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Face Time

THE PORTRAITURE
OF EMILY TULL

**MICHAEL
BRENNAND-WOOD**
The code less travelled

Ruth Singer
TEXTILE TRACES

Jenny King
Fashion Forward



HERITAGE



Herstory

A major exhibition reveals the untold story of the craftswomen who turned their practices into successful businesses between the First and Second World Wars

Women's work from the 1920s and 1930s is hard to research, find and exhibit. A new exhibition at Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft: Women's Work, is taking on the task of re-evaluating and exhibiting work by women of this period: textile artists, weavers, ceramicists and silversmiths. Some of the women in the exhibition were directly connected with the village of Ditchling, and probably all of them knew one another to some degree. Ditchling Museum, the venue for this exhibition, covers the history of the artistic community that thrived in the village in the early decades of the twentieth century. Much of that artistic community pivoted around Eric Gill, a graphic artist and sculptor, and other men. The women there were making great strides artistically yet their stories have, so far, been subsumed under the men's. In the inter-war period it was usual for middle class women to give up work upon marriage. And that was the story of many women makers of the time – they made early work that showed promise, and then nothing. But as more research happens and exhibitions like this are staged, as women makers' lives and friendships

(some sexual, some not) are revealed so we begin to see the web of women's work in relation to Ditchling, and how beautiful that work is. In 1916 weaver Ethel Mairet moved to the village and opened a weaving workshop called Gospels. She was pivotal to the story of women who worked in Ditchling and is pivotal to this exhibition. Among the women who studied with her were Petra Gill, Marianne Straub and Hilary Bourne (who would later be one of the founders of the museum). Her workshop was an important centre of activity in the village. And her teaching and publications spread the word of weaving far and wide. Perhaps the best known of the women designers in this exhibition is Enid Marx. Her work rivals – and exceeds – much of the output of her more recognised male counterparts. She was a pattern maker of excellence and by all accounts a woman of substance and opinion. Marx studied at both the Central School of Art, as did several of the women in this show. She did more than textiles – but her textiles are the link here. Though the idea is somewhat of a cliché, most of these women worked in textiles, some in ceramics





Above: An undated hand carved printing block and textile sample from Barron and Larcher's workshop

Left: Detail of an undated dress fabric, blockprinted by Barron and Larcher

Opposite: Barron and Larcher's workshop
COURTESY CRAFTS STUDY CENTRE, UNIVERSITY FOR THE CREATIVE ARTS

and metalwork but, interestingly, few in the graphic and printing arts Ditchling is better known for. Marx apprenticed at the start of her career with two textile designers, Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher, who are the textile stars of this exhibition. Barron and Larcher left behind them a great number of block printed textiles, distinctive in their mark-making form and earthy, spontaneous colours. They were well connected, eccentric women, and a couple. The exhibition has four garments, printing blocks and lovely lengths of printed textiles by them. Their textiles were bought by the wives of famous artists like Charlotte Bawden, wife of Edward Bawden, ladies of the theatre like Miss D'Oly Carte of the opera D'Oly Cartes and socialites like Mrs Detmar Blow. Phyllis Barron also knew Ethel Mairet – and so the friendship circles continue. Barron and Larcher sold their textiles through the Little Gallery shop in London, opened in 1928 by Muriel Rose, and material from the shop also features in the exhibition. Some wonderful ephemera here (like much of her exhibition on loan from the Craft Study Centre in Farnham) demonstrates what a stylish set up the Little Gallery shop was. It was where any maker worth their salt sold their wares. Other standouts in an exhibition of standouts is the silver work of Catherine 'Casty' Cobb, whose inlaid cutlery, small objects and jewellery have an incredibly modern vibe. Katherine Pleydell-Bouverie's luscious muted pots show her mastery of ceramics. And Alice Hindson's surface pattern designs have a certain delicacy of design that make one hopeful more of her work will surface one day. Elizabeth Peacock, a little-known (to date) weaver of several pieces on show, had begun an apprenticeship with Ethel Mairet in 1917, at age 36. Peacock was a weaver of hand spun yarns, British wools and imported silks. Her vegetable dyed stoles and dress lengths apparently caught the eye of Parisian couturier (to the fast and surreal sets) Elsa Schiaparelli. In 1922 Peacock and Molly Stobart,

One can but imagine the curiosity and speculation that these independent women evoked

a local farmer, built 'Weavers', a house with a workshop and smallholding at Clayton, near Ditchling, where they would live out their lives. Valentine Kilbride (also an apprentice of Ethel Mairet's) wrote of them in 1923: 'I am rather curious to see Miss Peacock's establishment. She is described as a slight delicate prim little person and lives in partnership with a Miss Stobart, a farmer who has never worn [sic] a skirt for years and looks like a very slightly feminine John Bull, red faced and short haired. They get along splendidly it appears.'

One can but imagine the curiosity and speculation that these independent women evoked, wherever they lived. Perhaps in Ditchling they were a slightly more common sight, with blue-dyed hands and their aprons. Perhaps not. But it is completely heartening to be able to see an exhibition about their work and their lives and the connections between them all. The exhibits in Women's Work sit effortlessly next

to the permanent collection at Ditchling, a testament to the power of place and the creative melting pot that was the craft scene in the 1920s and 30s. Women's Work is a clever title for this exhibition. It was a derogatory expression for so many years, used to dismiss so much work – particularly textiles – made by women. Here the title is more of a call to action. Curator Donna Steele hopes the women featured here will be further researched, further exhibited and talked about, that this exhibition is just the start of their stories. Which is great news for those of us of who really, really, want to see more women's work. ●

Jane Audas

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Women's Work: Pioneering Women in Craft 1918-1939 is on show at Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft until 13 October

ditchlingmuseumartcraft.org.uk





Top: Installation view, courtesy Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft.

PHOTO: SAM MOORE

Above: The designer Enid Marx.

Right: Phyllis Barron (of Barron & Larcher) block printing in her workshop.

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Below, right: Ethel Mairet's workgirls.

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