

## Talking Quilts: Saving Quilters' Stories Project

# Quilting a future: the transformative power of the stitch



In August 2013 I interviewed Sylvester in Her Majesty's Prison, Brixton, for the Talking Quilts project of The Quilters' Guild. His engagement with quilting helps us understand the different ways in which quilting can enhance the quality of life and give purpose in difficult circumstances.

Pauline Macaulay

I KNEW OF Sylvester's work through Fine Cell Work (FCW), founded in 1997 as a not-for-profit social enterprise that teaches needlework to prison inmates, enabling them to learn a useful skill, make beautiful objects, and re-enter society with the independence they need to stop re-offending. Sylvester began his sentence in 2005 and by 2008 had won a Platinum Certificate Award, the highest award given by the Koestler Trust in their Prison Art competition. He has made quilts designed by FCW as well as designing and making his own quilts for sale at their events. He contributed to the quilt made by a group of prisoners in HM Prison Wandsworth for the successful exhibition 'Quilts 1700–2010' at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2010. Recently he quilted the group quilt for the exhibition 'What We Do in Bed', curated by author Tracy Chevalier and currently on show at Danson House in Bexleyheath, Kent.

It took time for FCW to arrange an interview in the prison. Caroline Wilkinson, a long-time volunteer tutor, facilitated my visit with the highly supportive governor and staff. For security I had to take my passport, and a 'clean' camera and voice recorder. Sylvester, a

Polish man in his early thirties, clearly used to pumping iron in the gym, laughed 'I strongest man in prison'. We conducted the interview on our own in a small office. His English is frequently inflected with Polish grammar. As I set up my recording equipment and explained the project and documentation, Sylvester spread out a quilt called *Coloured Squares* that he had recently completed for a Koestler Trust competition. He explained that FCW provided the fabric squares and he chose how to distribute the colours in each nine-patch block. He quilted it with red thread in centimetre squares 'to look this quilt more like "up" to a design, and if you touch this quilt it feels nice and different. Good.' It is a striking and highly textured quilt. Our hands skimmed over the surface.

#### How did you get into quilting?

No one in Sylvester's family sewed, but 'in bad situation' in his tough first year in prison, he seized the opportunity offered by the FCW workshops which he learned about from a fellow inmate. Passing time is a constant challenge for prisoners who often spend 17 hours a day locked in their cells, and even longer at weekends and holidays. Dealing with this

enforced boredom, as Erwin James describes it, can soon grow to mean much more than merely getting through the hours.' 'I starting quilt stitching in the cell and I starting [to] enjoy. The more you do you get more excite[d] and more skilled. I want to learn more and more.'

Three aspects emerge as important to Sylvester's experience with quilting: first, he feels the real sense of enjoyment that many quilters experience as they work; second, he gains a growing and persistent sense of excitement; and third, this emotion drives him on to further learning. As he becomes more skilful his enjoyment grows and it strengthens his desire to improve and learn new quilting skills. He sets his sights high: 'I want to learn more and more ... I want more achievement. I want to be the best in [among] the quilters, like any other people.'

#### Tell me about how you do your quilting.

FCW volunteers cut out the fabric pieces and take them to the FCW workshops where prisoners discuss aspects of design and structure with their tutors. Sylvester says he is allowed to take to his cell one needle, threads and the fabric pieces, and volunteers add the wadding and backing. They return the three layers for quilting. Sylvester sometimes works to a tight design plan, colour scheme and quilting pattern; at other times the choice of the blocks, quilting pattern and colour of the threads

"Passing time is a constant challenge for prisoners"



are left to him.

