

# A stitch in time

In a new series, we look at the work of artists who find inspiration in our native wild flora. Here, Hannah Shuckburgh highlights three British contemporary embroidery artists who explore the beauty, symbolism and textures of wild flowers and lichens

'Meadow' by Jo Butcher, £450. Also available as an embroidery kit, £42. [www.jobutcher.co.uk](http://www.jobutcher.co.uk)

Since the first humans started embellishing their surroundings, flowers have fed the imagination of artists. From the simple flower motifs on the Pazyryk carpet in the Iron Age frozen tombs of Siberia, to the elegant floral needlepoint designs of William Morris, the language of flowers in embroidery reaches across all cultures. Decorative, but also rich in symbolism – juniper for eternity, rosemary for faithfulness – flowers gain a new identity in embroidery art, where they become almost three-dimensional, textural and asking to be touched.

The 17th century was a golden age for English floral embroidery, when needlework pattern books became available to people in their own homes, and women began to explore the possibilities for self-expression in embroidery. Now in the 21st century, a new crop of female artists continues to explore the themes of our native wild flora, pushing the boundaries of embroidery and creating works that are beautiful, intricate and skilful, with a strong message about our natural world.

## Meadows in miniature

Jo Butcher, from her studio on the Somerset levels, creates highly crafted, small-scale works handstitched onto canvas. Jo takes the viewer deep onto the meadow floor – she calls it a “rabbit’s eye view” – so that we are eye level with the plants, the viewer dwarfed by majestic, ruby-red poppies and frothy heads of cow parsley. Her miniature works, some only 8cm high, depict sunny scenes of grasses bending in the breeze and fields carpeted in buttercups.

There are no blights on the landscape in these works – no tractors, no intensive farming, not a single trace of human activity. Jo’s work is not concerned with gritty reality – it is pieced together from happy memories, often from remembered scenes of unspoilt meadows from her childhood.

“There is a simple beauty – a pure joy – to meadows that I try to capture in my work,” she says. “People often say they recognise the bits of coast or places in my work; but they are all from my imagination. I think it’s wonderful that people connect with them in that way.”

In Jo’s work, skies are perfectly blue with puffy white clouds, a seagull cawing overhead. But the calm, peace and positivity of her work are in dramatic contrast to her own story of how she came to embroidery. She lost her daughter to a genetic illness at 10 months and took up embroidery in the depths of grief, looking for, she says, “something to do, something to focus on. I wanted to create something very

beautiful out of such an awful time.” Embroidery for Jo was a kind of therapy, to transport her into another world.

## Embroidered sculptures

While Jo Butcher’s work is concerned with dreamlike, almost ethereal scenes, Lancastrian artist Corinne Young’s embroidered floral pieces are almost forensically precise in detail, created from meticulous botanical research.

“The tiniest flowers when viewed close up have fascinating structures,” she says. “Seedheads, leaves and roots are all interesting forms to recreate in embroidery.”

Corinne often grows the plant from seed in her garden, in order to study the plant’s structure through every stage; sketching, photographing and even scanning the plants to build up a library of images from which to work.

Her pieces begin with her pressing her own paper from raw linen fibres, onto which she draws and paints floral shapes. These are then machine stitched before being cut out and shaped into lifelike forms – a pink-tipped anemone or a ruffle-petalled scabious, say – which Corinne describes as “embroidered sculptures”. Corinne hand-embellishes these sculptures with extraordinary, eye-watering detail – knotted stamens and beaded seedheads – using wiring and gathering to bring the form to life.

Corinne came from a family of stitchers – both grandmothers were skilled embroiderers and her aunt taught her the basics of embroidery. But at college she found her own style.

“I feel very connected to the domestic, feminine history of embroidery, but in my own practice I wanted to take it beyond that sphere, to be more ambitious with it,” she says. Inspired by 17th-century stumpwork – a style of raised embroidery made using silk and metal threads with appliquéd fabric and beads – she started to think about the three-dimensional possibilities of her work. “It gave me the idea that embroidery can be sculptural.”

Her work is a beautiful mix of lifelike and textural, and her colours are vibrant and intense – she says that the bold, deep hues of the embroidery of American artist Kaffe Fassett was a huge inspiration.

## Natural inspiration

It’s not the easy beauty and natural symmetry of anemones or daisies that interests Manchester-based embroidery artist Emily Wright, however: it’s the coarse, rough, wild lichens and natural textures of coastal plant life. Her works, which she makes under the name Salt Stitches, and sells via the ▶

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'Physica' by Emily Wright, £220 (sold). For similar, visit [www.etsy.com/shop/saltstitches](http://www.etsy.com/shop/saltstitches)



'Dandelions' by Corinne Young, £275, available from the Arteria Gallery, [www.arteriashop.co.uk](http://www.arteriashop.co.uk) [www.corinneyoungtextiles.co.uk](http://www.corinneyoungtextiles.co.uk)

online craft store Etsy, are richly textured and abstract, combining hand-embroidery with shards of glass, pumice, semi-precious stones, wooden beads and bamboo.

"I've always been attracted to the rough surfaces and colours of coastal plant life, and my work always starts and finishes with those natural textures" says Emily.

The rugged coast of Anglesey, where she has spent her summers since childhood, has been the source of inspiration for much of her work, as well as recent travels in the Swiss Alps and Canada.

"Anglesey has the most beautiful, varied coastal landscape," she says. "The sea can be almost turquoise and it rains so much, it's very green; there are always new wild plants and flowers to discover."

Her works begin with photographs. Emily will take close-ups of plantlife textures: seaweeds, coastal lichens,



Buttercups: Patchwork Meadow square by Anne Hutchings

saltwater moss and the flora that clings to cliffs and rocks. "The plants on rocky coastal surfaces have this resilience I love – they can survive anywhere," she says. She also documents the impact of man on the environment – debris from boats and objects washed ashore that show the effects of the sea and the elements.

"I like to create a cacophony of textures in my work," she explains of how she pieces together these elements.

Her works are all made on traditional embroidery hoops, which create a taut surface on which to work. "I enjoy working on a hoop rather than a traditional square frame, because I think the circular shape echoes the natural inspiration of each composition," she says.

Her works layer textures together into beautiful, complex, three-dimensional abstract compositions that look familiar

yet are not placeable. Some remind you of rock formations, others like aerial shots of river basins, some even suggest bacteria growing in a Petri dish. Her pieces, each a one-off, layer rough with smooth, matt with shiny, creating depth and interest, but always connecting the viewer back to the wonder of nature.

"My works are never planned out," she says, "each evolves as I go, so they are always a reflection of my mood, and of the textures I've seen and documented."

### Patchwork Meadow

These embroidery artists, in their wildly different styles, evoke in vivid detail the intricacy and tactile nature of our native flora. It was with the same aim that Plantlife launched the Patchwork Meadow project in March 2013. As part of a Europe-wide endeavour, supporters were asked to create small



Poppies: Patchwork Meadow square by Douglas Anderson

15cm square works of textile art inspired by Britain's wild plants and flowers. Pieces submitted covered every imaginable technique – knitting, embroidery, beading, weaving, felting and crochet – exploring the place wild flowers have in our culture: in life, love, folklore, faith, literature, poetry, place and time. These small squares were then sewn into a vast patchwork that was displayed in a touring exhibition, an evocative monument to our floral heritage, with the beauty and value of plants woven deep into every square.

The finished patchwork – and the works of these three embroidery artists – are richly textured, decorative and beautiful to look at – but perhaps they have a deeper and more powerful message, too: that just like the finest threads and most delicate embroidery, our native botanical treasures are fragile and precious, and worthy of protecting.