

Below and opposite: A vibrant Peacock butterfly rests on a plume of Buddleia flowers, the petals cut from hand-painted organza.



On SILKEN WINGS

Embroiderer and textile artist Jane E. Hall's silken canvases of butterflies are living habitats complete with the leaves, shrubs, grasses and flowers that succour the butterflies with nectar.

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So strong was the conviction in Ancient Greece that the emergence of the adult butterfly from its chrysalis represented the personification of the human soul, they used the same word for both – *psyche*. For many, regardless of religious or spiritual belief, the butterfly continues to symbolise freedom and hope and has been celebrated in art from the earliest times, whether representing Egyptian belief in the afterlife on frescoes at Thebes over three millennia ago, or fluttering across the surface of artefacts from ancient China and Japan. For textile artist Jane Hall, even the word 'butterfly' is spellbinding, conjuring up halcyon childhood days spent playing in the garden, hiding in the long meadow grasses beyond the garden gate, and exploring neighbouring woodlands. As her art developed, it became clear to her that the butterfly is her muse. "It embodies the very spirit of my creativity." ➤➤

Over the years, she has observed them on the wing in the two-acre field surrounding her studio, rendered their likenesses in sketchbooks, captured their beauty through the lens of her camera and in the tiniest of stitches on silk. Listening to Jane talk about butterflies, her sense of wonder at these magical creatures is evident. "I believe that there is no inspiration, artistically or otherwise, without a sense of wonder." Years of informal study have equipped Jane with a certain 'satisfying' intellectual understanding of her subjects, but she is keen to disown any suggestion of being an expert in the field of natural history. "Mine is a field of tousled grasses, a meadow in which to play. A field of dreams, where ideas and imagination take flight among the butterflies." Though she observes them acutely, she



observes beauty before science and is inspired to interpret this artistically rather than feeling tasked to make accurate replicas. Having spoken to her, read her book, and gasped at her exquisite creations, I would say, put simply, she knows her stuff, but modesty, especially from one so gifted, is always attractive.

The wealth of detail on a butterfly's wings never fails to enchant even the casual observer. Jane has examined their intricate patterning under magnification to find that it is made up of miniature scales, each of differing iridescent colours.

The name Lepidoptera, given to the insect order butterflies, means 'scaly wings', and in Jane's butterflies each scale is represented by the tiniest of silk stitches. ➤➤

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SHUTTERSTOCK

Above: Magnified butterfly wings, their brilliant colours reminiscent of Ghanaian kente cloth.
Right: The delicate Orange-tip butterfly is on the wing between April and June.





‘When I delight upon a
Speckled Wood butterfly;
it transports me to an
idyllic, sun-speckled
woodland glade...’

Above: various stages in the creation of Jane's Speckled Wood butterfly.
Opposite: An embroidered Red Admiral is secured to the silk-bound wire stems
of the bindweed, holding her away from the surface of the work, thus creating
the illusion of air beneath her wings. Her delicate antennae are made by
dipping the fine wire ends into a wet mix of modelling medium.



‘It can leave me quite breathless as I unconsciously hold my breath to still my mind and my hand. One must be patient and careful with tiny things...’

Silk is the greatest component of her work. Natural, pre-dyed silk is her preferred material as it translates into the gentle sheen and weight of a butterfly’s wing. It carries the silk dyes which Jane uses as a watercolourist might use paint, allowing the colours to flow and merge. Sometimes, she uses a watercolour primer which enables her to control the pattern and shape with the precision of a miniaturist. Her hand-made Japanese needles are extremely fine with perfectly flat heads to carry spun silk gently through delicate fabric. Jane selects silk threads from her vast collection, many of which are vintage, wound on to sturdy wooden bobbins, like jewels in a treasure

chest. Silk floss is separated into filaments, which she then twists into workable threads, either single or perhaps combining two differing shades. Where necessary she creates her own coloured thread by using silk dyes. Frequent changes of thread and needle are part of creating the miniature patterning, with the ends of each thread worked back through the stitches on the underside of the wings. The stitches towards the outside edges of the wings have to be closely aligned and cover every thread of fabric in order to prevent the wings from fraying when they are finally cut away from the silk. Observing the veining of a butterfly’s wings, Jane uses unbelievably fine wire, caught into the stitches on their undersides, to lift her creations into life.

The butterflies’ bodies are crafted, using fine tools, from paper clay before being brushed with silk fibres and painted. The whole process of assembly requires great precision and concentration: "It can leave me quite breathless as I unconsciously hold my breath to still my mind and my hand. One must be patient and careful with tiny things..." ➤➤

Clockwise, from top left: A pretty Painted Lady alights on the tin of a wide variety of fine silk threads selected for her intricately patterned wings. Vintage reels of pure flat silk, which Jane separates into gossamer-fine strands. A Large Blue, with its inky black spots and clearly defined white margins, has a ‘floppy, slow and fluttering’ flight.



THIS PAGE: JANE E. HALL

Jane also creates the habitat in which she places her butterflies. Mostly they are fashioned from silk, which she has painted before cutting to create petals and leaves, most of which are then carefully wired, the wire being disguised by delicate over stitching using thread drawn from the same fabric. A flowering stem of wild grass might be described with tassels of silk floss formed by knotting different shades of silk together, snipping off the knots at their bases and stitching them on to silk-bound wire stems before placing and stitching them into place.

Talking to Jane about her muse, I was astonished to learn that the Red Admiral 'migrates on gentle wings which belie its strength to spend its summers in Great Britain', and that Painted Ladies fly in from the desert edges of North Africa. Having thought I had done my bit by planting a *Buddleia*, I now appreciate that different species of butterfly require specific plants to provide food for their caterpillar stage, shelter for their pupae, and nectar for their life on the wing. Nettles are good. Jane likes to create studies of individual butterflies showing them as observed, whether a Red Admiral among the 'tousled grasses' of her field or a Painted Lady nestling in the thistledown of high summer. ❖

Follow Jane on Instagram @jane.e.hall
www.clothofnature.com



Jane is working on a new book for publication in September 2021. At the time of going to press, a reprint of her wonderful 2012 book, *The Art of Embroidered Butterflies*, is under consideration with the publisher. I will keep readers informed via Instagram and/or newsletter.

