

Celebrity Interview with

Michele Carragher



You started knitting and sewing at an early age, going on to study Fashion Design at the London College of Fashion. You have since worked with many top stars and created many of the costumes for the hugely popular TV series 'Game of Thrones'. Had you envisaged a career in Fashion Design when you started?

When I was young, I never prepared a master plan in advance to reach a desired job. I was one of the those children with their heads stuck in the clouds, my imagination roaming free, engaged in flights of fancy - mostly involving horses (my other true passion).

When I had to think about a future career whilst at school, all I knew was that I wanted to work in a creative field where I could utilise the artistic mediums that I had a passion for, such as illustration, painting, sculpture and the creation of costumes. So now I feel very fortunate that I have eventually fallen into a career that combines them all! When it came to the choice of Further Education, it was between Art and Fashion - I can't really remember how I came to make the choice, but Fashion won in the end.

At the London College of Fashion, where I studied Fashion Design, I really enjoyed the craft aspects of the course, but I became aware that the work I produced on the course wasn't mainstream fashion - more avant-garde. My first major manifestation of using embroidery creatively was while I studied there, for many of the designs that I conceived on the course. I wanted them to have a sculptural presence so, in order to get the desired look, I invested much time into learning skills to aid me - skills like embroidery, millinery and knitting.

For my final collection, I created handmade knitwear pieces which had three-dimensional sculptured heads of the fantasy figure of Pan, surrounded with crocheted oak leaves and acorns on each arm. I wanted to produce work that would present a high level of craftsmanship and beauty, inspired by my many influences, and to have a Theatrical presence, but importantly, that embraced the female form.



You are incredibly knowledgeable about a huge range of stitches and techniques. Where did this knowledge come from?

Before (and even after) attending college, I have never had any extensive education in embroidery. My skills in sewing were forged at an early age, being taught some basic stitching by my mother. At college, there was some basic training in embroidery, mostly machine based, so I have evolved within my craft as a hand embroiderer by being self-taught and learning on the job.

After college, because of my hand embroidery skills, I had the opportunity to work for Kitty Morris in textile conservation. My work in this field has given me the great opportunity of being able to see and handle many different textiles from around the world, from different periods in time - from 9th Century Persian weavings, Ottoman fabrics and 16th to 19th Century European and Islamic embroideries.

It was like having my own personal museum to work in.

Whilst still working in conservation, in my spare time, I started to get involved in making short films with a group of friends, designing and making costumes for their films. By working on these amateur films, it was a good grounding for me. They gave me freedom to develop and experiment with costumes for film and gave me a passion and interest to pursue a career in Costume professionally. I started off as a Costume Assistant on a low budget feature film then onto more high quality TV drama productions for the BBC and ITV.

I then gravitated from general costume assisting onto the decoration and embellishment of costumes. My first major role as Principal Costume Embroiderer was on the HBO/Channel 4 TV series 'Elizabeth I' starring Dame Helen Mirren. I was noticed for the work that I created for 'Elizabeth I', leading onto further productions, one being 'Game of Thrones'.

I would say the work I have done in textile conservation has helped enormously with the work I create for film and TV, as a hand embroiderer. The huge variety of textiles from around the world that have passed through my hands have been an invaluable resource, allowing me to see different techniques and build up speed and precision in my work.





You have mentioned 'Game of Thrones' and it is this work, embroidering the costumes for this show, which has elevated you into the public eye.

The costumes are universally applauded for the sumptuous design, decoration and level of imagery contained in them, reflecting subtexts and evolving to mirror the characters' personalities and status within the story. Can you explain something of the relationship you have with the Costume Designer, Michele Clapton, and your input into the development of the embroidery designs when the costumes are being developed?

When creating an embroidery design for a costume on 'Game of Thrones', it starts with me meeting with the Costume Designer, Michele Clapton, who will have illustrations, mood boards, colours and fabric swatches of the costume that I will be creating a design for. We will discuss a character's back-story, their traits, their personal narrative within the script and this will all go towards influencing my design.

After my initial conversation with Michele, I will then go away and conduct in-depth research in relation to the piece I am creating. This usually involves me looking for imagery to inspire me, either by visiting museums, looking through historical costume reference books or just looking on the internet. I get my inspiration from anywhere and in everything, I love sculpture, architectural decoration, vintage textiles, jewellery, Haute Couture embroidery and nature. I will draw on elements from many sources to develop an idea.

For the next stage, I will need to start sourcing suitable materials that will help to portray the character's status and personality. Then I start with some sketches of a design, followed by creating samples to show Michele in order to get her input and the design will develop and evolve from there.

