



Duration

Track 1: 01:29:25 / Track 2: 00:36:41

Reference

OH11.1 / OH11.2

Subjects

Batik / Textiles / Clothing / Craft Revival

Recording date

29 July 2015

Recording location

Interviewee's home, Highgate, London

Interviewee

Dyrenforth, Noel (ND – speaker, male)

Interviewer

Lin, Gloria (GL – speaker, female)

Synopsis

The textile artist Noel Dyrenforth (b. 1936) discusses the craft revival, counterculture and finding his place as an 'outsider' in the art of batik. Prior to his use of the technique, batik had a scarce tradition in Western culture. Dyrenforth suggests that his rise to prominence in batik was partly a result of attempts to blur the boundaries between art and craft in the context of postwar subcultures of drugs, music, political activism and feminism. His pioneering work also emerged from taking risks and experimenting with 2,000-year-old techniques from China, Indonesia, Japan and Australia. Dyrenforth comments on his affinity with tribal and nomadic peoples whose 'fine embroidery' have inspired him, and how he was influenced by the 'imposing' landscape of Australia during the six months that he spent working there.

Recording

Track 1

00:00 ND begins by talking about how craft opened up following the Second World War: the craft revival was bound up with subcultures of drugs, music, political activism, feminism etc.



03:41 ND discusses the ‘dichotomy’ and ‘fusion of arts and crafts’ in the 60s, and suggests it has come full circle back to division and conflict, not just in craft but politically and racially.

06:47 ND remarks on the way ‘history repeats itself’ and talks of nostalgia for the past, when life was much more ‘pleasurable’.

07:23 ND comments on the first article written about him, by Fiona MacCarthy, after his first exhibition in 1967.

09:17 ND talks about his first studio and how the V&A circulated his work in schools following his first exhibition. Over the next 10 years he produced 60 pieces.

11:00 ND begins discussing his time abroad, in Japan and the US, which inspired him.

11:49 ND comments on memories of Graham Hughes, the curator of the Goldsmiths’ Company, and his work with the Crafts Centre.

12:46 ND discusses his piece in the Crafts Council Collection, *Single Swing* (1970; T71), and various other pieces that he donated to the Handling Collection in c. 1978.

13:53 ND describes his memories of the 70s, referring to it as an ‘amazing time’, a huge ‘cultural swing’. He describes himself as being ‘just on the outside of things’; he did not want to be ‘caught up in mass’. He remarks that he was inspired by writer Colin Wilson, author of *The Outsider*, who drew on people living outside of popular culture, such as George Bernard Shaw. The book gave him a sense of authority, which came through in his making.

16:23 ND discusses his teaching style and how he thought about concept first, then technique after. He remarks that this is often ‘difficult and unnatural’, but it is important to find the ‘spirit’ of the material. **‘You could bend the material and shape it, so long as you handled it and felt it and smelt it and [laughs] ate it, if needs be. The senses were the most vital part. It was the mechanical process that came later.’** He remarks that ‘technocrats [*sic*]’ who ‘rule all colleges’ were the ‘restraining element’ in craft, the ones who held up the mainstream and were in the business for profit. He compares them to banks now, ‘working in such a fashion as to destroy people’s lives and values’.

18:21 ND discusses craft, politics and quality, including issues with craft now and how young people adapt to an era in which there are no established galleries. He suggests that tactility has lost out to technology and that making has become dehumanised, as in politics, which aims to ‘destroy the poorest parts of our economy’.



20:20 ND remarks that in 1972 there was a lot interest in batik, which 'blossomed'. He talks about his interest in fashion and how he was making and selling one-off dresses on the King's Road. He comments on how his work was exhibited and auctioned.

21:56 ND describes his relationship with schools and their interest in weaving. He remarks on the difference between techniques then and now, commenting that more emphasis is placed on 'art and digital drawing'.

24:12 ND talks about his favourite gallery, Atmosphere, on Regent's Park Road, and using the space in the 1970s.

25:38 ND talks about his enjoyment of one man exhibitions due to the possibility of having a narrative: **'My story was to do with counterculture [...] I try to emphasise that there are always underlying forces in society [which need to be illuminated].'**

26:21 ND discusses his technique over the years and how he used to experiment with hot wax. He refers to a time he worked naked ('that's what you call really getting into the material'). He suggests that risk is important and draws attention to counterculture as having **'free spirit, free will, but it's got to be confined [...] and redefined if necessary, until it compacts and compounds, it grows.'**

27:31 GL asks about beginning something like *Single Swing*. ND replies by commenting on mechanisation 'getting into people' and the free spirit. He refers to Kafka and his own attempts to be 'outside', drawn from the American expressionist period, which was 'ambitious' and flexible with materials.

