



Sasha:
Quick
CV

Age 4

Learns to knit and crochet

1965-68

Exeter College of Art, Fine Art degree in Art and Design (painting)

1968-71

Royal College of Art, Master's Degree in printmaking

1972

Sasha moves to Wales from London

1974

Establishes handmade knitwear business

1985

Moves to present home in Llawr-y-glyn

1984-2008

Publishes 6 knitting and crochet books, tours the USA, Europe, Japan, Australia and the UK giving workshops and lectures.

2000

Retrospective exhibition at the V&A Museum



Sasha wearing Hawthorn Jacket from *Country Inspiration* 2000. This piece is in the V&A

Countryside Knitting

MICHELE MATHESON VISITS SASHA KAGAN'S STUDIO TO TALK ABOUT HER CAREER IN KNITWEAR

It is a bright sunny afternoon, uncharacteristically hot for Wales. Having driven along ever narrowing roads in the heart of the Welsh countryside, I know instinctively when I have reached Sasha Kagan's house and studio. The white wooden clap-board studio stands at the side of the road covered in the deep red flowers of an old-fashioned rambling rose. Sasha, who is at the gate to meet me, explains that the rose bush was a Mother's Day present from her children some years before. She feels an affinity with the land here and is Welsh by adoption, having lived in Wales for the best part of 40 years and in her current house for 23 years. She reminisces, "I was so busy when we first came here. We had this ruinous old house, we were setting up the knitwear business and I

continues the story into the 1980s when she established a successful knitwear business. Her mother was a talented seamstress who loved knitting and crochet and passed on her love of textiles to her daughter, teaching her to knit and crochet by the age of four. One of Sasha's first memories is of sitting on a three-legged stool on the doorstep of her parents' tumble-down thatched cottage in Hertfordshire, crocheting a peach baby's matinee jacket with a green plastic crochet hook. Later as a student in the 1960s she was caught up in the clothes-focused youth culture of the day. She remembers spending all her grant money on fabric and yarn, crocheting a silver shift dress for a party. "Starting with an Irish crocheted rose, I ad-libbed my way through a box of silver Lurex and two days later I had produced

“The doors kept falling off the car. I remember once the driver's door and the passenger's door were both wired together so you had to get in and out of the car by climbing over the back seat.

It was just completely mad but they were magic times”

very quickly had three children." She now has four children, one daughter and three sons, and three grandchildren. She jokes about the early days but there is no doubt that times were very difficult. She remembers their first car, an old Morris Traveller that used to bump along the pock-marked country lane through five sets of gates to get to the house. Sasha explains laughing, "The doors kept falling off the car. It was just completely mad but they were magic times. The children look back on it now and, even though they had polythene windows and water out of a rain barrel, they say what a wonderful upbringing they had."

Lurex Gown

We sit down in Sasha's studio with a cup of tea and a slice of home-made cake while she

a sleeveless floor-length gown and matching cloche cap. The outfit was worn with purple tap shoes from Anello and Davide, false eyelashes and a very white face!" she recalls. She studied printmaking at college which had an impact later on her knitting designs. She comments, "The print I used to do was all repeating patterns. Now looking back I can see how the rhythm of the repeating patterns is very similar to what I do now in knitting and crochet." After college she was making the costumes for a theatre company when the company decided to move out to Oswestry on the Welsh border and so began her love affair with Wales and a chance to develop her own knitwear business.

