

Many of us have had the experience of picking up something in a shop – a birthday card, maybe, or a pair of earrings – and thinking, ‘I could have made this, if only I had the time’.

Now it seems more and more women are making that time, snatching precious hours from busy lives to delve into their creative sides.

Taking a course guarantees the ‘me time’ necessary to satisfy that creative urge, as I found when I cleared my diary for two days to learn how to make jewellery. Not only did I have a ring and choker to show for my hard graft, but I was surprised to find that I felt as relaxed and revitalised as if I’d been on holiday.

From art classes to textile design, women are rediscovering the pleasure of using talents barely exercised since the days of *Blue Peter*. West Dean College in Sussex runs courses in everything from gardening and pottery to blacksmithing. Of 5,000 people taking their courses last year, 72 per cent were women. Birkbeck College in London reports similar figures, with a 69 per cent female attendance on their creative writing courses, and women making up a staggering 90 per cent of the class in performance studies.

Melanie Howard of the Future Foundation puts this down to women being more concerned with self-fulfilment than we used to be. In a recent survey for the think tank, a third said they wanted to be more

creative. ‘As a consumer society we have been through the stage when we thought buying power was the route to fulfilment,’ she says. ‘Now we’re spending increasing amounts of time and money on doing and making things.’

And what could be a better antidote to spending all day in front of a computer than crafting something with your own hands?

If you’ve ever dreamed of turning your hand to something creative, now’s the time.

From interiors to garden design, a little imagination can go a long way.

By Jane Hughes.

Photographs

Polly Farquharson



Here's one I made earlier

INTERIOR DESIGN

LUCY HORN, 33, is an advertising executive and lives in Bath with her husband, Richard, and their son, Zac, who is nearly two. She took a 10-week evening course in interior design

I've always had a strong creative streak, but during my twenties my job was too hectic and all-consuming to make room for it. I'd gone into advertising aged 19, and soon became more interested in spending money than in the painting and drawing I'd previously found therapeutic.

It wasn't until I hit 30 that I became less materialistic and realised I was frustrated at the lack of creativity in my life. Once I started the design course, it felt as if I was feeding a part of my soul that had been neglected for years. It was so thrilling and absorbing that I'm determined to continue studying.

We downsized to Bath from London two years ago and I got a real kick out of using vivid colours to do up our 1930s house. I wanted to make it quite arty and funky and I spent every night at the top of a ladder, almost up until Zac's birth.

I knew I wanted to learn more, and when I heard about the interior design course at Bath

University I decided to seize the moment. I was working very hard, three days a week, and also putting a lot into being a mum. In a way, the course was an escape from all that responsibility. But I always came away feeling energised towards every aspect of my life.

interiors, from flooring and fabrics to wallpaper and windows. Sheila advised us to avoid magnolia, be experimental and to paint ceilings the same colour as the walls to avoid the eye being drawn upwards. One week we looked at how to create lighting that people don't even notice, by getting away from a central source and using uplighters, downlighters and lamps to create mood. It inspired me to go home and completely redo my own lighting – a very useful way to build up a database of suppliers! The session studying colour psychology was also fascinating.

