

Soft Rock 5

Project 5

Muir of Ord Art 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 inspired by the work of George Bain and the imagery found on local Pictish Stones. 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



**LOTTERY FUNDED
MAOINICHTE LEIS
A' CHRANNCHUR**



The fifth wall hanging

This felt panel was made by a team of volunteers from Muir of Ord Art Group and other people from the village 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 art group's premises.

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:

- Hannah Anderson
- Erica Atkinson
- Victor Atkinson
- Ruth Black
- Gordon Davis
- Ian Dempster
- Kathryn Nuttal Halliwell
- Eleanor Innes
- Alex Johannesen
- Helen Leslie
- Neil McKay
- Annie MacLean
- Tracy Shaw
- Natalie Shearer
- Morven Skinner
- Eileen Smillie
- Moira Torrie
- Stewart Torrie
- Tracy Underwood
- Marion Wharram

Session 1, 10th June 2015

We started the day by looking at two of the other wallhangings that had been made by other groups and then everyone dived in to choose their colours of Merino wool. Some were working individually, others in pairs.



Each person had to choose two colours, either complementary or toning.



Our choices made, we started to lay down the wool fibres on top of sheets of bubblewrap starting with the darker / stronger colours. Some people worked in the art room, others out on the big felting table out in the corridor.



All the fibres were laid down in the same direction until we had even layers with no gaps.



Two pairs of volunteers were working on large sections which needed some colour blends.

Once the first layer was complete we did a fingertip touch test to ensure there were no gaps.



Then a second layer of fibres was added using the contrasting colour, this time with all the fibres running at right angles to those of the first layer.





With two complete layers it was time to choose some decorative fibres to add some bling. I had brought along a choice of metallics, silks, mohairs and synthetic fibres, each of which would give a different effect.



When all the fibres were in place we poured warm soapy water onto them till they were completely wet then laid another sheet of bubblewrap on top and spread the water through the fibres.



The next step was to rub and rub. As one rubs over the bubblewrap, water is pushed in all different directions. The water carries the wool fibres with it thus tangling them up with each other.



These fibres had to be added sparingly and then a very fine web of Merino wool was spread on top to trap them in place.



After a few minutes rubbing we turned over the felts and did some more rubbing from the back, so that they were felted enough to be able to roll them up and squeeze out the surplus water. We only wanted these partially felted at this stage as they would later have to be felted into a background felt.



Once the water was squeezed out we could put the felts to one side and dry off the tables ready for the next stage.



Each section of our design had to be traced onto a special translucent non-woven fabric using marker pens.



These tracings were then spread onto our damp pieces of felt to use as patterns for cutting out our intricate designs.



Part of our design was to include whisky stills - a former distillery manager drew the designs before cutting them out of coppery coloured felt.





As the cut sections took shape, others worked on producing some additional pieces of felt for some of the other design features - a mix of greys and blacks for the "black cattle" from which the village owed its existence and some red for the poppies to mark the war-time heritage.



An advantage of working out in the corridor was that visitors to the library saw what we were doing and came to join in. Here you see people making small pieces of felt that would be used for our mythical beasts to be incorporated in the vinescroll sections of the design.



Again, tracings were done and used to cut out these strange creatures.



Everyone who helped was asked to sign our record sheet so we knew who had participated and so we could keep them in touch with progress through my blog.



Session 2, 11th June 2015

The major task for the day was making the background felt but we had sufficient space and enough people so that some volunteers were able to concentrate on making the remaining pieces of coloured felt for other design features - so more colour choices to be made.



We needed a tracing of the Highland cattle design and some felt for the clarsach that would feature in our text.



Meanwhile, others set to work laying out white merino wool fibres to cover the sheet of icewool that had been spread over the table.



This white wool would make the felt that supported the whole design so it was important to get good, even coverage. All the fibres were laid down in the same direction but we moved around the table so that there was less likelihood of one area being thinner than another.



When the table was completely covered we started on a second layer, this time with the fibres running at right angles to those in the first layer.



Meanwhile, one person drew and then traced the clarsach design which another person subsequently cut out from the brown and gold coloured felt.



The black cattle were cut out from another piece of half felt - but it proved awkward for this left hander as I didn't have left-handed scissors.



Out in the corridor the two layers of white wool fibres were complete and we started to add some decorative fibres. The idea was to create a background that was not a flat white but at the same time, would not detract from the decorative elements we would be adding later.



We used a variety of fibres - silk, bamboo, mohair, Angelina, nylon and some coarser wools. Most of these were fairly neutral shades, but even those with more vivid colours were added sufficiently sparingly that they simply added touches of texture.





Satisfied that everything was as we wanted, we poured several jugfuls of warm soapy water over the fibre layers before covering the table with a large sheet of bubblewrap.



Towels on the floor to soak up the spills, we started spreading the water through the fibres to get all the fibres flat and evenly wetted.



After a few minutes of rubbing we tucked in the fluffy edges which had been hanging over the edge of the table.



Then we did some more serious rubbing to get the felting process started. After about 10 minutes of rubbing we turned our attention to creating our design using the cut-outs from the day before. Here you see me squatting in the middle of the paper plan while we decide where to put each piece - community art in action.



Decisions made, each piece was transferred carefully onto the background felt and any wrinkles smoothed out.



Poppies, grass, whisky stills and Highland cattle were all added in amongst the knotwork panels.





When we were happy that everything was in place, more warm soapy water was poured on, concentrating particularly on the additions which had all dried out overnight.



