

# Slow Stitch

Mindful and contemplative textile art

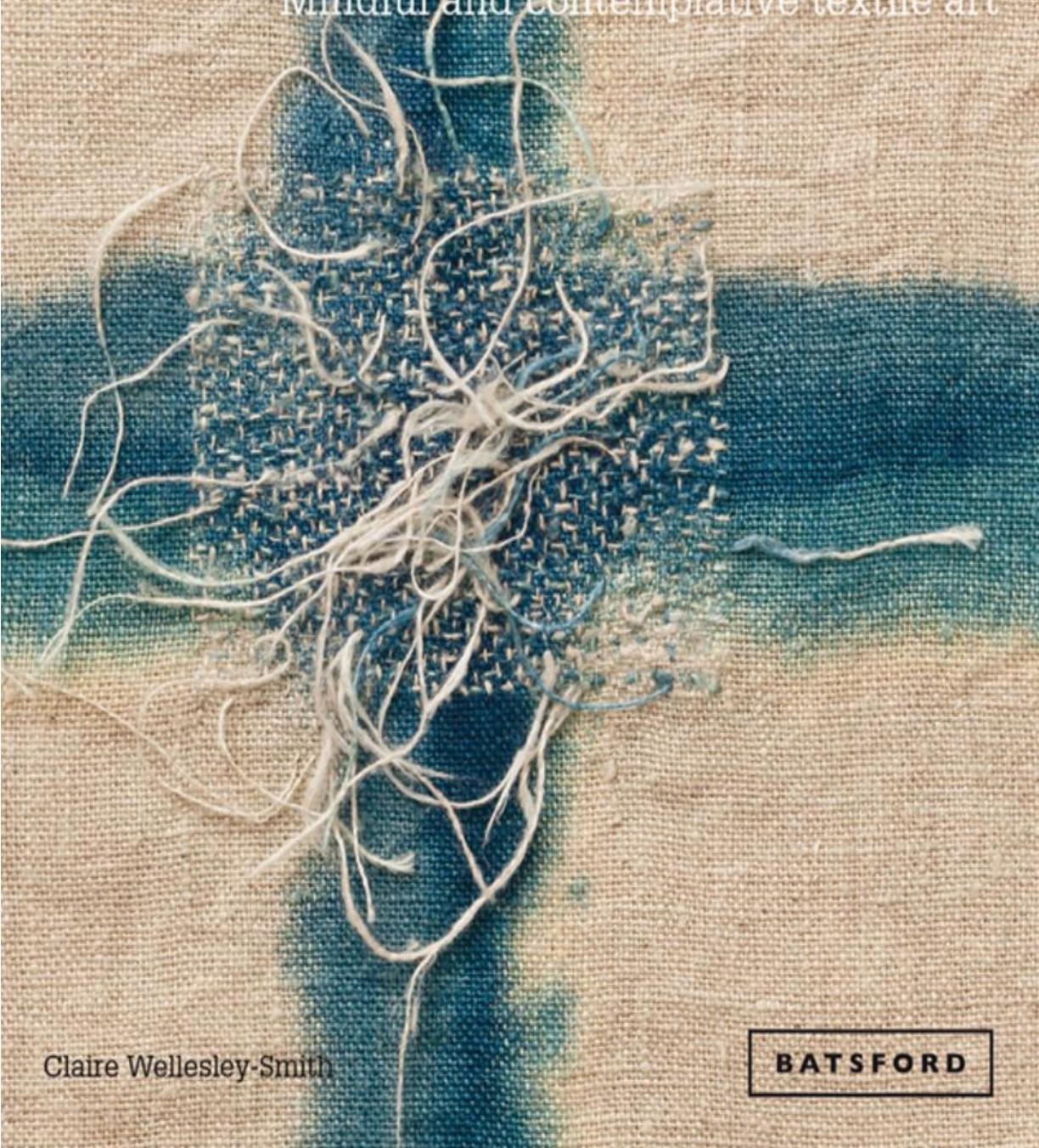


Claire Wellesley-Smith

**BATSFORD**

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# Introduction

*The speed at which we do something - anything - changes our experience of it.*

***The Tyranny of Email, John Freeman***

This book explores a 'slow' approach to stitching on cloth. The pleasures to be had from slowing down processes are multiple, with connections to ideas of sustainability, simplicity, reflection and multicultural textile traditions.