On 'Game of Thrones', I am given a huge workload for a single-hand embroiderer. It is a full on job where deadlines are always looming; most of the time you are working long hours in order to get the job done. The main thing you have to learn, which is not solely exclusive to working on a production like 'Game of Thrones', is to adapt your process to suit the deadlines that you are presented with for each design that you are asked to create.



As an artist, I have never liked to dampen down my ambitions for any of the designs I have created, as I have always been driven to create the best work I can, even in a limited timescale, so it is a constant battle for me to be highly creative as well as practical in my approach to my work.

Creating samples for a design can be useful for many reasons - not just to show how the embroidery will look, but also as a useful guide for me to see how long a certain embroidery will take to do, as I need to know if the design can be done in the scheduled time. This time restriction can be a positive as you discover and develop new skills and processes that will help you create your embroidery work in the future.

On TV, you get far less preparation time and so it is easier if the costume is made up and can be fitted, as that is most important, and I can then work on the garment in between fittings. I have found during my time working on 'Game of Thrones' that the best solution is for me to start the embroidery separately to the costume, creating a kind of motif that I can then apply to the costume and work on it further if needs be.

I use silk crêpeline as a base for embroidery. The reason for this is that it is very sheer and can be dyed to match the costume, so that when I stitch the embroidered motif onto the garment, the base fabric of the silk crêpeline becomes almost invisible.



There is not a right or wrong way to decorate or embroider; you just have to find the best solution to each particular situation. For me, by creating the initial stages of my embroidery on organza/silk crêpeline, it means I can be more ambitious with the work that I want to create and have less pressure on myself as I am not holding up the costume makers' process.

'Game of Thrones' is a fantasy rather than a specific period piece, so I am free to use any materials, stitches or style to suit the particular characters being portrayed and the world they inhabit. However, this still has to be a believable one to the audience so during my time embroidering for this show, I have been very lucky to be able to experiment and try out many different threads, beads and gemstones on the various characters for whom I have created designs.

I love using silk threads as they have a delicate lustre and there are some fantastic thread companies out there. I also use metallics, which can be more difficult to work with, and I will mix a metallic machine thread with a couple of different viscose threads to create some far more antique looking metal work embroidery. The threads I regularly use are Kreinik, Au Ver a Soie D'Alger, Thread Gatherers, Carons, Kacoonda, Gumnut, Weeks Dye Works and Threadworx. All these ranges bring something different.

For beading, I use tiny 2mm pearls which have minute holes - too big for even fine beading needles, so I use a piece of metal purl wire pulled straight then folded in half as the needle. I string the pearls onto a suitable thread and then couch the string down onto my design. I like Miyuki beads, Labradorite gemstones, small garnets and pyrite beads. I also use 2mm Swarovski round faceted crystals, although they have now discontinued many of the colours - very annoying!

I sometimes use sequins but it can be difficult to find more subtle, pearlised versions or metallics. I have used actual fish scales too, painted with pearlescent paint which you can cut to shape. Mesh wires have proven very useful. I also use many paints, glues and leather. I get through many pots of Thread Heaven thread conditioner and more recently, I have found a magnifying glass useful for threading some of the tiny pearls along with stronger and stronger glasses.



The designs you produce are incredibly intricate. How long does it take you to embroiderer a design?

When working on a production like 'Game of Thrones', I usually work for about four months, either a 5 or a 7 day week with each day being around 10 - 12 hours.

I will give an insight into a few designs that I created and give you an idea of the time it took me to make them.



For Sansa's wedding band embroidery, Michele Clapton really wanted to have the story of her life, such that it was to that point, embroidered on the band that wraps around the bodice of the dress. This band is given to Sansa by the Lannisters for the wedding so I imagine that Cersei has commissioned it and therefore, it would have a similar style to that on her own gowns and she would direct the nature of the story stitched into it. At the back waist, I started with Sansa's parentage, so there are Tully fish wrapped around Stark Direwolves. As you move round to the side waist, the Direwolf is tangling with the Lannister lion. At the centre front, the Lannister lion is ascending, wearing a Baratheon crown - a nod to Joffrey's supposed parentage. At the back neck, there is a Lion head stamped onto it, showing the Lannisters claiming ownership of Sansa.

The embroidery is mainly in golden hues but woven throughout the design are some pomegranates, introducing some Lannister red but also representing Sansa as a ripe fruit ready to be plucked. This piece took me fourteen days to complete.



For Daenerys' season three dragon-scale dresses, Michele wanted me to create three different versions of the dresses.

The first was less embellished, the final more developed, but they all had a dragon-scale texture starting quite subtly on the shoulder area and then growing gradually down the costume, becoming more pronounced as she and her dragons grow in strength. I experimented with various techniques, threads and beads. Michele really liked the North American smocking, with some stitching in between with metallic thread in a Lock stitch, which also had a scale-like feel.



