

HOW ABOUT?

with Louise Howland



In the midst of a bustling metropolis, women are fascinated by the craft of yesterday and the bonds of friendship they promise.

The Art of Needlework dates from the earliest record of the world's history, and has, also, from time immemorial been the support, comfort and employment of women of every rank and age. Day by day it increases its votaries, who enlarge and develop its various branches individually and together, so that any addition and assistance in teaching and learning needlework will be welcomed by the ... "wise of heart" who work diligently together with their hands."

So says Samuel Butler in his preface to Beeton's Book of Needlework, by Isabella Beeton, written in 1870. Craft groups of all kinds are the hot ticket for, mainly, women who feel that a connection with needle and thread provides balance and reconnection in their lives.

Hands-on creativity is enjoying a huge revival, and craft groups add another dimension – a chance to bond with enthusiastic, like-minded women. Members of embroiderer's guilds and quilting groups have always known this, of course, but women who've previously missed connecting in such company are now feeling the need and filling it.

On a recent trip to the USA, I went to meet with a craft fellowship in Chelsea, New York. Neighbourhood based, it attracts people from a wide variety of careers, some experienced and others with absolutely no background in handwork of any description.

"I've never so much as stitched up my hem," says fellowship member Sandra O' Meera. "Yet one day, completely out of the blue, I had an enormous urge to decorate a tablecloth with my family members' names on it for Christmas. The project just grabbed me and I was like a dog with a bone until I had it completed. To lots of people, craft and craftiness are at the opposite end of cool. But there's been no looking back for me."

It's down time and it's up time. We know there's no substitute for the sisterhood that comes from getting together at the table to share creativity and conversation; you can just feel the tensions of the week slip away.

Like so many congregations of crafters throughout the world, here are people who have supported each other through illnesses, births, deaths and the many and varied travails of life. They share a bond born of the common threads of their passion, creativity and conversation.

Craft groups seem to fulfil a basic need people have, to spend time with one another doing something constructive, learning and sharing. They restore something important that's been lost in much of modern society.

For a while I was a nurse in Tangier, Morocco, and I remember the women of the Kasbah having great camaraderie as they shopped at the souk, chose ingredients, cooked, ate, talked, laughed, stitched bright materials for clothes and household decorations, and tended their children. It seemed such a natural way for women to enjoy each other's company, yet not be idle.

As Sandra says, "Stitching together makes this huge city feel like our village. There's a sense of belonging. And that brings with it a warm and positive feeling."

Until next month

Louise