With the knitwear business she learnt as she went along. Laughing at her own lack of



Sasha enjoying magic times with her children wearing her Welsh Poppy Knit, 1987

knowledge, she says "When I first started, I couldn't do set-in sleeves. I used to have these garments where you couldn't really lift your arm up!" But Sasha's designs were popular and she had large orders from American department stores such as Henri Bendel in New York but even then things did not always go smoothly. She had about 150 knitters who were working full-time and also outsourced much of the making up and finishing of garments to ladies in the local village of Caersws. But disaster struck as she explains, "I had this giant sack of everything that had been knitted and gone to the finisher and was all pressed. It was left outside the wall of my house and got stolen so we had to rush around and get everything reknitted to meet the delivery dates." She describes how difficult it is to make a living with hand-knitted production and comments, "It was very stressful. I stopped doing that big production after a while

Merinos to create sheep that have a wonderfully soft fleece but can withstand the rigours of living on a Welsh hillside. These are some of the ways Sasha has expressed the need to give something back to Wales for the happy times she has spent there. No two working days are alike and as she points out, "At this time of year, I have to stop at around 3 p.m. because I have the whole garden to cope with as well. I have a poly-tunnel full of food for when the family come home." Beyond the garden, another 13 acres beckon.

Colourful countryside

The garden and the Welsh countryside have provided inspiration over the years for her knitwear designs. Her early geometric designs, so popular in the 80s, were gradually left behind as her love of organic shapes, the infinite variety of leaves and flowers and the riot of colour they

repeats will go easily into it. Most designers work the size out and make the pattern fit the size. I do it the other way round. I make the fabric first and then decide what garment to make out of it." Colour choice is paramount. Pulling out a jumper she laughs, "I can't stop with colour. I am obsessed with colour. See this green, it's almost luminous although it is subtle and it is reacting with this oaty background." The exquisiteness of her colour palette is seen in 'Laurel', a scarf design where treacle and ginger are off-set with bilberry and claret. Her garments are far from simple. Not only is there a richness of colour but also a technical complexity. She has a unique approach, often combining flower motifs with cables or lace as in 'Cable Flower' or 'Lace Pashmina'. "I am most concerned with the colour and the pattern but sometimes a design just needs a little bit of air in between the motifs so

film 'Baraka' which she describes, "There was no sound at all, just image after image of wonderful patterns and juxtapositions of colour." It is her favourite film but 'American Beauty' runs a close second! She has recently visited the Gambia and travel, yoga and singing also provide a contrast to her knitting life. Does she have any unfulfilled ambitions? She would like to build a new studio and explains laughing, "This studio is actually made out of sections of the dismantled Domestic Science Unit of Llandrindod High School!" She has a clear vision of what the new studio would be like, "It would be two storeys, with my studio in the top half looking out over the surrounding countryside. There would be a showroom underneath where people could try things on and I would have a display of kits and books perhaps, and beautiful pieces made by other craftspeople." It would be a place where she could give workshops and the build would be eco-friendly. Another as yet unfulfilled ambition is to recreate a Russian teddy-bear from her childhood. Sasha's father was a Russian aristocrat who left St. Petersburg before the revolution of 1917 to study in Oxford and so she was given the Russian name of Alexandra; the Russian diminutive is Sasha.

Heart values

Sasha seems to have indefatigable enthusiasm for trying something new. When it was suggested by the editor of 'Vogue' knitting magazine, that she write a book on crochet, she enrolled on a week-end course to revisit long-forgotten skills. She finds it very funny saying, "There's me going on a crochet course so I can write a book about crochet! We would be sitting in a restaurant in the evening and someone would be showing me this and someone would be showing me something else." Taking an experimental approach can be a positive thing. She points out some 'button flowers' and explains, "Here I have used the crochet back to front. I think it is much more interesting that side." She hopes that 'Crochet Inspiration', her personal slant on crochet techniques, will encourage the crafter to be more adventurous. Her willingness to accept a challenge is shown by her involvement in the Bowmont Braf venture. Because initially the yarn was only produced in a limited range of range of colours, she abandoned her characteristic colour motifs to design in cables and textured stitches to bring out the beauty of the yarn. She comments laughing, "I am having a very interesting life. I am never bored."