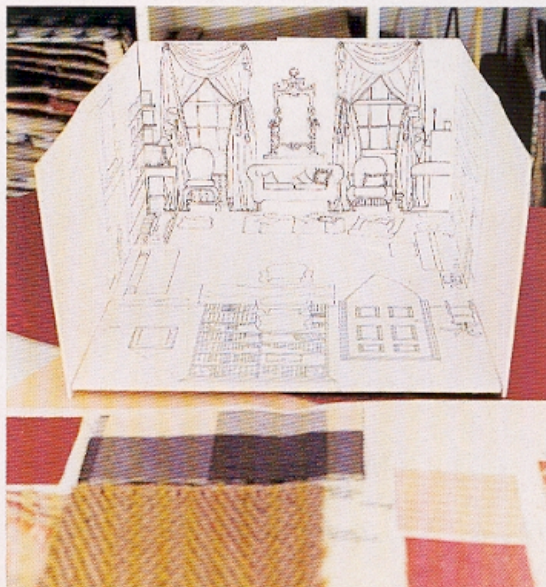
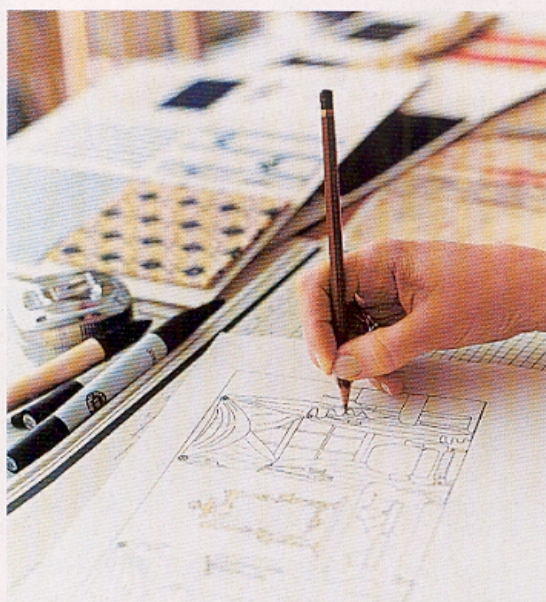
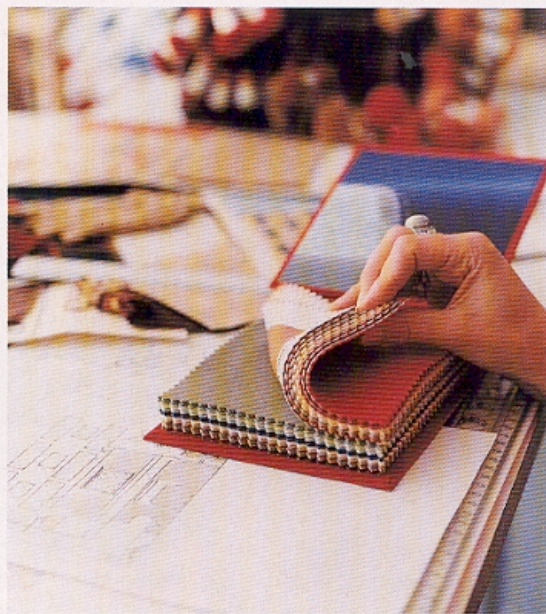
Most of the women on the course were older than me but we had a lot of fun working in teams to design a room to a fantasy client's specifications. It became quite difficult when the 'client' chose something I really hated! In the last class, we went to Sheila's studio and were all able to delve into her huge collection of samples to put

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Sheila Dunlop, the tutor, was brilliant and made me realise just how much there was to learn. We covered the basics of both traditional and contemporary

different looks together. Now I'm completely hooked – I have heaps of books and an interest that draws me into conversations with all kinds of people. I'm even setting up my own business – it's in the early stages at the moment. *The 10-week evening course in interior design at Bath University runs from October 7th and costs £68. Call (01225) 826552 for more details. Sheila Dunlop also runs short courses from her studio in Bath. Call (01225) 421657 for more information.*



ABOVE: Lucy makes her mark. RIGHT, FROM TOP: samples and swatches; the interior design course re-introduced Lucy to her hobby of drawing; a model for one of her design schemes

JEWELLERY MAKING

JANE HUGHES, 38, is a freelance journalist living in London. She recently took a two-day course in silver jewellery making

Sitting at a workbench strewn with tools in a large, sun-filled studio, I began to rediscover the buzz of making things. The last time I was anywhere near a circular file or desk clamp was at school, where I made a very strange Perspex fish and a leaf-shaped copper pendant that caught on everything! Yet here I was, filing and sanding and polishing, and realising that I was really enjoying myself.

I'd seen jewellery 'designer makers' in action at open studio events, so when I heard that Cockpit Arts - a group of workshops in Clerkenwell, East London - was offering courses

in jewellery making run by one of its designers, I couldn't resist. The idea of spending two Saturdays learning how to turn the ideas in my head into one-off silver designs seemed luxurious - a complete contrast to my usual weekend 'to do' list.

While my job is creative, it's still work, so the chance to conjure up ideas for fun proved surprisingly relaxing. The atmosphere was very friendly - I found myself breaking off from a particularly intricate bit of filing to compare broken nails with the other three women in the group, and hunting the floor for tiny stones that had jumped out of

someone's fingers during some fiddly inlaying.

