

# CYMDAEITHAS GWISGOEDD A TECSTILAU CYMRU THE COSTUME AND TEXTILE SOCIETY OF WALES

**Newsletter** November 2010

**Meetings are held at the National History Museum, St. Fagans.  
Located in the Committee Room of the Office Block unless otherwise advertised.  
Doors open 10.30am for coffee. 11am Morning Lecture 2pm Afternoon Lecture**

## **10 April 2010 AGM Guest Speaker: Cobi Erskine**

In 2008 Gina Corrigan spoke to our Society about the Miao people in South West China, showing us pieces from the comprehensive collection of costume and textiles that she had brought back from her travels. The artistry and skill exhibited on these textiles had been the inspiration for two books by Ruth Smith *Minority Textile Techniques Costumes from South West China, 2007* and *Miao Embroidery from South West China, 2005*.

We were inspired by their contents and wanted to hear more so we contacted **Cobi Erskine**, a talented embroideress, who had contributed to the books. She had deconstructed, reworked and described some of the embroidery techniques used by the Miao women to embellish their clothing. We were delighted when she agreed to talk to us and to run a workshop to demonstrate some of the stitches and involve our members in a project using filling and border patterns.

After a brief AGM meeting we welcomed **Cobi Erskine**, to share her passion for textiles and embroidery. Cobi was invited by Ruth Smith to work on the Miao books because of her experience in embroidery and crafts, she was a City and Guilds student and has used her qualifications to teach and contributed to many exhibitions in the Sussex area. She is constantly experimenting with new techniques and combines them into highly colourful and individual pieces of work.

Cobi spoke about her first visit to China, with a group led by Gina Corrigan. The sights and sensations were so vivid that on her return home Cobi embroidered a scroll to record her experiences. Visiting villages and markets, talking to Miao women and textile traders the Group saw many things and had the opportunity to collect samples and to photograph life in Guizhou Province.

Amongst the many objects were cross stitch shoe soles, paper cuts and silk felt sold in the markets and applied using silk floss and couched with horsehair. Folded silk appliqué

and tin metalwork all used to decorate Miao clothing.

The Dong and Miao minority groups made paper booklets to store their threads, paper patterns and needlework tools often with a family photograph inside. These pockets were decorated and had fabric covers tied up with a braid or ribbon.

Cobi had generously packed cases of lovely things from her collection for us to examine and handle after her talk and these remained on display during the afternoon when we held the workshop.

### **Miao Black work Embroidery Workshop**

Cobi Erskine had prepared a kit consisting of an illustrated instruction sheet, cream fabric, black thread and needle, enough to make a mobile phone pouch.

The Miao use a combination of stitches to create filling patterns; they use coloured threads as well as black and white. The border patterns found on shirts and tying bands resemble European Black work and it is not known whether the technique had been learnt from the Han Chinese or from European missionaries.

Cobi had created a motif incorporating Miao counted patterns and we all started to work over sewing the fabric edges and counting threads to position the design, traditionally fine cotton or linen is used but for this project we used 14 count aida.

Having explained how to achieve straight stitch lines and the use of single and double threads to emphasize and outline details

Cobi took aside small groups to demonstrate some of the more complex stitches and unusual techniques used to embellish Miao costume. We were in awe of the skill and time required to produce such fine and detailed work and it posed the inevitable question as to how long the traditions would survive with increasing education opportunities for girls, movement to work in Chinese cities and the availability of cheap machine manufactured textiles and sophisticated sewing machines from Shanghai.

It was a thoroughly enjoyable day and inspired several people to expand and develop their own designs during the summer.

On 26<sup>th</sup> June we held our summer meeting in the spacious new building, containing the Glamorgan Archive at Ninian Park.

Our first speaker **Sarah Paul**, the Collections Advisor for CyMAL- Museums, Archives and Libraries of Wales, introduced her talk on **Textile Conservation Management and Storage** with a definition and a question.

The purpose of conservation work is to stabilize and preserve an object for the future and to enhance the quality of that item.

The question was to define the three main textile groups handled by a Conservator, this was to develop into a workshop testing our knowledge and teaching us so much about Sarah's own work and how to maintain and

preserve our own family treasures and favorite textiles.

