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Women's Work

Pioneering Craftswomen at Ditchling

On display at Ditchling Museum of Art + Craft are a couple of necklaces so strikingly modern that they could be straight off the catwalk. "I have to remind myself, when I look at them, that they were made in the 1930s," says Donna Steele, curator of the Women's Work exhibition, at the museum until October. The necklaces are the work of the silversmith Catherine 'Casty' Cobb; one of a group of women who worked between the wars to establish themselves as successful craftswomen. "We're presenting a group of women whose work we think was really phenomenal and has stood the test of time," says Donna. "Not only were they interesting as craftswomen, but they had good minds for business too."

Alongside Casty Cobb, the exhibition features

textiles by Enid Marx, Elizabeth Peacock, Alice Hindson, Phyllis Barron and Dorothy Larcher, and the pottery of Katharine Pleydell-Bouverie and Denise Wren. "What links these women is that they all have a connection to Ditchling. Mostly through Ditchling's Ethel Mairer who revived the almost extinct crafts of handloom weaving and natural dyeing. She was very encouraging, and a good contact for people." A sort of sorority existed between these women, most of whom had attended The Central School of Art & Crafts, where the Ditchling connection continued. They each had to study five crafts, and calligraphy would have been one of them, taught by Edward Johnston, famous for designing the London Underground typeface. The networks they formed at The Central



Photo by Sam Moore

would support them throughout their careers. Whilst they worked with traditional techniques, they developed a surprisingly bold and modernist aesthetic. "They took on the spirit of the original Arts & Crafts movement but developed it for a modern audience. They had lived through the carnage of the First World War," explains Donna, "and many of them had travelled abroad working for the war effort. When they returned it was to a traumatised Britain, but at the same time people were looking for new ways to create a new world. There was a pioneering spirit, and, with the loss of so many men, they could see a way forward for themselves living 'the simple life' and making an honest living using their hands." Their work was championed by female gallerists like Muriel Rose of The Little Gallery, where they found patrons among the wealthy and fashionable clientele. Even Queen Mary patronised The Little Gallery.

The advent of World War II interrupted their success – in a time of national crisis and austerity, priorities changed and craft was seen

as an unnecessary luxury – and many went on to teach, and to write. Their legacy continues through their work and their books, many of which are regarded as important today. In researching the exhibition, Donna discovered dozens of talented but largely unknown craftswomen. "I'd quite like to write a book myself," she concludes, "but there's no time. I've got to get on with organising the next exhibition." Women's work. Never done.

Lizzie Lower

ditchlingmuseumcraft.org.uk



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