Only Natural

Sue Rangeley's *work is the epitome of nature-inspired fine art fashion. In a career that spans almost fifty years, she has developed her iconic style combining machine embroidery, hand stitching, 3D sculptures, and other textile techniques to create whimsical yet avant-garde works; ephemeral yet sculptural; fragile yet bold.*

STORY BY ANSIE VAN DER WALT

Charmed from an early age by beautiful clothes, Sue has vivid memories of a trunk of vintage garments she and her group of friends would dress up in, drifting into imaginary worlds of make-believe and fantasy.

Growing up in a family of farmers with a love of gardening and the countryside, Sue shared nature walks with her parents, collecting wildflowers and observing butterflies. Adventures that nurtured her artistic eye.

"My mother's wardrobe enticed me. I loved the sequin sparkle and luxurious fabrics of her 1950s evening dresses that replaced her farm workwear when she dressed up for special occasions such as a Farmers' Ball. I still have one of her evening dresses in my collection of vintage clothes."

Sue's early affinity for beautiful clothes and playing dress up inspired her to experiment with creating her own outfits. Her first dress was a Queen of Hearts ensemble to wear to a fancy dress party adorned with minuscule felt mice dressed in sequinned party clothes.

At the age of eight, Sue's neighbour, Aunt Emily, introduced her to a haberdashery chest bursting with threads and beads. *"From that day, I found the lure of a needle and thread irresistible!*

I owe my first forays with hand embroidery to Aunt Emily. Like many post-war households, my mother's sewing machine was used to sew make-do-and-mend clothes and household items. I was fascinated by the inventive possibilities of this 1940s Singer *machine. As a teenager, I manipulated many pattern pieces under its needle."*

Another influence was Sue's secondary school art room, which she refers to as a 'haven of delights'. Sue credits her art teacher for encouraging her artistic imagination to fly in different directions. *"In tandem with drawing and painting, a liberated needlework teacher gave me free rein with a needle and thread; her classes were not just about precision hems, seams, and buttonholes but the occasional dalliance with wilder embellishments on an apron. I still have mine - blue linen covered with fairies and pixies."*

With these influences, Sue was tempted to study fashion or textiles, yet she chose fine arts instead. A decision that continued to pay dividends throughout her career.

"At the end of my first year at art college, I was undecided between pursuing further studies in textile or fine art. Both areas attracted me. I loved painting and drawing and felt it could enrich any textile career I might follow later. Indeed, that choice has continued to enhance the design approach to my creative embroidery.

I still place great emphasis on sketchbook work, drawing and watercolour painting as a vital stage of developing a theme for embroidery. The freedom of the pencil or crayon can suggest a fresh direction before a needle pierces fabric, influencing pattern and colour palettes."

As an art student, fashion continued to play a significant role in Sue's life. *"The latest issue of* Vogue *was always by my bedside; I was swept up by the fashion revolution of the 1960s. With my old* Singer, *I would create fun mini-dresses, and recycle velvet or brocade curtains into hot pants or dance outfits. The magical power of a needle and thread was always in the background awaiting a project."*

Inspired by a box of embroidery threads, Sue had a vision of a hippie-style jacket emblazoned with flora, and so, as a final-year art student, her journey into artistic stitching began. Her vision of a future designing embroidered clothes in a craft workshop was beginning to take shape.

Looking back over her highlight-filled career, Sue regards her encounter with the doyenne of the embroidery world, Constance Howard, in 1972 as one of the most influential and long-lasting. *"Meeting her enlightened my approach to the art of creative stitching. As a highly influential teacher and textile artist, her impact on embroidery touched many, and I was one whose career was sparked by attending a few of her workshops."*

"Even though machine embroidery processes dominate many of my stitched creations, I have always used accents of hand embroidery and hand beadwork to add the final detail. Looking back to the early collections of machine appliqué fashion pieces from the late 1970s, I always enjoyed some signature hand-stitch details of flower centres in French knots, leafy tendrils in stem stitch, or feather stitch patterns on an insect's wing."

London in the '70s produced some of fashion history's greatest icons, and Sue happened to be in the right place at the right time.