effort. However it was hard to know when to stop. We kept finding more bits. Look closely and you will see little golden claws on the hound.

The bird became more recognisable as such when we put in the wing detail.





This knotwork was the most complex. The design is adapted from a panel on the side of the cross slab in Groam House Museum



And this was how it looked by the end of the day. Some detail had still to be added, but we were encouraged by how much we had achieved.



Session 5, 2nd February 2015

The final day - we set up the table at sitting height and made the final push on getting the needlefelted detail.



This complex knot was drawn by Rita - so we left it for her to finish off - everyone else thought it was too difficult!

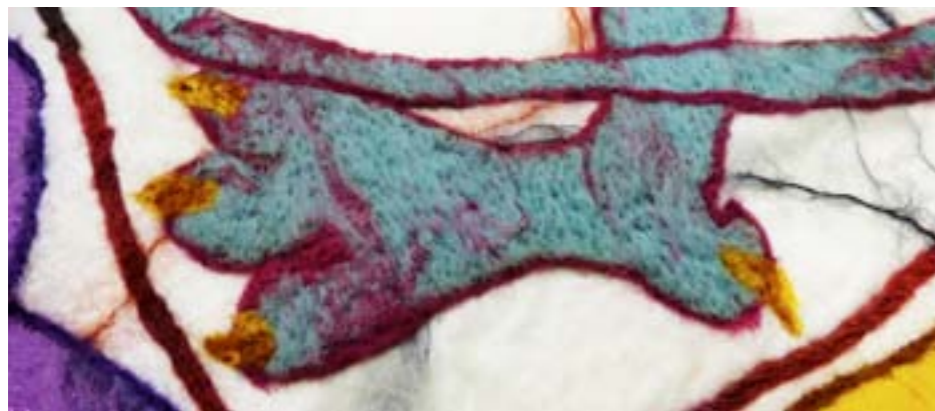




Then we turned the whole piece over and started needlefelting from the back. This ensures that everything is firmly held and cannot be accidentally pulled out.



Needle felting completed, it was time to wet the felt again with hot soapy water and then to start rubbing.....



After a couple of hours needle felting we were confident that all the detail was finished and securely in place.



At this point we were joined by Donald - a young man on his first day working at the museum as a trainee. He discovered that there is quite a variety of work expected from museum staff! He joined us in our game of "musical chairs" where we all kept moving round the table after a few minutes to ensure that each part of the felt got the same treatment.





The bubblewrap was removed and we did some more gentle massaging as a final check that there were no loose fibres.

We started working on the back of the felt, working for a few minutes and then all moving round the table a little until everyone had done a complete circuit - probably about 40 minutes worth of rubbing, and then we turned the felt over and did the same again for the front.

We worked up quite a lather with all our rubbing and it took quite a long time, but worth it to ensure that everything was fully attached to make a really strong piece of fabric.



We then rolled up the felt and squeezed out as much water as we could. The table was covered with towels and then a bamboo blind before we repositioned the felt and rolled it up in the blind.



Then the hard work really began.....

This stage called for teamwork as the felt had to be rolled firmly backwards and forwards to complete the felting process.



This is called milling and is physically quite hard work. Because of the size it was best done in pairs with Rita counting out the rolls.



After 100 rolls, we re-rolled and swapped to the next pair.. Although it was hard work while rolling, there were enough of us there so that by taking turns, we all got plenty of opportunity to rest in between.

We found that this process worked most efficiently when we were able to have people of similar height working together.





After a few rolls along the length of the felt we changed to rolling across the width. This involved bigger teams and quite a lot of re-positioning of the felt as the bundle tended to come unrolled. Also we had to work with two bamboo blinds side by side as there are no 8 foot wide blinds available.

Each time we unrolled, the felt was noticeably firmer and eventually we had managed to shrink the width of the piece from 120 cm down to 110cm and to take a similar proportion off the length.

So our work was done - all we had to do was pin a tube of fabric onto the back of the top edge so that we could hang it up and admire our handiwork.



Time for the group photo!





The clothes rail wasn't quite tall enough, but two people held it up to reveal the full effect.

Time for everyone to go home, but I still had work to do. All that soap had to be washed out and this was something that needed something bigger than a sink - the washing and rinsing had to be done in the bath.

The next photographs show the process of rinsing, squeezing and finally draining.



The first rinse produced a lot of soap - I got very clean feet that night!



It took 4 bathfuls of water to rinse out all the soap but eventually the water was running clear and the felt had become really firm.



As the felt firmed up it was more difficult for the water to penetrate so little droplets were visible sitting on the surface. Then it was just a question of leaving the felt to drip dry - this took three days.





Groam House Museum - www.groamhouse.org.uk