The idea of a Slow Movement has been applied to many things, but all look at slowing the pace of life and making a deliberate decision to do so. It is a philosophy that embraces local distinctions and seasonal rhythms, and one that encourages thinking time. In craft terms, I see a slow approach as a celebration of process; work that has reflection at its heart and skill that takes time to learn. By slowing down my own textile practice, I have developed a deeper emotional commitment to it, to the themes I am exploring, and to the processes I use. In the community-based stitching projects I run I have noticed the benefits that this way of working can give to participants. Simple,

contemplative activities can be convivial too, creating non-verbal conversations through making.

The scope of textile art is huge. There are always new things to try, techniques to learn and products to buy. While it can be difficult to step away from diverting new experiences, self-imposed limits can bring a meaningful and thoughtful approach to your textile practice.

This book uses simple stitching techniques and traditional practices. It looks at choosing to use re-purposed materials and minimal equipment, and explores slow processes that allow thinking time and create a real connection with the object you are making. It has project suggestions and resources that will help towards making a more sustainable textile practice, and has examples of inspirational work from textile artists who work in this way.

You may find in using this approach that 'less is more', and that your slow textile projects become more personal and sustainable.



*Slow Square* (2014). Naturally dyed threads on linen (40 x 40cm / 15¾ x 15¾in).



# About me

I have come to this slow approach to textiles through a non-conventional route. I studied political science and had a career in community engagement and advice work for many years, often working with people who were experiencing crisis in their lives.

I grew up in a household in which things were made; my mother was a wonderful seamstress and knitter, a textile project always on the go, and she passed her skills to me. My grandmother was a professional machinist and dressmaker, who worked from the age of fourteen to help support her family. In my family, talking was mostly done when accompanied by making. I watched my grandmother knit a jumper for me as a student, fully engaged in all the conversation in the room and simultaneously completing a newspaper crossword. When I went to college to do creative textile courses as a new mother, I started to see connections between my own stitching and making, that of my female relatives, and in the communal support shared by my peers in the classroom. Gradually this developed into my main work, still based in community engagement but nowadays through my textile and teaching practice. My strongest interest is in connections: how do we connect to each other and how does the universality of textiles help us

to do this? My approach includes archive-based research looking at the social history of textiles; exploring family stories through textiles and working on projects that aid understanding of personal and community history through textile making. The thread that pulls this together is a strong belief in the process, and I believe that the slower this process is, the more beneficial it can be both for individuals and communities.



The view from my studio.



A detail from my stitch journal.



**Part One:**  
Slow

# What is the Slow Movement and how does it relate to textiles?

The origins of the Slow Movement can be traced back to the mid-1980s and the beginnings of the Slow Food Movement in Italy, started by Carlo Petrini. This began as a protest against multi-national fast-food companies and became a concerted campaign that encouraged sustainable local production, awareness of heritage, and strong connections to local culture and community. Carl Honoré's 2004 book *In Praise of Slow* broadened out these concerns, defining the Slow Movement as a cultural revolution against the notion that faster is always better. In the book he writes, 'The Slow Movement is not about doing everything at a snail's pace. Nor is it a Luddite attempt to drag the whole planet back to some pre-industrial utopia [...] The Slow philosophy can be summed up in a single word: balance [...] Seek to live at what musicians call the *tempo giusto* – the right speed.' And on his website Honoré goes on to explain, 'It's about seeking to do everything at the right speed. Savouring the hours and minutes rather than just counting them. Doing everything as well as possible, instead of as fast as possible. It's about quality over quantity in everything from work to

