



# ONLY CONNECT

Jane Audas traces the creative journey of textile artist Anne Kelly

Connection is a theme running through the work of textile artist Anne Kelly. Connecting cloth and paper with intricate stitch, connecting family stories across generations, connecting with her students to help them unlock their own creativity. At heart, she is a teller of stories, her own or those of others. Easy to talk to on the telephone (Covid-19 prevented our meeting up, despite living within a few miles of each other), her modest and unpretentious way of ➡

*Left and right: Home Fires Dress.*  
A textile form of Home Thoughts from Abroad, this piece represents the comforts of home and garden. A cheap supermarket dress has been transformed by layers including a vintage map, half-finished vintage needlepoint and overstitching.





talking about her work belies its layered complexity. Each piece is rather like a visual stream of consciousness, drawing on many aspects of her life. She might start with a watercolour in a sketchbook, or a few scraps on a mood board, before gathering, layering, patching and stitching. On the surface, each piece is a wonderfully accomplished, accessible work

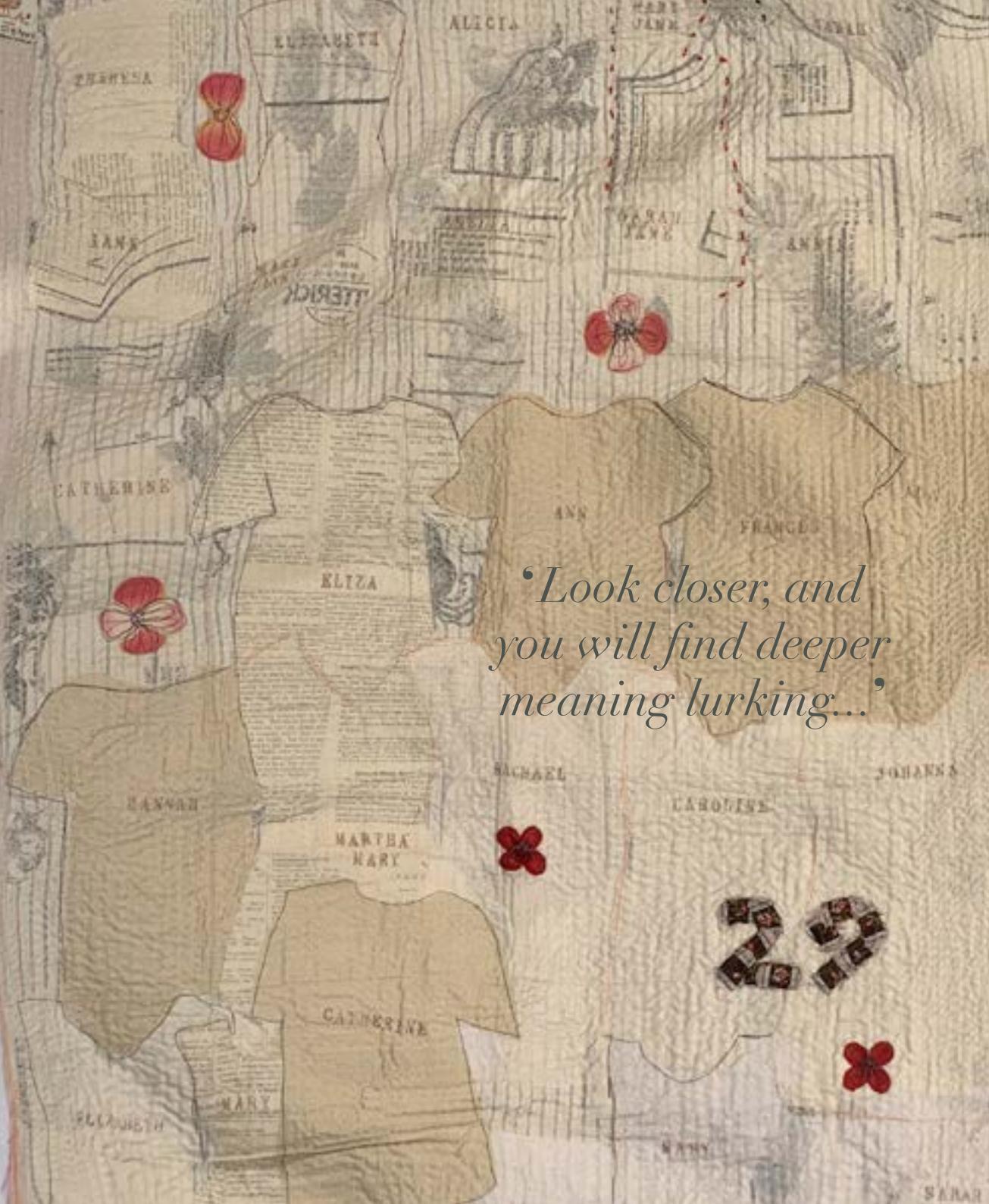
*Right: A new work by Anne:  
New England Folk House.*

**Far right:** 29 Sisters (see above also) While teaching in Australia, Anne became aware of a project to culminate in an exhibition called Stitched Up, a textile response to the lives of 193 girls sent to the Newcastle Industrial School. Anne decided to capture the groupings of sisters at the school. Using remnants she had with her and some donated by the gallery, she created small dress patterns to represent each child, backing the whole piece with cloth found in Australia.



of textile art: look closer, and you will find deeper meaning lurking. An example of this is *29 Sisters*, in which Anne has used small dress pattern shapes to represent each of twenty-nine sisters who had been sent to the Newcastle Industrial School and Reformatory for Girls (1867-1871).

