

Inspired by a passion for six centuries of European costume.....

Serena Partridge creates a sense of quintessential Englishness and eccentricity.

I remember very well the first time that I saw Serena Partridge's work, I was rushing to work (at that time De Montfort University), when my eye was caught by a new exhibition in the window of the City Gallery, Leicester. I was running late (an endless bad habit of mine!) and yet despite this I was forced to stop and take a better look. What I saw was a glass cabinet about the size of a large fish tank, inside of which was a small mannequin beautifully bedecked in an 18th century style blue brocaded silk dress complete with vastly extending panniers and a fabulous silky white wig of equally ginormous proportions. From my years studying fashion and textile history I had seen 18th century fashion dolls (The Costume Museum in Bath has a wonderful example), these items weren't for children but were used as examples of the latest French court fashions to send to other countries and courts – a sort of three dimensional fashion illustration. However, I knew that it wasn't one of those, for a start there isn't a curator on the planet who would allow a rare 18th century item to be in such a well lit situation and secondly, this looked different, it looked quirky, there was an element of whimsy. I could see through the window that there were other items that looked equally intriguing and beautiful but first I had to go to work.

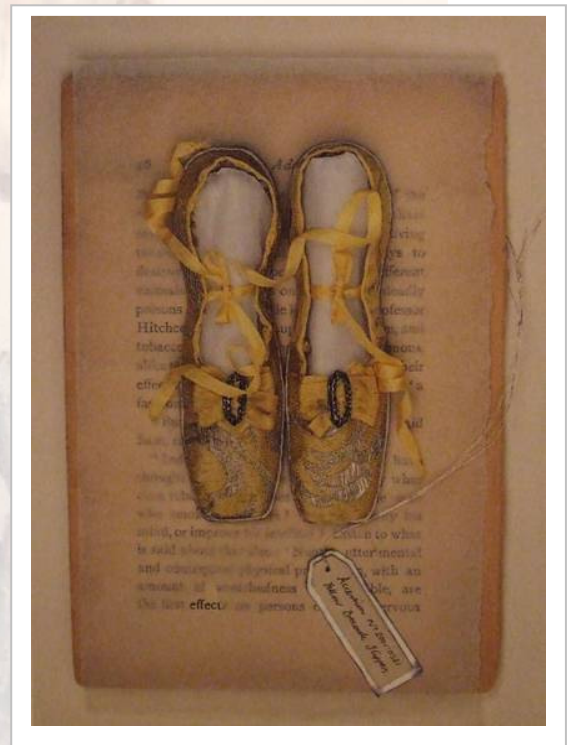


The exhibition was called Cabinets of Curiosity and it was Serena's first solo show with a national tour. After Leicester it travelled to Kilmarnock, Denbighshire, Lancashire, Canterbury, Shetland and Dumfriesshire. The items within have been described by the curator Mark Prest as 'curios that are peculiarly English in origin and eccentricity' (2001) and by renowned writer and curator Mary Schoeser as 'these magical little items' (2001). Serena designs and makes tiny decorative artefacts inspired by convoluted fashions and fripperies from past centuries. Miniature shoes, gloves, wigs, purses, cakes and costumes are displayed in frames and glass cases complete with attached 'museum' labels, which detail fictional accession numbers and imagined histories or provenances. Some of the items even have paper and packaging as if they had just been opened by a curator in the stores of a museum for temporary display to a visitor. However, these items are comments on the frivolity and excesses of past fashions, and are not intended to be exact historical representations of any specific period, more of an amalgamation of many, which then becomes unique to her alone. The objects play with the past, and with the viewer, as you consider whether the item that you are looking at which is lovingly cased or framed is an actual object from the past or a part of a fairytale fantasy. For Mark Prest, the work reflects the imagination within Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels (1726) and comparisons with specific characters such as the mesmerising Miss Havisham from Charles Dicken's novel Great Expectations (1861). It is interesting to note that these are examples of what the viewer brings to the objects and not the original inspiration of the artist herself.

One of the most notable things about the work of Serena's is the eclectic mix of materials and techniques. She delights in the reuse of materials, the transformation of old kid gloves into 'Venetian' Boots, silk slips into delicate slippers, a disintegrating wedding veil that becomes the cream filling of a three tiered cherry Gateau. Part of this appeal is the sense of authenticity that using vintage materials gives to her creations, it is also the intrinsic quality of vintage items, they often have finer properties and even the spots caused by aging (foxing) all lend a distinctive character to the final work. However, of equal importance for Serena are the stories behind the materials that she uses, her Grandmother's silk slip that was made into numerous slippers, or the scraps of fabric that she was given by a curator in thanks for all her help in the stores at a museum. Even when she doesn't know the actual people who originally owned the items themselves she still likes to think about who would have owned them and imagine what they were like and how the items became as they are.



The importance of Serena's own past upon her work has been astutely noted by the writer, curator and historian Mary Schoeser, who describes Serena's 'informal' training as beginning from the age of seven when she lived on a Devonshire farm. She was taught to knit by her paternal Grandmother, had a mother who was 'WI-ish' (what a great phrase!) and a member of the West Country Embroideries, Serena also discovered that she had a maternal Great Grandmother who had been a professional dressmaker – a fact that Schoeser suggests may be evident in her 'experimentation with pattern cutting' (2001). Along with her elder sister she was encouraged to enter a wide variety of competitions (e.g soft toys, vegetable animals and 'miniature' gardens) in the local country fairs. These are all elements that have given rise to 'her eye for detail and confident creativity' (Schoeser, 2001).



New work can currently be seen in the Fairytales and Urban Myths Exhibition at the Millennium Galleries, Sheffield (which is open until 23 April 2006). Serena has created the stockings that went with the infamous 'Red Shoes' whose wearer could not stop dancing and of course Cinderella's Shoes among other items. It is not surprising that Serena's work should be considered for such a themed exhibition, as when gazing at Serena's work I am always reminded of the fairytale 'The Elves and the Shoemaker'. For those of you who do not know this is a charmingly little tale of an elderly and impoverished shoemaker and his wife who are secretly helped to prosperity by two small elves and in payment the Shoemaker and his wife make them each a pair of tiny shoes and a complete set of clothes down to a hat with feather. This particular correlation has been noted by others, including her tutors at Herefordshire College of Art & Design who playfully claimed that she must have had 'little helpers' in order to create the incredible amounts of work that she did for each project.



In Serena's work the past and present mix delightfully. The intricacy of the work will leave you spellbound and whatever it reminds you of from Marie Antoinette to Miss Havisham I promise that you will enjoy it.

If you are interested in Serena's work or would like to know more, please contact me at ruth@sheer-sumptuousity.co.uk