No longer a novice, Sylvester sets himself high standards and cares deeply what his clients think about the product. 'I want to make sure the quilt is the best for the people to make sure the people happy with that.' Their feedback and appreciation, particularly in written form, is greatly treasured and carefully saved. Out of a much-fingered envelope he shows me photographs of quilts he has made, letters from customers thanking him and appreciating his work, and the awards and certificates he has won. Validation by both FCW and clients is important to him not just for his quilting skill and precision but, more movingly, for the message inherent in their letters that he is valued as a quilter and as a human being 'like any other people'. He states: 'I never have people [who were] not happy with quilt. Everybody happy. Even these people tell another people who know this guy in the prison who is stitching good quilts, you know.' He laughs softly, not missing the novelty factor of being a quilter who is a man and a prisoner.

### What would you say to a new prisoner coming in to Brixton?

Sylvester, seen as a master quilter, instructs novices who come to him for practical help, such as marking or binding, while at the same time mentoring them to cope with daily life in prison, thus conveying his experience and belief in the benefits of quilting. When I ask what he would say

to new prisoners to Brixton he replies: 'You have to cope, yes, you have to *keep* coping as well ... I will maybe particularly help these people to be busy in the time because in the prison you can think about different things in your mind, you see, or you never know what happens on the next day or next day. But me, I know what is happening next day, I will be quilting, stitching. I know it will be boring sitting in the cell for do nothing ... I enjoy myself. My time is going. My time is flying. When they say I am going home I am happy person. Knowing what is happening the next day and the next, stitching as well as prison routine and tasks, provides a rhythm and feeling of steadiness through being productive and creative while earning money.'

Quilting can help to cope with pressing thoughts and uncertainty, and, crucially, to kindle hope. Quilting every day, Sylvester explains, makes him happy and makes time fly. 'I pass my time in a situation fast because my time is going fast if I do stitching in the cell.' This suggests that he often experiences a state of 'flow' with a loss of awareness of things going on around him and a displacement of anxieties, enabling relaxation.<sup>2</sup> In May 2011, Qa Research published an in-depth, qualitative evaluation of FCW at five prisons in England and Scotland.<sup>3</sup> This found that the benefits of quilting included improved prisoners' mental health and social skills, reduced levels

Above left:

*Coloured Squares*

Above right:

*Coloured Squares, detail*

### References

- <sup>1</sup> Erwin James, *A Life Inside: A prisoner's notebook*, Atlantic Books, London, 2003
- <sup>2</sup> Emily J Burt and Jacqueline Atkinson, 'The relationship between quilting and wellbeing', *Journal of Public Health*, 2011, 1–6, doi:10.1093/pubmed/fdr041
- <sup>3</sup> Qa Research, *Stitching a Future: An evaluation of Fine Cell Work*, Qa Research, York, 2011

of anger and aggression, raised self-esteem, and promotion of a calmer state of mind. Quilting also helped time to pass productively and enabled a strong sense of the creative process, achievement, pride and self-confidence. Most importantly, it enabled a more positive outlook for inmates' future on leaving prison. Sylvester's own words provide a first-hand account of how quilting has captivated and distracted him, enabling him to use his prison sentence to aim for a better future.

### What do you think you might do when you go home?

Sylvester sees a future in which stitching, quilting and teaching will play a part. His experience has prepared him to support others serving sentences to reclaim time as their own and to transform their confinement into a period of productivity and creativity. When he returns home to Poland he says he would like to teach quilting, perhaps even in a prison. His story enhances the view that prison can be a place for creativity where stitching can have a transformative power for the present and the future.

### Author's acknowledgements

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- For further information about the Talking Quilts project, please contact: [info@talkingquilts.org.uk](mailto:info@talkingquilts.org.uk)
- Find out more about Fine Cell Work at: [www.finecellwork.co.uk](http://www.finecellwork.co.uk)
- Find out more about the Koestler Trust at: [www.koestlertrust.org.uk](http://www.koestlertrust.org.uk)
- 'Things We Do in Bed', an exhibition of quilt works curated by Tracy Chevalier, runs until 31 October 2014 at Danson House, Bexleyheath, Kent; see page 20 for more details.