The different versions of this dress took between three and seven days for each, depending on how much of the dress was covered with the various textured smocking and stitching.

For Margaery's wedding dress, Michele wanted quite a simple bias cut shape, soft and fluid, and the decoration, although using the Tyrell's rose motif, needed to be beautiful but not delicate.

It had to have a strong hard edge akin to the character's personality. For the decoration of this dress, it was important to get the right flow of the rose stems from the front bodice around the side waist and then trailing down into a cascade of roses.

The silver Czech glass spikes create quite strong, hard looking thorns. The main task for me for this decoration was making the many roses for the train at the back of the dress - not difficult but time-consuming. I think it took me fifteen days to complete the whole design.

Looking back at all the designs that I have created for 'Game of Thrones', it is difficult for me to pick a favourite piece, as each design poses a challenge. For each embroidery I work on, I am continually developing, experimenting and trying to achieve the elusive vision in my mind.

I am never completely happy with something I have just finished and always think how I could have improved it with more time, so I am always driven in the search of perfection in my work.





Watching 'Game of Thrones', you can see the costumes of characters such as Cersei, Margaery and Sansa as particularly rich and intricate.

There are subtle hints at a more modern approach with your use of dimensional forms (such as the Direwolf embroidery and the exquisite stumpwork insects incorporated onto the Quartheen costumes) but you can also see movement of your work in other directions with the Children of the Forest costumes. Do you feel that working on these costumes has allowed you to spread your wings a little more within the confines of what is a historical setting and allow you to show more of your range?

When 'Game of Thrones' was first being put together, the producers wanted to create something that although it is a fantasy, it should be a believable World, so it was approached as if it was a real period drama, something akin to a medieval setting. The designers were free to draw on elements from anywhere to suit each tribe or character as long as it fitted their situation, status or narrative story.

For a historical drama, there are usually documented references for you to draw on - in books, on the internet and in museums and you use all these to influence your designs but you don't have to recreate pinpoint accurate embroideries, as there wouldn't be time to do this. You are trying to create an impression of the style of work that is believable to the audience as belonging to the period you are portraying on screen and is suitable for the particular character's status or narrative story. With a fantasy like 'Game of Thrones', you have more freedom to create designs as you are not restricted to a specific period in time. This has given me the freedom to push the boundaries within my own work.



Each new season of the show allows me to develop some of the existing characters' designs (if they are not killed off!) and there is so much scope within the different worlds that inhabit the

show. There are always new characters being introduced who come from different tribes and cultures, so these lead to new designs to experiment on, develop and create. One such costume was an interesting textural embroidered piece that I worked on for season 4, for a character from a magical tribe called the Children of the Forest. They are a mysterious child-like, non-human race. When it came to their look, Michele Clapton really wanted them to look as if they were a part of the forest they inhabit and for their clothing to reflect that. The costumes couldn't look too much like garments, or the decoration look too stitched on; it had to really be a part of them.

The base of the costume was a body stocking painted to look like silver birch bark and over this was a sheer, web-like shift dress. I started by creating mossy textures on the shoulder area, drifting down across the dress. For this I used a moss matt from a scenic store, stretched out and stitched into with various threads such as chenilles, mohair, and fuzzy sparkly ones. I then worked on various stumpwork lichen, fungi and root-like twig pieces to add to the costume.

I really enjoyed working on this costume, as the style of it was a departure from some of the other costumes that I had created. In my mind, I don't think of this any differently, in regard to my creative approach, from something that may take the form of a more traditional embroidery. To me it is all stitching, embroidery, textile art - I just need to find the right materials and techniques to suit a particular piece.

I have never had a specific preference as to what style of embroidery that I incorporate within a costume design, creatively I enjoy them all. I don't pre-plan to the last stitch or bead, I allow the piece to develop as I work on it and due to the nature of time constraints for filming deadlines, I always have to be adaptable within my design.

There are some stitches and techniques I may like but would just take too long to achieve for film and TV projects. The most important thing for me in my costume embroidery work is to use the appropriate style that will help to portray a particular character, their narrative story or the world they inhabit.





We imagine that work on this series is all consuming but do you have time for developing your textile work outside this?

I have always wanted to be able to create my own personal work that I could exhibit in a gallery - ambitious work that can be viewed closely but at this moment, it is hard to find the time to do this. I have been planning my exhibition 'Seasons' for a couple of years now. The work that I have devised for this exhibition will be embroidery presented in a unique way with the use of mixed media but due to ever increasing offers of work in costume on TV/film productions, I have had to delay again and again. At the moment, I am working 24/7 on three productions at once until the end of the year and hopefully I will find some time next year, or the year after that. It will happen one day, I hope!

