

This is an article about making the Sedgwick Museum mat, written by me for promotional use by the Museum ...

Creating A Story Mat For The Sedgwick Museum

"Where would YOU like to explore?" and "What places fill YOU with a sense of awe and wonder?" These were part of the brief given to me by staff from the Sedgwick Museum when making a story mat for their education project working with schools in Cambridge. The story mat will be used by a storyteller for her newly commissioned story based on Darwin's voyage on the Beagle and in particular, his work as a geologist and explorer. Her story would then be used to initiate language and textile art work within the schools.

To get the commission, I took my embroidery samples, photographs, finished textile pieces and my first story mat to the Museum. We discussed the Darwin theme which was the guiding inspiration for the story mat along with more requirements for display and other projects. Having an existing story mat there meant we could talk about how it was to be used and to get a feel of what the Museum staff and project members particularly required. Listening to their responses really set my mind thinking and some areas on the final mat were a direct result of those comments: "This reminds me of bird's footprints; it would be good to have suggestions of something having been there, but nothing too obvious and literal." "That looks a lot like foraminifera fossils." I really like the texture in the felt, lots of that would be good."

Early on in the project, practicalities such as size and shape were determined by storage, display and the needs of the storyteller. She wanted the mat to be backed with a plain fabric and to have a handle, so she could carry it at the beginning of her performance, lay it on the floor and slowly unfold it to reveal the mat inside. This gradual opening up of the mat would be the first exploration for the children listening to her story. Thinking of all those small hands exploring the story mat over the coming years made me think carefully about making it hard-wearing. This dictated the choice of materials, the thickness of the felt pieces and the embroidery techniques I could use. Everything was sewn down twice (at least!) with strong thread and many edges were finally secured with satin stitch to strengthen the edge and prevent fraying. Vulnerable metallic fabrics and threads were used with care and oversewn with a more robust thread to hold them down well. There are no small attached items on the surface to prevent a choking hazard.

My brief was to include lots of pockets and flaps, not only to hold samples of rock, fossils and minerals, but to provide secret places to hide things. Under the flaps, I put surprises, such as shiny and colourful minerals or intriguingly shaped fossils. I also changed the colour and texture of the pockets' and flaps' linings to enhance the sense of exploration, making their use a tactile as well as a visual experience. These were an important consideration of the design as the mat might be used in a hanging position.

A second visit with the storyteller to see the Darwin Exhibition at the Sedgwick Museum was invaluable. Seeing the rocks and fossils in the exhibition gave me lots of inspiration for texture, shape and colours. We learnt about Darwin's prospecting for minerals, witnessing of a volcanic eruption and an earthquake as well as the dangerous jagged rocks that the Beagle sailed passed in the Strait of Magellan. The exhibition had a huge contoured map showing a mountainous area of the Island of Ascension, which inspired the choice of a fabric with a similar design for the background of the land. Studying rock samples led to conversations about ways to include the layering of rocks, such as comparing them to the layers of bedding on a child's bed. This led me to make "bedding" from layers of contrasting pieces of felt. The Museum staff are incredibly knowledgeable and were really helpful. They gave me a clear sense of what elements were required as well and suggested some great sources of inspirational images.

They placed a lot of trust in me, giving me scope to develop my own ideas and interests, making this commission especially exciting; I had permission to play. Salt pans and saline lakes can be full of beautiful colours and I find them mysterious places. A National Geographic article had an aerial view of a such a lake in China, coloured garnet by salt loving bacteria, was such an amazing image that I had to include it on the mat. It had certainly filled me with awe and wonder.

Darwin had seen and collected many corals and their fossils, so these had to be included. The Museum's display of the stages in coral atoll formation was echoed on the mat. From the Museum's fossil collection I picked out the glyptodon shell, some tree ferns, crinoids and a mushroom coral to add to the mat. Volcanic features were made by felting around different balls to make craters, some of which were active and erupting with flowing lava. Darwin had visited the Amazonian rainforest, so that gave the opportunity for a contrasting and colourful area with a meandering river running through it. My old geography teacher would never have forgiven me if I hadn't included an ox-bow lake!. I aimed for a verdant and opulent feel to the rainforest included several small and heavily embroidered flaps, edged with green pompom trim to suggest trees. This was a good opportunity for hidden gems such as shiny water holes and flowers.

I showed the work-in-progress to the museum staff a couple of times, picking up on their responses and feeding their suggestions into my continuing work on the mat. I was pleased they were keen for me to relive my childhood memories by including Chesil Beach and Fossil Forest from near Lulworth Bay. I also had several meetings with the storyteller about what she was planning for her story so I could take account of her needs. She already has a lot of experience of using her previous story mat, so she could tell me what areas were particularly successful, how she used different parts of the mat and how it could be improved. Highly textured areas and those that could be interpreted in many ways really stimulated children's imagination; this fitted perfectly with the Museum's requirements. The storyteller was keen to know the source of all the materials used on the mat, as she loves children's responses when she tells them what clothes were used on her mat; her husband's socks being a particular favourite. I used existing elements of clothes I had been given, hoping that the children might recognise them and relate them to their own clothes, seeing them in a new light, giving a sense of surprise and delight. For instance my "cave island" was made from the pocket of a dyed pink hoodie. A jumper accidentally felted by washing it too hot, became the largest volcanic island, its seams transformed into ridges and its cuffs and neck becoming a fumarole and volcanic cones with lakes in their craters. Buttonholes from some trousers and a cardigan were applied to give a suggestion of pathways. Lace trim from two tops were used for the beaches and details in the rainforest.

Although I actually made the story mat, its creation was a collaborative process involving many people. As it begins its life with the Sedgwick Museum, it is lovely to think of it being out there in the world and being used and enjoyed over the coming years. I've loved hearing about its early visits to schools and the responses of teachers and children. Hearing of a child's cry, "It's the whole world!" was just brilliant, a lovely ending to what I regard as "my dream commission".

Jenny Langley 2009

References and Sources of Inspiration:

What Mr Darwin Saw, by Mick Manning and Brita Granstrom

The Earth From The Air, Yann Arthus-Bertrand, Thames & Hudson 1999 National Geographic January 2002,

China's Unknown Gold, Alashan, by Donovan Webster, Photographs George Steinmetz 48-75

US Geological Survey website Postcards from the Kensington Geological Museum.