We agreed upon the definition of *natural fibers* as those made from materials that grow in nature, cellulose and protein, they include cotton, linen, ramie, silk, wool and fur. *Synthetic fibers* manufactured by man, we divided into two categories *cellulose fibers*, such as rayon and acetate, made from wood and *regenerated fibers*, including nylon, polyester and acrylic, manufactured by the petrochemical industry.

We also defined a textile group that included non woven fabrics such as vinyl, synthetic leather, resin and rubberized coatings.

Our next task was to identify the hazards posed to the survival of each type of textile, these included sunlight, vermin, chemical contamination by wear and spillage, friction, disintegration due to fiber breakdown and treatment by mordant and dyes during manufacture.

Sarah spoke about the methods used to preserve the objects in her care and advised on the best way to store textiles and costume accessories. She gave us a comprehensive fact sheet with advice on conservation quality materials, environmental and handling protection, cleaning and pest control materials as well as a suppliers list.

Finally we were presented with a number of items on which we had to make a condition report and suggest possible treatment and future care and storage. It was altogether a

stimulating, informative and enjoyable exercise.

After lunch **Charlotte Hodgson**, our Membership Secretary spoke about her work as the Principal Archivist at the Glamorgan Record Office, describing its history, form and function.

The **Glamorgan Record Office** provides vital service to the communities of South Wales storing and preserving information and records from public and private sources, which may come as gifts or on long term deposits. Everything is unique and is cared for by a small staff of eighteen, who have created an electronic catalogue and make the archives available to the public.

Housed originally in Cathays Park the Glamorgan Archives were moved to a purpose built building next to the Ninian Park Stadium in January 2010. The public search room opened in February and between March and May welcomed 1543 visitors.

We were impressed by the range of enquiries handled by the staff and that the most frequent requests were leisure inspired by individuals looking up family trees and local history, both in person and on the internet.

The Archives are an important resource for educational users of all ages, academics, curricular activities for school children, local societies, teacher training and lifelong learners.

The third category concerns evidential records, usually accessed with Solicitors or Social workers in a private room, relating to adoptions, boundary disputes and for compensation claims.

Charlotte had gone to considerable effort to select material from the Archive illustrating both the scope of the collections and reflecting the particular interests of our Society members. Books, photographs and maps had been set out in the public search room for us to examine and we had a brilliant time with much enthusiastic discussion about the material on view.

To conclude her talk and our visit Charlotte took us on a tour of the new buildings and its state of the art facilities. It was clear that the staff is delighted with their building and the statistics were impressive on environmental control and storage security and provision. That it has been so successful is obviously the result of meticulous planning and backbreaking work by the staff, over three years, to prepare the archives for the move. Thank you to Sarah and Charlotte for a wonderful day.

On 25<sup>th</sup> September we met at St Fagans to hear **Cefyn Burgess -An artist talks about his work**. We were pleased to welcome back this internationally renowned Welsh designer, textile artist and weaver whose Collages of Welsh chapels and designs for Cyfarthfa Castle had captured our imagination on a previous visit.

Cefyn had extended his research on Welsh chapels to the Liverpool area and westward

to America where emigrants from Welsh retained strong ties with the chapel, language and domestic traditions of their homeland.

Liverpool proved to be a rich source of inspiration as 34 chapels had been built in the city in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was a time of considerable wealth amongst the Welsh community who were active in trade and commerce and could fund new chapels to accommodate their growing congregations. Interestingly Princes Road was 'notable for the sound of silk as the ladies went to chapel' but no such luxury attended the services in the poorer Anfield area where the girls were in domestic service.

In contrast the chapels observed in Pennsylvania presented an American exterior but were strongly Welsh inside. Every community had its traditions, on view were shelves of Welsh language books, at fund raising chapel teas Welsh cakes were served and chapel crockery was decorated with an exclusive emblem and name. These all form part of a powerful communal memory which Cefyn has translated into fabric collages of cups and plates which in turn elicited strong reactions at a recent exhibition in North Wales.

In the domestic setting mementos of Wales and traditional *carthens* and quilts are cherished in America and in Wales. Considering the way in which women have decorated and embellished functional textiles may be seen as a symbol of respect

or regard for the recipient adding another layer of meaning to these items.

