



MATERIAL MATTERS



The UK is a world leader in textile design and, as **Ann Morgan** discovers, creative students are learning the latest techniques on a range of exciting and innovative courses offered by universities across the country

Come in from the bustling London street, climb the stairs past signs to 'Art & Design against ATM Crime', 'Creative Practice for Narrative Environments' and 'Industrial Art', and you find yourself in a white space full of stands. Spirals of fibre-optic lights dangle from the ceiling flashing green and gold, carved wooden screens filter shadows out of the glare from the window and in the far corner a collection of knitted fabrics reveals 'Hidden Beauty in Islamic Architecture'. You've arrived at the Central Saint Martins BA Textile Design show. And if you thought textile design was just about making fabrics, you're in for a surprise.

'I'm really proud of this one. It's about illusions,' says Anne Marr, Director of the BA course, stopping to demonstrate an installation that allows visitors to use a pair of heat-sensitive gloves to sketch out coloured threads on a screen using Nintendo Wii technology.

She explains that the 81 students graduating from the course in 2011 have all been given an extensive grounding in knit, weave and print design, before having the chance to focus on a particular area of interest.

'They do everything because we want them to be flexible specialists,' she says. 'Then at the beginning of the third year we say to them "off you go".'

One student just embarking on the adventure of the final, third year is Ajibike Philips-Molajo from Lagos. Having planned to study fashion, she decided to opt for Textile Design after her foundation year at Central Saint Martins helped her realise it would give her greater freedom. She is now planning a print project called 'Second Skin', looking at patterns on animals, fish and reptiles, and relating these to the body.

Having already sold two pieces to design chain Anthropologie for its new Hawaii store and worked for designer Mirjam Rouden during placements on her course, Philips-Molajo is keeping an open mind about whether she wants to take a job in the industry or set up her own company.

'The creative industries are very diverse,' she says. 'Throughout my degree my ideas have changed so much. You don't stop learning.'

With more than 110 institutions offering some sort of fashion or textiles programme, the choice of textiles courses you can study in the UK is as diverse as the industry. While some courses focus on the commercial aspects of the field, others are much more conceptual or art-based, and some, like the newly validated MA/MSc in Integrated Knitwear Design at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) may also be highly specialised.

For Sally Wade, Associate Dean of NTU's School of Art and Design and Chair of the nationwide Association of Fashion and Textiles Courses, the broad choice means it's worth doing your research.

'The UK has got the largest provision of fashion and textiles courses in the world,' she says. 'It's got the most mature provision internationally and in terms of creativity it sits alongside the fashion industry. My advice would be to have a discussion with



Left to right: creations by Jing Chen, Naomi Abe and Catharine Osborn from the Central Saint Martins BA Textile Design end-of-year show



the institutions as to what they cover and what they deliver. You can say “textile design” and mean a lot of things.’

With the UK fashion industry boosted by the recent announcement that the media centre on the Olympic Park will be transformed into a fashion hub after the 2012 Games, the country is set to continue to be a world leader in design. Many courses reflect this, with cutting-edge technology such as Stoll and Shima Seiki knitting machines, computerised Jacquard looms, laser cutters, digital printers and computerised multi-head embroidery machines enabling students to access the latest techniques. In addition, research into smart fabrics is enabling aspiring designers to explore the potential of UV- and heat-sensitive fabrics, inks and yarns, and incorporate concepts such as stretch sensors and sound technology into clothes.

Tradition and innovation

But textiles courses in the UK are about more than up-to-the-minute design. Drawing on the UK’s long history of textile production, particularly in northern England, many courses offer students a grounding in traditional techniques and the broader context to today’s industry too.

At the University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) students have the opportunity to participate in projects and exhibitions at Preston’s Harris Museum, which holds textiles collections that demonstrate the region’s rich weaving and spinning history. The university is also establishing links with some of the area’s surviving mills to enable students to participate in specialist live projects.

And if you don’t know one end of a bobbin from another, you needn’t worry: students are taught to use textile technology old and new from scratch, so you don’t have to have specialist skills to apply for most courses.

‘You can learn the techniques,’ says Angie Jones, Course Leader for the BA Textiles programme at UCLAN’s School of Art, Design and Performance. ‘The main thing we look for in [applicants’] portfolios is creativity. We look for creative thinking and problem solving in an imaginative way. It just matters that they are trying different things.’

Personal cultural heritage often plays a key part on courses too. Students from Nigeria will find plenty of opportunities to incorporate the country’s many regional crafts and aesthetics



Above: the work of Central Saint Martins students Cassandra Sabo (left), Naomi Abe (centre) and Naomi Abe (right). Below: a design by freelance textile designer Emamoke Ukeleghe



EMAMOKÉ UKELEGHE - TERIPENGLLEY



“STUDENTS WERE INVITED TO JOIN A CHATROOM THE SUMMER BEFORE THE COURSE AND INSTRUCTED TO CREATE A DOG OUT OF WHATEVER THEY WANTED”

into their work, as Ayisatu Emore, a second-year student on UCLAN's BA Textiles degree, discovered after she switched to the programme from a fashion course.