Another of Sasha's many publications has been 'Knitting for Beginners'. She says, "I thought it



'Prowling Cats' from Sasha Kagan Sweater Book, 1984
Llandi Loes market hall in the background

was important to get the next generation going: to make it a bit more fun, not so intense," and so fuel the current enthusiasm for textiles. She feels there is such a buzz from knitting at the moment with the growth of Stitch and Bitch and Knit and Natter groups and the starting up of new yarn shops and shows such as Wonderwool. Sasha's fundamental love for craft comes through when she says, "I am a great waver of the flag that textiles are very healing." She points to the growth of community projects such as the Hyperbolic Crochet Reef to draw attention to global warming and the support for all kinds of charity knitting projects. "It's very important to keep that good energy going: people being nice and caring for each other, thinking of people less fortunate and supporting Third World projects. There's something about yarn that brings out these 'heart values.'" She feels very lucky to be pursuing a career she loves and says, "I think people who are in this kind of career have so much job satisfaction because we are so addicted to yarn and just love making beautiful things." ●

Workshops

Sasha will be giving workshops at the following events:
Llanidloes Craft Fair Nov 15-Dec 24 2008,
Wonderwool, Builth Wells April 25-26 2009
Wool and Willow Festival, Llanidloes June 8-26
French Treats, Le Vieux Monast, re,
South West France, June 13-20.

Books

Sasha's recent publications are
Country Inspiration (Taunton Press, 2000)
ISBN 1-56158-338-3

Knitting for Beginners (Carroll and Brown, 2004) ISBN 1-903258-90-1
Crochet Inspiration (Sixth & Spring, 2007)
ISBN 978-1-93302-712-8
Knitwear (Guild of Master Craftsmen, 2008)
ISBN 978-1-86108-519-1
Signed copies of all her books are available from her studio:

Sasha Kagan, Y-Fron, Llawr-y-glyn, Caersws, Powys, Wales, SY17 5RJ

More details of Sasha's activities can be found on her website www.sashakagan.co.uk or send an SAE for information to the above address.



Sasha's studio



The view from Sasha's studio

“ Starting with an Irish crocheted rose, I ad-libbed my way through a box of silver Lurex and two days later I had produced a sleeveless floor-length gown and matching cloche cap. The outfit was worn with purple tap shoes from Anello and Davide, false eyelashes and a very white face ”

because I realised I wasn't enjoying the knitting and designing side of things anymore. That wasn't what I had come to Wales to do."

She explains that today the key to a successful career in knitting is flexibility and comments, "I do think you have to be good at juggling and I now have many strings to my bow." She produces twice-yearly collections of garments, creates patterns for magazines, writes books (she has so far written six and has two more planned), teaches and goes on lecture tours visiting places such as Japan, Australia and America. She has also been an encouraging voice behind the annual Wonderwool show in Mid Wales and has provided expertise and designs for a local rural development initiative, Bowmont Braf, where Scottish Shetland sheep are cross-bred with Australian Saxon

presented expressed itself in her work. Eventually ten years worth of designs inspired by nature were brought together in 'Country Inspiration' published in 2000. This year was also marked by a retrospective exhibition of her work at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, a great honour. She explains that she approaches her designs from a different direction to most people because she starts with the motif and then creates a garment to fit that. She illustrates the point by showing me a jacket with an elongated leaf design where the jacket is a longer length to accommodate the leaf motif. Then she pulls out a box of knitted swatches from a stack of similar boxes reaching towards the ceiling and explains, "I usually do a piece that is one repeat long by one repeat wide. I work the size out by how many

that's when I put the lace in," she explains. Her distinctive designs are now recognised world-wide but her own satisfaction comes from making a beautifully crafted garment, she says, "It needs to be in lovely colours, a beautiful pattern, a good fit and feel good on the body. All those things together make it a beautiful garment."

Along with Kaffe Fassett and Susan Duckworth, Sasha pioneered the use of colour and pattern in British knitting in the 1980s before which, according to Kaffe, there was "beige and more disgusting beige". All three have very distinctive styles but a shared love of colour. Having been friends for more than twenty years, Sasha recently went to Kaffe's 70th birthday party and proudly shows me the typically colourful invitation. At the party they had a private screening of the