

HOW ABOUT?

with Louise Howland



This month, Louise considers the expert status achieved through specialisation versus the pleasure of variation.

I'm attracted to variegated threads, ribbons and fabrics, however many people whose view I hold in high regard, are not. Is variegation kind of cheap, faux-creative quick fix?

I often ponder the benefits of specialisation versus variety. Is it ultimately more satisfying to attempt to be an expert in a particular field, or to dabble and explore across the spectrum?

I feel something that may well be envy for the specialists, the committed, those who dedicate themselves to blackwork or whitework, crewelwork or goldwork. These focused folk arrive in our showroom and zero in. They know what they seek. They can walk right by delectable fat quarters, multi-hued silk ribbons, unbelievable beads and divine old-style broderie anglaise. Perhaps they pass a kindly glance here and there but there's little sign of temptation.

On the other hand, the generalists explore. They seem to be hunting for a treasure, an inspiration, from any quarter. They browse and stop, pick up and put down, sidetrack and double back.

A gentleman named Charles Fourier, a French utopian socialist born over 200 years ago, was not a supporter of specialisation. For him, variation made for a higher degree of satisfaction and happiness. "Work should be varied about eight times a day," he specified, "it being impossible to sustain enthusiasm longer than an hour in the exercise of any labour."

So, one might start the morning propagating pansies, then spend an hour or two quilting, try some watercolours en plein air after lunch, embroider in the afternoon and perhaps play piano duets or have a game of bridge before retiring to read.

I'd agree that when I experience great variety in the course of a day, there's an undeniable sense of pleasure and contentment, a feeling of delight with the world and its contents.

And yet, the obvious downside of too much of this universal embracing is that it's likely to mean less competency in a field. Bits and pieces of diverse activities prevent some of us becoming expert in anything.

Specialising in a particular field brings marketable skills and a high degree of satisfaction as increasing professionalism is attained. Becoming an expert means having a level of skill held by few. If I am to have brain surgery, I'd like a doctor who is an expert at brain surgery rather than a doctor who is not bad at brain surgery, dabbles in fashion design and enjoys some part-time work as a chef. Specialisation is a key aspect that makes our economy and society work.

However, diversification is important for many people's happiness and wellbeing. We all have examples of people who are



brilliantly capable and knowledgeable in a particular area of their lives at the expense of another. Some are brilliant in their financial lives, yet their relationships and health are in a neglected state. In our personal lives at least, specialisation is not always effective.

Fortunately in our panoramic world of craft, many skills are interrelated. A threaded needle in the hand of an embroiderer can turn quite flexibly from cross stitch to trapunto. We don't need to sacrifice diversity entirely, and we may even discover some previously uncharted territories.

Until next month,

Louise