

A day in the life of an...

Photos: Dillon Blyden



...ecclesiastical designer

by Hilary Whitney



'One of the things I enjoy most is that although my designs are contemporary, they are timeless and will be used many years from now'

POLLY Meynell is fascinated by silk. "I'm convinced it's a legacy from snuggling up to the silk scarves my mother used to wear when I was a baby. I always knew it was really special — it's the queen of fabrics." In the final year of her degree in textile design, Meynell decided to specialise in silk and discovered that because it was so expensive it was originally used almost exclusively for religious vestments. "Then it occurred to me that designing ecclesiastical textiles would be a fantastic opportunity to create beautiful and enduring pieces of work, using this sumptuous cloth."

When Meynell left university, she worked for a short time as an assistant designer for Watts, the ecclesiastical furnishers in Westminster. Eventually she decided to realise her ambition of working for herself and now, at 26, is the youngest ecclesiastical designer in Britain.

"I've always been far more interested in costume than fashion. I love clothes, but fashion design is too ephemeral for my taste. One of the things I enjoy most about my work is that although my designs are contemporary, they are timeless and will be used many years from now. It's also tremendously exciting to have 2,000 years of symbolism to draw on."

Meynell's workshop is in the picturesque village of Westhampnett, three miles east of Chichester, one of the largest dioceses in the country. Like any freelancer, Meynell has to drum up business. "I did a mail shot to parishes all over southern England and that generated most of my early work. I had a very auspicious start. My first commission was from the Drapers Company in the City who asked me to design a celebration cope [large cloak], mitre [headdress worn by archbishops and bishops] and stole [long scarf-like vestment worn around the neck] for the then new Bishop of London."

Some of her recent designs have included a Trinity chasuble [sleeveless vestment worn by a priest when celebrating the Eucharist] for Chichester Cathedral, an altar frontal, a chasuble and four stoles for St Mary's, Horsham, and 18 seasonal banners for St Albans Church, Crawley.

Once Meynell receives a commission, she will go to the church on a site visit. "I try to get a feel of the place. The vicar and I will talk about how we envisage the project and I'll have a careful look at the other vestments to ensure there's a sense of continuity. It's very important that the pieces I design harmonise with the buildings that will house them. I take photographs and then I'll go away and come up with a few design ideas that I'll discuss with the vicar to make sure I'm on the right track. All my

sketches are done by hand as I wouldn't be happy designing on a computer."

Meynell prides herself on using the highest-quality fabrics, which can cost as much as £150 a metre, and is tenacious about finding exactly what she wants. "I use various fabric suppliers in France and Belgium and the best cloth of gold — which costs around £300 a metre — comes from India. If I want a specific sort of damask or a certain colour I have to go to a particular supplier. For instance, I know of only one company that supplies good-quality purple damask."

The final design is drawn on tracing paper for the embroiderer; it ends up looking like a piece of Braille because there are raised points all over the drawing where it has been pricked through with a needle. Meynell doesn't do much of the embroidery herself. "I do very basic restoration embroidery but my new designs are very exacting, so I use highly accomplished embroiderers who know what I want to achieve. Once a design has been approved, the embroiderer and I will go through every point, discussing the fabric and the colours I wish to use. It's a collaborative process, so I have to have absolute trust in her. The degree of delegation can be nerve-racking."

Once everything has been completed, Meynell is usually invited to a service of dedication. "I will often hold the vestment while it's being blessed and I can't help but feel terribly proud. It's so satisfying to work with such beautiful materials and produce something so enduring that actually has a purpose."

Meynell's dream commission would be to design for the next Archbishop of Canterbury. "That doesn't mean to say I don't get great satisfaction designing for small parish churches. I'm currently working on four altar frontals for an exquisite little 12th century church hidden away in the middle of a wood in Sussex. I'm using a botanical theme and each season will be represented by a different plant or flower in a contrasting colour. It's an absolute joy to do."

Pros & cons

PROS

- The freedom of being self-employed
- Working in some of England's finest buildings
- Creating work you are genuinely proud of

CONS

- Only having five days holiday a year
- Knowing that everything stops if you take time off
- Sore fingers