Our tutor was Kelvin Birk, whose strikingly modern silver pieces are often inlaid not only with stones but with grainy bits of Portland cement. As soon as we arrived, he had us sketching ideas for a ring with a decorative cut-out centre that we would make during the day. It was a brilliantly practical way of introducing us to techniques we would use later - trying not to break tiny saw blades when cutting silver sheets, filing sharp metal edges rather than finger nails and hammering the sheet of silver into a circular ring. At first, I was

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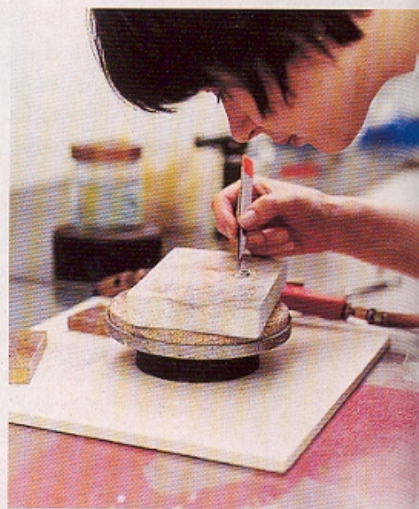


rather alarmed at the size of the flame used for soldering but soon I began to enjoy the moment when the tiny scraps of solder would suddenly melt and - hopefully - flow in the right direction. By the second day, I was making a choker almost entirely by soldering sections of silver wire together.

Realising I needed a stone, I rushed off to a jeweller Kelvin recommended in nearby Hatton Garden. It was a real revelation - there were trays of hundreds of lovely gemstones in all shapes and sizes, costing anything from £2 to several hundred. I settled for a £6 amethyst.

I think all of us on the course surprised each other at what we were able to create. I've never felt the same sense of satisfaction when buying something.

Two-day beginner and intermediate jewellery-making courses run by Kelvin Birk cost £65, plus £20 for materials. Contact Cockpit Arts, London, (020) 7419 1959, or e-mail info@cockpitarts.com.



LEFT: Jane wearing one of her own designs. FROM TOP: in action on her two-day jewellery design course; the fruits of her labour

GARDEN DESIGN

RUTH DAZELEY, 37, is a theatre nurse. She is divorced and lives with her two young children in Cambridge. She has just completed a one-year part-time garden design course



Being out in the fresh air and working with the soil is such a complete contrast to the clinical setting of my nursing job - I love getting my hands dirty. I've gardened since I was a child, and find the constant cycle of renewal phenomenally optimistic.

After my divorce I wanted to put aside time to do something that would bring me personal fulfilment. Knowing my interest in gardening, friends were already asking for help with landscaping and, at times, I felt a bit out of my depth so I enrolled for a



Ruth gets back to nature. LEFT: hitting the books; Ruth gets her hands dirty; illustration is all part of the course

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course at The College of West Anglia that would give me the knowledge to design a garden.

I work three days a week so I can spend time with my son who has special educational needs, so it was a big commitment to find another day for the course, plus an additional 10 hours for home study. I've spent many evenings hunched over my drawing board learning about the profiles of around 80 different plants, but I've enjoyed every minute.

The course covered garden design from the Middle Ages to the 21st century. We had a wonderful group - 11 women of all ages and backgrounds, from a portrait painter to a pharmacist. We were taught how to illustrate plans with pen, ink and watercolour, and learning about walls, drains and fencing was also new territory for me. I felt hugely empowered by the body of knowledge I built up.

Everyone had distinctive drawing styles and the tutor, Jocelyn Hallinan, worked with us to develop these individually. I couldn't believe how much my

drawing skills improved. Sitting at a blank sheet of paper can be scary, but I love the feeling when the ideas start to flow.

We each had to develop paper designs for a 21st-century garden on two budgets (one with an organic influence), a concept for our own garden and a submission to the East of England Show. Low maintenance has emerged as my speciality. I'm planning a design for my parents' house, including a *potager* (ornamental vegetable garden), prairie-style planting

and space for the children to have their own bit of earth.

I'm very excited about how the work I'm doing for friends is mushrooming. I've also made lovely friends on the course. We go out socially and visit gardens, and we all hope to go on to do the advanced level next year.

The one-year intermediate course in garden design at The College of West Anglia, Milton, Cambridge, starts in September. The course costs £314, with a discount for those on lower incomes. Call (01223) 860701.



BACK TO SCHOOL?

Birkbeck College, part of the University of London, runs courses and weekend events in creative writing, contemporary theatre and performance studies. Call (020) 7631 6000, or log on to bbk.ac.uk

The Arvon Foundation offers four-and-a-half-day writing courses covering poetry, fiction, stage drama

and television and radio. Call (01409) 231338, or visit arvonfoundation.org

West Dean College in Chichester runs courses on gardening, photography, pottery, sculpture and music. Call (01243) 811301, or visit westdean.org.uk

Light & Land offer photographic holidays to

improve your wildlife and landscape shots, with backdrops such as Iceland, Sri Lanka and the Rockies. Call (01737) 768723, or log on to lightandland.co.uk

Hope End in Herefordshire holds one-day courses in, amongst others, basket making, silversmithing and flower arranging. Call (01531) 633122