



Supporting Birmingham's Collections: The Friends of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery and the work of Mary Jane Newill

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Since our formation in 1931, the Friends of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery have enhanced Birmingham's collections by supporting the purchase of over 2,700 acquisitions, funding conservation work and enabling the public to access and enjoy the collections.

In 2006, to celebrate the Friends' 75th Anniversary, a team of Friends volunteers began working alongside Birmingham Museums staff to produce a comprehensive database cataloguing all the items which the Friends had helped to purchase over the years. The process of collating accurate information about these acquisitions has taken over 20 years, but the database is now complete. A simple version is available in the 'Publications' section of our website: <https://fbmt.org.uk/publications/friends-acquisitions-history/>.

It is still a work in progress as we will be adding more images using Birmingham Museums Trust (BMT)'s Digital Asset Resource and, of course, the database will be updated as we continue to



support and enhance Birmingham's collections.

This article will focus on Mary Jane Newill, known as Mary J. Newill, who was born in 1860. She studied at the Birmingham School of Art where she subsequently taught needlework and embroidery from 1892 until 1919.

Newill was a landscape painter, an embroiderer, a stained glass artist, a textile worker and an illustrator

associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement. In 1893 her 'Babes in the Woods', a stained glass panel cartoon, was displayed at the annual Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in London. This was only the second stained glass design by a female artist to be exhibited, and the first by a woman who later became a successful commercial artist. The drawing was used as an illustration in Christopher Whall's influential manual 'Stained Glass Work', published in 1905.

By 1906 Newill had her own studio in Great Western Buildings on Livery Street in Birmingham. She was a member of the Birmingham Group, sometimes called the Birmingham School, which was an informal collective of painters and craftsmen associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement working in Birmingham in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She was also a designer for the Bromsgrove Guild of Applied Arts and an elected professional Associate Member of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists between 1909 and 1923, although she was never



elected to full membership of the Society.

In 1982, the Friends purchased a bed cover which had been embroidered by Newill in 1908. This work highlights the crucial role which women played in the development of textiles. During the earlier Victorian period sewing and embroidery were largely a private, homemade artform. The Arts and Crafts movement increased the possibilities for, and the public visibility of, these crafts. Under the direction of enlightened educators at art school, women were given the chance to study to become professional designers and makers, and Birmingham was one of the British art schools to lead the way in this.

Newill picked flowers from local hedgerows and imitated them meticulously in the intricate embroidery on this linen bed cover, using coloured wools. The quote around the edge is from the second verse of 'Ode – Intimations of Immortality' from 'Recollections of Early Childhood' by William Wordsworth and reads: 'The Rainbow comes & goes & lovely is the Rose, The Moon doth with delight look round her when the heavens are bare, Waters on a starry night are beautiful and fair, The sunshine is a glorious birth...'. In the centre, a circle is divided into 8 sections with motifs loosely illustrating the text: an owl, a sparrow, a chaffinch, a tit, butterflies, bees, moths, a moon and stars – and with a sun in the centre and a trailing design of dog roses in the alternate panels. In the four corners of the bed cover there are dog roses and a rainbow.

This unique, hand-crafted textile was

shown as part of Birmingham Museums Trust's 'Victorian Radicals' exhibition which toured America from 2018-2021. The bedcover can be seen as an artistic response to industrialisation, prizing craftsmanship over mass production. Tim Barringer, the Paul Mellon Professor of the History of Art at Yale University and a curator of the exhibition, talks about the bed cover in an article on the Yale MacMillan Center's website: "When we came to display it, we found that it is not quite square. Of course, it isn't – it's made lovingly inch-by-inch by hand and is a unique, hand-crafted textile." Barringer suggested Newill's bedcover essentially critiques the factory-produced machine-made goods of the early 20th century: "What is of value in our lives? What kind of labor do we value? What kind of life do we value?" Barringer asks. "Is it the life of high-pressure, mechanized, capitalist moneymaking success embodied in that carpet? Or is it the art of thoughtful artistic creation reflected in this bedcover?"*

This bed cover is not the only work by Newill in Birmingham's collections. In 2001 the Friends supported the purchase of two stained glass panels by Newill which form a single image of two medieval ships before a city's wall. The quote on the panels is from the poem 'Sleep after Toile' by 16th century poet Edmund Spenser: 'Sleepe after toile, port after stormie seas, ease after warre, death after life does greatly please'. At the turn of the 20th Century, appliqué embroidery was likened to stained glass with its outlines compared to lead lines. This comparison was reinforced by Newill, who designed both domestic leaded windows and linen wall hangings.

There is also a painting by Mary J. Newill in Birmingham's collection entitled 'Coastal Landscape', which she painted in 1911. It was purchased from the collection of Remo and Mary Granelli as part of a group of works by Birmingham School artists, and presented by the Public Picture Gallery Fund in 2018 (2019.18.4). Most of Newill's work was commissioned by and purchased for domestic homes and as a result little is held in public collections. If you would like to view more of her work then one of her stained glass windows is in the lady chapel of St. Mary and St. Ambrose Church in Edgbaston, and one is in the north side of the nave of Wrockwardine Church in Shropshire.

Artefacts is the Friends of Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery's quarterly magazine and is an essential communication tool for the arts world in the West Midlands. The magazine reflects Birmingham's Museums collections, exhibitions, expertise and diversity. Published on a quarterly basis, Artefacts is available by subscription, and is mailed out to members of the Friends. It is also free to pick up for visitors to Birmingham Museums Trust's historic properties and from libraries, galleries and museums across the Midlands. The Autumn 2023 edition will be available in August 2023.

Pictured:

'Sleepe after Toile' by Mary J. Newill, before 1905; Purchased with assistance from the National Art Collections Fund, the Resource/V&A Purchase Grant Fund and the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 2001; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CCO

'Embroidered bed cover' by Mary Newill, c.1908; Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1982; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CCO

References:

*'In 'Victorian Radicals', art reflects, and reacts to, industrialization', The MacMillan Center (yale.edu): <https://macmillan.yale.edu/news/victorian-radicals-art-reflects-and-reacts-industrialization>

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- 'Mary J Newill (1860-1947), Bromsgrove Guild Designer', Research Worcestershire; <https://researchworcestershire.wordpress.com/2015/07/24/mary-j-newill-1860-1947-bromsgrove-guild-designer/>