Originally from Canada, Anne did not grow up in a creative household, yet she cannot recall a time 'when she was not appropriating her mother's Singer sewing machine' to make and stitch. As textiles were not a degree option in Canada at that time, Anne opted for a Fine Art degree, specialising in print making and photography, both disciplines helpful in informing her later work. ➤



*‘Look closer, and you will find deeper meaning lurking...’*

In 1983, a travel grant for young artists brought Anne to England, staying with an uncle and aunt in Kent, where she still lives.

Having explored a few different options, and now married, she decided to embark on the post-graduate, practice-based art teaching course at Goldsmith's College in London. Two children later and she found her life divided between home and family, teaching and making. Teaching was never a compromise dictated by economic need, for Anne loves connecting with people. The process of sharing life, inspiration, work and laughter with her students keeps her energised. She enjoys sharing her skills and techniques to help them find starting points for their own creative endeavours. This generous approach extends to her books, in which she is refreshingly open about her work processes. ➤

*Below and right: Possibly Anne's largest and most unusual single creation is Unfinished Journey, an allegory for the process of her emigration from Canada to the UK, shedding the past comforts of home and making a new life abroad. The 13', hand-built, 'pre-loved' canoe skeleton was an internet purchase, which Anne covered with a combination of vintage paper embroidery patterns on one side, backed by fabric treated with PVA and water. The layers were stitched together, wrapped around the canoe and stitched on by hand.*





A vintage map of Devon found in a charity shop was the starting point for this piece, a record of a summer teaching tour of Devon and Cornwall. Fragments of textile, drawings, prints and kantha-stitched remnants are layered and held together by tissue paper which has been coated in a mixture of 50/50 PVA and water. The whole was then backed with textile and covered in Anne's signature Bernina finishing stitch. Amazingly, the map folds neatly back into its original shape.



This sketchbook was made by Anne to accompany her on a three-week teaching tour of the West Country in the summer of 2019. She wanted to capture a glimpse of each place she visited and in particular to record the wild flowers in the hedgerows. She re-purposed a vintage natural history book about the area, covering the fronts of each page with unbleached muslin and the backs with tissue paper. The 'weeds' are drawn in fine-line pen, painted in watercolour with hand-stitched detail.

"Creating books has been a great way of linking the three things that I do – exhibiting, teaching and writing. In a way, each book has paved the way for the next: my first, *Textile Nature*, was about deriving inspiration from the natural world but included a chapter about folk art. Wanting to explore that subject more led to *Textile Folk Art*, in which there was a chapter about travel, something which has always preoccupied me and which is the subject of my new book, *Textile Travels*, published later this year."

Anne recalls that her early embroidered pieces were small, intensely stitched works that took 'ages' to make. Realising that she wanted to create larger pieces, layering different media and types of fabric, she developed her free-motion machine 'netting' stitch, which holds everything together. Hand-stitched detail is added afterwards, 'Stitching for me is a way of drawing on fabric.' She also uses screen and block prints, even rubber stamps on the surface and embellishes the finished pieces with various finds and ephemera from her collection. Anne is an inveterate collector. Everything, from old bags of lace and doilies to threads, tins, dolls' houses, small, tatty suitcases – and now even a canoe – is hauled back to her studio for re-use, either in her work or during her teaching sessions. "I like sharing, I feel that if I have made a piece using something old and beautiful, ➤"

and someone enjoys it, that's more of an achievement than just enjoying it myself."

Breathing new life into old, unwanted textiles characterises Anne's work, and offers the viewers an extra layer of narrative. Anne has always kept scrapbooks, where she gathers oddments for inspiration, and often one of these textile fragments is the inspiration for a new work. Anne travels a lot in the course of her work and obviously derives joy and inspiration from visiting new places and meeting new people. In her new book, *Textile Travels*, you can follow the diary of her recent travels, and observe as each new place engages her maker's eye and inspires new work.

Toward the end of *Textile Travels*, Anne writes about the often solitary nature of making. As this journal goes to press, we are in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, and isolation, in differing degrees, has been forced upon us. Anne's book reminds us that the mind keeps travelling, regardless of what our bodies are doing. *Textile Travels* gives us so many ways of mapping memories of our travels past and (hopefully) future. It is an intriguing, inspiring book celebrating textiles, travel, and the capture of memories in the making. ♦

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Left: Maharani Gardens mixed-media textile. Whilst teaching in India, Anne visited the Maharani Gardens in the walled city of Jaipur. Indian gardens have many architectural features, and the soft colours of the stone, exotic flowers and birds were hugely inspiring. The sense of being surrounded by lush foliage, colour and the energy created by the birds and other wildlife is perfectly captured in this piece.



*Textile Travels* by Anne Kelly (Batsford) is out in October 2020. Available for pre-order from online retailers now including waterstones.com