food to parenting.' The Slow Food Movement has led to other Slow movements, including 'Slow Cities', aiming to encourage calm living places attentive to residents' needs and quality of life, and 'Slow Fashion', described by Kate Fletcher in her book *Sustainable Fashion and Textiles* as being 'about designing, producing, consuming and living better'. In the US, the idea of 'Slow Cloth' has been expounded by Elaine Lipson, an artist and writer with a background in the organic-food movement, who linked the principles of the Slow Food Movement into a manifesto for textile making in her 'Slow Cloth Manifesto' article, published in *Textiles and Politics: Textile Society of America 13th Biennial Symposium Proceedings* in 2012 and also online at [digitalcommons.unl.edu](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu).



*Field Work (Yellow)* (2012). Naturally dyed and pieced using repetitive hand stitching (35 x 15cm / 13¾ x 6in).

The speed of life in the 21st century can often be overwhelming. Life is relentlessly busy, but this is not a new phenomenon. In 1875, W.R. Greg wrote an article called '*Life at High Pressure*', much quoted at the time, bemoaning 'a life lived so full [...] that we have no time to reflect where we have been and whither we intend to go'. Around the same time, William Morris and makers within the Arts and Crafts Movement were consciously returning to pre-industrial processes, including the use of natural dyes and handloom weaving, despite the wide availability of faster, modern alternatives.

The issue of speed has preoccupied artists, too. The artist and weaver Anni Albers, writing in an essay titled *On Design* in 1939, talks of the 'indecision due to speed, the acceleration of processes, the rise and fall of ideas'. Now the digital age means that we are bombarded with information: emails and other notifications appearing on our phones, the pressing idea that we might 'miss out' on some vital news or update if we don't check now. The thing that I have become most conscious of is the number of interruptions in the day that come from external digital media and how long it then takes for me to regain my concentration after I engage with them.

The availability of ideas and inspiration, and the connections that can be made using online resources, are a fantastic facility for artists. However, I am increasingly interested in having a more measured approach to their use and this in part is due to my interest in the Slow Movement.

Working on textile projects in community arts settings has also drawn me towards the idea of slow processes. I have worked on a number of long-term arts and health projects with adults experiencing mental-health distress, and the two themes of connection and reflection have come to the fore again and again. I see a slow approach to stitch and textile projects as an enriching process. Simply thinking about your choice of materials offers an opportunity for reflection, to take time over the choosing of them, and to reflect on these choices as you work with them. This approach to the creative process can offer a calm space to engage meaningfully with materials and process and also with the people you may be working with. For me, the social context of textile making and production is key to this process. When you understand how things are made, where they were made, and why, you have a greater connection with them. The process of making by hand means the maker has a relationship with the object being made because he or she physically engages with it.

Using hand processes for textile projects is by nature slow. The real pleasure for me is the process, the doing and the getting there. David Gauntlett, writing about craft in his book *Making is Connecting*, describes it as '[the] satisfaction of making sense of being alive within the process, the engagement with ideas, learning and knowledge which come not before or after but within the practice of making'.



Detail of *Field Work (Yellow)* (2012).

# Sustainability and resource efficiency

I see a slow approach to textile projects as a low-impact approach. Reflecting on your projects and taking the time to consider the way you are working and consuming sits uncomfortably with products that are purchased at the expense of others' wellbeing. The textile industry is heavily entwined with environmental issues and the working conditions of those who work within it. For consumers in the West, the majority of textile production is now hidden from view, with poor labour practices mostly invisible to the consumer. Textile and garment production involves the cheapest and most flexible labour in some of the least regulated workplaces in the world. Many textile workers don't earn a living wage, and they work in unacceptable and dangerous conditions.

Issues around the production of raw materials include the use of pesticides in growing cotton, emissions to water and air from synthetic fabric and fibre production, and the huge demand on water supplies and non-renewable energy resources for production generally. In the UK we send 1.2 million tonnes of textile waste, much of it good quality, to