29:09 ND describes his process and materials: **'I chose an old, 2,000-plus-year technique'**. He used materials in a very free way and then began to use tools that give you very fine lines (see HC514/HC515). **'Nothing was planned, the use just developed.'** He stuck to traditional techniques. **'The expression I was motivated by was the "idea" [...] that was a prerequisite in all of my work.'** He refers to a time he was making dresses from Liberty fabric and designed a dress for actress Lynn Redgrave.

32:45 ND describes acquisition of his work by the Crafts Council (CC) and his CC bursary in 1977, when he went to California.

35:11 ND gives a brief description of makers he had an affinity with or was inspired by, such as Tony Hepburn, a potter he exhibited with. He discusses how Gordon Baldwin, Mo Jupp and his residency at John Cass School influenced his work. He



explains that he took time off from batik: **'I wanted to get something solid, I wanted to work in three-dimensional form.'**

37:37 ND talks about his technique of using fabric three-dimensionally.

40:34 ND highlights the opening up of batik as a technique in 1975 and discusses his time on the CC Selection Committee, when he met Mo Jupp and Gordon Baldwin.

45:55 ND refers to his first batik book (written by Goldsmiths' assistant curator John Houston) and doing radio and television to promote it.

48:42 ND and GL talk about his two years during the 70s working on ceramics at John Cass School.

50:01 ND says that making is 'easier said than done': **'[Many people have] a conceptual way of looking at things, which excludes technique [...] you can't go very far with that, you know?'**

50:24 GL asks: 'Do you think there was a pressure for people to intellectualise what they were doing when it might have been more instinctive?' ND discusses the 'raw quality' of 'indigenous work', but suggests that he needs to have an 'idea to nurture off'. He remarks that this is why craft became politicised in the 70s: **'They weren't just looking for beautiful things, they were looking for beautiful ideas which might conflict with the [...] traditional aesthetic.'**

51:38 GL asks if it was also about 'cooperative living', which prompts ND to talk about his residency in Italy and his enjoyment of being a teacher.

55:27 ND describes 1975 as a great year for craft. He comments that his experiences without a teacher were pivotal in his pioneering techniques, as he did not come from a 'traditional background'.

58:33 GL asks what drew ND to batik originally. ND puts it down to counterculture and the first batik exhibition he attended. His passion comes through in talking about his fascination with the technique and the forms that could be achieved through various processes. He discusses his first attempt at batik, making scarves, his memories of being in fashion and the fine line between textiles and fashion.

01:03:06 ND describes his time in Australia in 1978, after winning an award to spend six months there along with jeweller David Poston, and his time on Java and in China.



01:20:56 ND talks about a 'debate going on' within craft in 1980, led by Bernard Leach discussing the 'way forward for craft', and the 'dichotomy' between art and craft.

01:22:35 ND highlights the experience of his first big exhibition in Los Angeles, which he felt was 'out of sync' with his work and self.

01:23:50 ND describes his concerns about how batik might have affected his health: 'I was very conscious my lungs were filling up with wax [...] having done it for so long [...] but I was reassured when I had an X-ray.'

01:25:18 ND mentions his CC exhibition *The Big Smoke*, which he shared with makers such as glass artist Steven Newell.

Track 2

00:10 ND talks about his enjoyment of teaching and his most notable students.

03:08 ND mentions his fear of Internet surveillance.

[ND goes through photographs and documents, commenting on various experiences in the late 80s.]

06:12 ND comments that there is no longer a textiles magazine available in the UK.

10:22 ND talks about batik conferences and comments on various exhibitions.

17:36 ND and GL discuss the disparity between social interaction in the 70s and now, due to technology and social media, and the preservation of archival materials for posterity.

21:54 ND mentions his awe at meeting Living National Treasure craftsmen in Japan: 'It's not just their psyche, it's in their bones.'

23:38 GL mentions that ND's pieces in the CC Handling Collection are used for workshops with adults and school children. ND admits to feeling 'under-represented' by his pieces and has concerns that his work is in archives rather than being exhibited.

27:58 ND talks about the potential of re-joining forces with the CC.

30:51 ND expresses his feelings about Tanya Harrod's writing on a thematic exhibition he was involved in. Harrod wrote that ND, Gerda Flöckinger, Wendy Ramshaw and David Poston were part of a 'revolt in style'.



Crafts Council: First Decade Project (1972 – 1982)
Noel Dyrenforth, OH11.1, OH11.2

33:00 'I was very flattered to think that one was represented in a time when things were advancing.' ND says that it is different now: 'you don't have the optimism. I think that's probably the thing that's missing with a lot of things. And, you're not even worried about what's going to happen in ten years' time, but getting on with it now, because it's, there's something there to connect and grow from you know, it's a seed. There aren't enough people with seeds.'



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