*'layers of tradition and layers of text'* have proved to be the inspiration for Cefyn's latest designs, creating a fusion of fabrics by felting and stitch work, painting pictures using traditional woollen tapestry and flannels and machine stitching. These have been translated on the jacquard loom into a range of furnishing and upholstery fabrics, which have been so popular there were no samples available for us to handle. In tandem with his commercial work Cefyn spoke enthusiastically of his collaboration with a number of primary schools in Wales on a textile project. Talking to the children and helping them to translate their ideas and images onto fabric using collage and machine stitching to create a series of quilts which will be on show at an exhibition in May 2011. It sounded as if they were having such fun that we will eagerly wait to see the results at the Pier Head Building, in Cardiff Bay, next year.

In the afternoon we turned our attention to costume when **Eleri Llyn**, Fashion Curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum spoke on **'Underwear Fashion in Detail'**.

Her new book of the same title is the latest in a series on Fashion from the Museum's collections, covering a period from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the present day and describes many items that have not previously been on display.

Many garments had been donated anonymously, reflecting an ambivalent attitude to the subject yet throughout fashion history underwear has been pivotal in determining female body shape.

A linen shift or lingerie was worn as a base layer to protect the body from coarse fabrics and to protect the outer garments from sweat; it was a sign of status to own lots of linen. Wealthy men and women wore densely embroidered and minutely pleated linen which required careful laundering and even into the 20<sup>th</sup> century fashion dictated that a man's formal shirt should be heavily starched.

Drawers were not worn until the 19<sup>th</sup> century but corsetry has been in use since the middle Ages. During the Renaissance garments made of heavy velvet and embroidered textiles required internal support in the form of whalebone and padding. By the 1660's stays became separate items of clothing, moulding the torso into new and more exaggerated shapes as the centuries progressed.

Advances in technology and manufacturing processes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century made corsetry available to all classes and became an essential staple of a woman's attire from childhood to old age. However the S bend shape fashionable in the early 1900's, was so extreme that there was a vocal reaction against restricting corsetry amongst medical and socialist circles. In the 1920's women flattened their breasts with bandages as fashionable shapes dictated and by the

1930's the ubiquitous bra shape appeared in the form of the Kestos handkerchief bra.

The corset had evolved into a girdle and steel and whalebone gave way to plastic and latex panels which gave a sleeker feminine shape under bias cut dresses.

WW II saw stagnation in corsetry design, styles remained static but women still needed support during their war work and were ready for a change when the New Look appeared after the war.

The last 60 years have seen an explosion of techniques and styles; nylon, metal under wiring, lovely coloured laces and washable materials. Hollywood and the Jet Age influenced the shape of women's bodies with the conical bra and the introduction of Lycra revolutionised underwear production and design.

By the 70's underwear became increasingly minimal, traditional corsetry had become too restricting for the busy lives of modern women. However attitudes change and specialist shops, chain stores and mail order catalogues offer a wild range of shapes and style of underwear for every occasion. We still restrict and control our bodies to conform to fashion and underwear can be discrete or worn for provocative effect as outerwear.

An interesting post note is the trend for young men and women to use exercise to attain a toned body shape avoiding Lycra and boning in favour of their own muscles.

*On Saturday 16 October 15 members and friends went*

### **Group Visit to the American Museum in Britain**

On Saturday 16 October 15 members and friends went to Claverton Manor, Bath, for a ninety-minute private tour outside normal opening times. After a brief introduction to the museum and its founders Dallas Pratt and John Judkyn we were guided around the **2010 special exhibition of 'Classic American Quilts'**, showcasing choice quilts from the museum collection, many rarely seen due to their size and fragility.. We returned later for a closer look at the bold colours, intricate designs and remarkable needlework and to reread some of the touching personal stories behind each quilt. Then our party was divided into two groups and we were escorted around the Period Rooms furnished in the style of early settlers in late 17<sup>th</sup> century tracing the varied and increasingly sophisticated tastes in domestic design into the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Our guides took care to point out the textiles and related implements that they thought would interest us and we spent extra time in the Textile room looking at the quilts and rugs before completing the tour.

After lunch we were free to explore the American Heritage displays, walk in the gardens and revisit the Heritage Rooms and the Quilt and Treasure and Terror exhibitions. It was a day full of interest and as usual we left wanting more time to see everything. .