

Bolton Castle, where Mary was imprisoned between 1568 and 1569



Clare Hunter

Photo credit: Mel Lewis



Portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots. François Clouet, c.1557

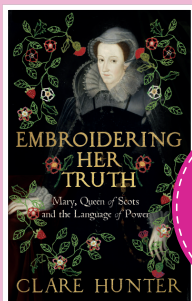
Mary,

QUEEN OF SCOTS

Clare Hunter's new book explores the life and art of Mary, Queen of Scots, as told through her embroidery. Michelle Rowley caught up with Clare to discover more about this fascinating textile story

Imprisoned by her cousin Elizabeth I, Scotland's expelled queen Mary, Queen of Scots spent the remaining 19 years of her life under house arrest. During this time, needlework not only kept Mary occupied but also provided an uncensored method for her to communicate her story and anguish.

CLARE HUNTER
Who better to explore how Mary, Queen of Scots, used textiles to leave her mark on the world than author and community artist Clare Hunter? Her beautiful book *Threads of Life* explores the power of sewing, something Clare understands through over 30 years of working with textiles. Her work as a community artist



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has enabled people of all ages and backgrounds to share their stories through wall hangings and banner making. She now shares Mary, Queen of Scots's incredible story through her fascinating cultural biography *Embroidering Her Truth*.

How much time did you spend researching Mary and her embroidery?

A huge amount of time – I did an MA in Historical Research at the University of Stirling first so I could use primary and secondary sources properly. I already researched her for my book *Threads of Life*, but I wanted to delve deeper and explore the importance of fabric in the 16th century. I wanted to bring the personal stories to life. We don't hear, for example, about Elizabeth I hand embroidering for Henry VIII, but these stories are fascinating. It took about four years all in all.

Were the techniques that Mary used similar to embroidery techniques used today?

Yes, very similar – she mainly used cross stitch and petit point and actually had a very limited repertoire of stitches. People can replicate her pieces today through reproduction kits, but they require a lot of stitches. When I saw Mary's piece *A Cate* (an embroidered crowned ginger cat representing Elizabeth I), I estimated the number of stitches to be around 10,000.



A doll made
by Clare
Hunter in
1962

It must have taken her hours. She had many tedious hours of imprisonment to fill after such an active life. Her life of revelry with tournaments and masques was replaced with being shut away without any close companions.

It is clear from *Threads of Life & Embroidering her Truth* that you see sewing as a tool for mental health

Yes, and also as a means to find your voice – they are stories of people in difficult circumstances still feeling connected to the world through their sewing. I think a lot of us find a release of tension in our stitching. There is a rhythm to sewing - it is like listening to music in a visual way.

What's your favourite piece that Mary embroidered?

I suppose *A Cate*, probably because I have seen it up close. You have a tactical memory when you see a piece of embroidery. I couldn't touch it, but I felt like I was seeing her stitching hand. You get the sense of her absorption in it. She would have had to change the colour of her thread for the shading many times and thought carefully about her colour choices. You can see the tension in stitches, which you can't get in a photograph. It is a signature of your mood. It is as close as you can get to someone who is no longer here. Her embroidery was a deposit of her emotions and also her care that she could no longer

practise. She no longer had people to care for or somewhere to express her sorrow, anger and defiance.

What did Mary want to happen to her embroidery?

All embroidery at the time was sewed to be functional. People embroidered items such as cushions, hangings and book covers, objects with a purpose and not just work or art. She knew her work would go into the great houses that Bess of Harwick was building at the time. She made things with longevity in mind. She wouldn't have put so much into them had she not felt they would last, especially the bed hangings that she made for her son James VI of Scotland. They were made to tell her son who she really was and for him to understand what her experience of captivity was like. They contain references to breakage, damage, isolation and her relationship with her cousin Elizabeth. Such detailed descriptions of the bed hangings written at the time show how evocative they were.

Whilst her letters were scrutinised and censored, why was it safe to put messages in her embroidery?

Textiles were so valuable then – they contained gold and silk thread and had such a high commercial value that they would not be destroyed. She was also an important figure who would be remembered, so they have an historical

Carlisle Castle, where Mary spent eight weeks imprisoned in 1568



A 16th-century fashion doll in the Livrustkammaren Museum in Stockholm. Photo Bonnevier, Helena, Livrustkammaren

value. She was gambling on the fact that they would be safeguarded.

Did everything she embroider have a hidden meaning?

I think she chose every single image with a purpose. We can only understand some of the layers of meaning. We can't grasp all those meanings today as we don't have the same visual vocabulary as people at that time when every flower had a meaning, for example. She often paired an image with a motto, and there was extra meaning derived from the relationship between the two that gave the deeper meaning. It can be more interesting to look at the why people embroider than the how.

Would these images with meaning also be embroidered on clothes?

Yes, and they also had their own personal and family emblem. Elizabeth I, for example, would sometimes use a falcon, which was her mother Anne Boleyn's emblem to show her connections. It is much like emojis today – you are taking a thought or a message and putting it into an image.

The power of clothing really comes through in the book. Do you think clothes hold as much power to royalty today as they did in Tudor times?

I think they do, particularly for the women, as they are still judged on their choice of clothing. Princess Diana used it as powerfully as she could, especially as a defence when she felt vulnerable. Every woman on a public stage gives a lot of thought to how they dress. To a certain extent, we all think about the impact of our clothing when we decide what to wear.

Tell me about your own story with embroidery

I was probably only about five or six when my mum taught me. I was an energetic and curious child with a lot of questions, and I think my mum found me quite tiring! She taught me embroidery to absorb me and keep me quiet. She took me to a wonderful shop in Glasgow, which felt like an Aladdin's Cave of wonders. This was post-war Britain – there wasn't a huge amount of colour around, so to see a carousel of different coloured skeins of thread was exciting. She bought me pre-stamped designs and taught me basic stitches like running and chain stitch, and I started making cushion covers. I then made clothes for my dolls. They were some of the most glamorous, best-dressed dolls around!

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It is as close as you can get to someone who is no longer here
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Have you dabbled in other sewing?

I went on to discover dressmaking for myself. It was now the 60s, and if you wanted to be in vogue in Glasgow, where Mary Quant had not yet arrived, you had to sew your own clothes. I was then always making something with textiles. I got involved with a cash-strapped theatre company and started sewing costumes for them. I went on to various other jobs, but I was always sewing in the background. I set up Needleworks in Glasgow to help communities through sewing, so I have a lot of scraps that I am currently using to make quilts and bags. Now that the book is finished, I am sewing like crazy!



ABOUT MICHELLE ROWLEY

Michelle is a sewing teacher, writer and maker based in Cheshire. Follow her latest dressmaking accomplishments on Instagram [stitchywhitney](#)