'My tribe, the Yoruba people, have Aso-Oke, which is heavily woven and highly decorated and embroidered,' she says. 'It's something I tend to end up veering towards [in my work]. I have that choice.'

Emore's favourite project so far is a piece of work she called 'Effigy', which involved her making a doll out of rough, traditional, tie-dyed fabric. She put a lot of her personality and heritage into the doll and the result was a powerful, individual piece of work that provoked a great reaction from her fellow students.

'Everyone who saw it didn't [need to] ask who made it,' she said. 'They knew who it belonged to straight away, which was fantastic. I found it absolutely adorable. It was very distinctive.'

As well as mining their personal experiences and backgrounds, textiles students can also expect to be challenged to explore concepts they may not have encountered before.

Dogs on show

Students who arrived in Manchester in September 2011 to start Manchester Metropolitan University's (MMU) brand new BA Textiles in Practice, for example, were given a thought-provoking brief even before they arrived. Invited to join an internet chatroom during the summer before the course, they were instructed to create a dog out

of whatever they wanted to use. The first time all 130 students met was in a park near the university, where they presented their dogs in a textiles version of the world-famous UK dog show Crufts.

'It was to get them thinking about the course before they started and make them feel at home,' says Programme Leader Kate Egan. She goes on to explain that the first module on the course, known as the Origins unit, helps to orientate students further by giving them an overview of the field.

'It is about learning the language of textiles and introducing students to context and the basic core skills, which are drawing and research,' she says. 'Some people [on the course] don't know whether they want to work in galleries, design or the fashion industry. We help them understand those contexts so they're learning technical skills and hopefully turning ideas into things.'

On many courses industry placements and projects can also be crucial when it comes to helping students identify the direction they want their career to take after they graduate. From placements at major fashion houses like Alexander McQueen and projects for clients such as Next and Marks and Spencer to work for specialist artisans, many courses place considerable emphasis on helping students channel creative talent into commercially viable skills.

At NTU, BA Textile Design students can make work of a professional standard in an in-house studio and sell it at the big international trade fair *Première Vision* at Indigo Paris. They also



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take part in an annual live project with Paul Smith, working to a brief to produce pieces that company designers critique. Short optional modules and placements also help them explore their options.

'It's a textile design degree and we want people to go and work in the industry,' says Amanda Briggs-Goode who leads the course. 'And they do in really good numbers. But also across the second year, we offer short electives in related subjects. From these, students often start to think they might take a slightly diverted career path. They might become buyers or work in global sourcing. Some of them really enjoy writing and styling, and have gone on to work in magazines. It's about building contacts and making the most of those opportunities.'

New technical skills

One textiles graduate who knows all about building her own opportunities through networks is freelance textile designer Emamoke Ukeleghe. Since graduating with a Textile MA from the Royal College of Art in 2007, having first studied BA Textile Design at the Chelsea College of Art and Design, she has carved a niche for herself designing contemporary textiles with an African twist. In 2010, she co-founded the African and African-Caribbean Design Diaspora, which held a festival displaying the work of more than 100 artists and artisans at the Bargehouse on London's South Bank in September 2011. Specialising in surface print design, she says the courses she studied helped her develop the technical skills she needed to produce her art.

'I was a computerphobe,' she says. 'Initially I was only aware of screen printing but then this whole new avenue opened up using programmes to create print. It opened my eyes to different ways of working.'

'As I get older I realise that anything is possible,' she continues. 'There are no limits. As long as you decide you are able to do something, you can do anything.' ■

Clockwise from far left: Emamoke Ukeleghe's *My Family Album*; a loom at Central Saint Martins; and student Naomi Abe at the college's BA Textile Design end-of-year show

MY EXPERIENCE



NAME Adekunle Thani
FROM Lagos
COURSE BA Textile Design,
University of East London

Studying textile design here was very enjoyable and fulfilling because of the dynamic approach of the university towards learning. The teaching and technical staff are very supportive and offered guidance throughout the course. For me this was very helpful and inspiring, as I had joined the course as a mature student and was studying full-time, as well as holding down a full-time job in the rail industry.

Doing the course was one of the best decisions I have ever made. The most interesting part was studying with students from diverse, multicultural backgrounds. As a designer, you learn about these various cultures and relate them to your design work and you start to understand why certain things will or won't work because of these different cultural attitudes. I also enjoyed doing teamwork through group presentations.

We exhibited our work at the *Première Vision* textile fair at Indigo Paris. This gave me a first-hand feel of what the industry is like. I also did a placement with Duchamp menswear, where I gained some experience of designing prints for men's fashion accessories.

The most enjoyable part for me was realising my goals of becoming a designer and inventor. I designed four unique sustainable products, including making chicken leather and upcycling waste into decorative functional pieces for interiors. I am on the verge of getting the prototypes made.

When I look back to my pre-university days, it makes me smile with satisfaction and pride because I can see how far I have come in three years and I am still forging ahead. My goal is to be an established entrepreneur and I feel the university can equip me with more skills to help me achieve this, so I have enrolled for an MA in Print Design. The future looks very promising now and I feel I am ready to take on the world doing what I enjoy best.