The bubblewrap was then spread out over the felt and we started rubbing again. This time it was serious rubbing, not just to flatten the fibres but to get them all felting together.



After a few minutes rubbing I realised we had forgotten an important step, so we peeled back the bubblewrap and got out the scissors to snip through the intersections of the knotwork panels. This helps in creating the impression of "over & under" which is typical of Celtic knotwork.



Then it was bubblewrap back in place and more rubbing..... and rubbing.....



The rubbing makes the wool fibres travel past each other, all going in different directions and therefore tangling up together. We rubbed on the front of the felt for about 20 minutes before turning it over to repeat the process on the reverse.



Turning a piece of wet felt this size is made easier with team work.



And then we needed more rubbing.....





When another 20 minutes of serious physical exercise was over we removed the bubblewrap. We could see quite clearly where the cut fibres from our coloured pieces had travelled through the white layers - a sure sign that the felting was well underway.



We did some more rubbing without the bubblewrap to finish off the felting on the back before turning over and repeating this process on the front.



By gently rubbing without the bubblewrap we could feel if there were any parts not properly secured, but all was firm with no loose sections so we could roll up the felt to squeeze out as much of the soapy water as possible.



Despite the large plastic box, a lot of water landed on the floor!



Session 3, 15th June 2015

With the felt made, the next step was to add the detail. This was done by a process called needlefelting which uses sharp barbed needles to push fibres through the felt. It is particularly useful for adding precise details. The felt was spread out on top of sheets of expanded polystyrene.



Everyone gathered around the table and we started by pinning ribbons to use as guides for the text in the centre of the panel. The group had previously discussed what they wanted as the text and I had prepared stencils for all the words. A punnet of strawberries helped to keep everyone sweet!





All the word stencils were positioned and pinned in place so the dark navy wool fibres could be needled through to form the letters. Those at the bottom end of the felt worked on adding detail to the vinescroll design and added black centres to the poppies.



As the words in the centre were finished we moved onto the knotwork panels.

The picture above shows the left-over scraps of half-felt from making our coloured sections at the previous sessions and these were used to add detail to the knotwork sections.



Each section of knotwork had to have borders added to follow the interlace line and show the “overs & unders” that are typical of Celtic knotwork. It took a little while for some people to get the hang of how the patterns worked but we were soon in full swing and as the patterns developed it was easier to follow the designs.



The top and bottom sections of the felt had vinescroll designs. These designs had been developed from a similar design on the Hilton of Cadboll Pictish stone, the original of which is in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. Throughout the vine there are strange winged creatures eating the clusters of grapes. All this detail had to be added.



Later in the afternoon one of our morning volunteers, Tracy brought her young daughters in after school and we showed them how to use the felting needles.



By the end of the day we were down to a small handful of volunteers but we had made good progress. The text was complete and we could see how the other detail was going to develop.

Session 4, 17th June 2015

We had found it rather cramped working in the corridor so this morning we set up the table in the art room.



This gave us more space to move around and was a brighter place to work. Before we settled down to work people were keen to photograph the panel, particularly those who had not been present at the end of the previous day.



Then it was time to settle down and carry on with our needlefelting.



One person added the strings to the clarsach. There are of course more strings in the real instrument, but the limitations of the medium meant we had to just have a few.



We had a good turnout of volunteers and work progressed remarkably quickly. As detail was added the vinescroll designs started to be clearer.





Tracy's daughters came in again and added a bit more detail towards the end of the day. Needlefelting is quite addictive and people were reluctant to go home.



There was still a bit of work to do, but we were pleased with progress and the end was in sight.

One section which people had been ignoring was the black cattle. Helen had done the original drawing for these and as she was not in a hurry to depart she decided to work on this part once everyone else had gone home. It involved leaning over the table and was easier with the room to herself.



Session 5, 18th June 2015

For our final day we started off in the art room finishing the needlefelting.



It was mostly fine detail that was being added. Helen still had a bit more work to do on the cattle and some sections of knotwork still needed their tramlines.





A few music notes and a treble clef were added around the harp while others touched up some of the lettering to make it look more even. And visitors called in to watch the work in progress.



A few more grapes were added onto the vine and Helen finished her cows.



Then it was time to turn the felt over so we could needlefelt from the back to secure everything in place.



Using the felting needles to push the fibres back through the felt means that nothing could come loose during our final wet felting session.



By lunchtime the needlefelting was finished and we set the table up again in the corridor. With bubblewrap and felt in place we poured on several litres of warm soapy water and then covered it with more bubblewrap.





This time, the rubbing was serious hard work - everything had to be securely felted in so we rubbed on the back for about 20 minutes before turning over and repeating the process on the front.



When we were satisfied the felting was complete we rolled the felt up and squeezed out as much water as we could. Some 10 litres or so had gone in and we got about half of it out by squeezing.



The felt had to be milled and this involves spreading the felt on bamboo mats before rolling up like a swiss roll and then rolling back and forth.



The rolling required teamwork and muscle power. It had to be done first from one end, then the other, each to a count of one hundred.





Then the mats and felt were repositioned and we rolled from side to side - bigger teams were required for this.



Finally we pinned a fabric strip across the back so we could hang up our felt and admire our handiwork.



Then came the photo session!



All that remained was for me to take the felt home and rinse out all the soap - several rinses in hot water in the bath, trampling up and down with my feet, and then it was left to drip dry for a couple of days.





Groam House Museum - www.groamhouse.org.uk