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## Casting new light on old skills

[Karen Emslie](#)

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The current exhibition at the Bonhoga Gallery sees one of Shetland's oldest and most cherished textiles traditions, fine lace knitting, fused with 21st century technology.



The show entitled *Mirrie Lace*, is part of the ongoing public art project co-ordinated by Shetland Arts in the run up to the opening of Mareel. Projections made by directing light through knitted lace pieces will become part of permanent light installations at the new venue.

*Mirrie Lace* gives the public an opportunity to see work in progress. The project has involved 21 local knitters who have been working with artists Nayan Kulkarni and Roxane Permar since July 2009. A selection of the projections is on show alongside many of the original pieces of lace.

The group spans generations and *Mirrie Lace* connects both tradition with technology and older with younger knitters. Roxane believes that the collaboration between artists and knitters has benefited everyone involved and that it was natural for the local knitters to try new ways of working.

"Shetland knitters have long been innovative, in part driven by the changing markets and the need to keep satisfying the changes in fashion," she explains.

The knitters have tried out new techniques and knitted with wool and more unusual materials, including gut and wire, to produce small pieces of lace. Light is then projected through the lace to create large, colourful, patterned images.

The specially created projection system uses LED lights and was designed and produced by Nayan and lighting engineer Duncan Turner.

The lace pieces were developed through a series of group sessions with the artists called *Lace Labs*. The *Lace Labs* were held in several places across Shetland, including Vaxter, Voe, Whiteness, Tingwall and Lerwick.

At the labs the knitters exchanged ideas and skills. They were then able to look at their lace work through a prototype light projector that simulates the lights which will be used in Mareel.

This gave them a chance to see how different patterns and materials appeared when projected. To see what worked well and what didn't. The process led to new experiences and some surprises, as Roxane explains.

"I have been very excited by the positive, open and experimental approach the knitters have taken. Some who said they could only knit with wool, for example, have knitted with a wide range of materials with stunning results."

Helen Robertson is taking part in the project; she has knitted since she was a young girl and is used to experimenting with new ways of working. She used wire to create knitted lampshades for the Shetland Museum & Archives' Hay's Dock restaurant. But *Mirrie Lace* has had another effect.

"When a project like this is organised it brings together the community of knitters, that doesn't happen very often. It happened when *Tête-à-tête* Opera came to Shetland [*A Shetland Odyssey*, 2005], but the Mareel project has taken this to a whole new level. To have so many knitters together in one room was very exciting," She says.

Seeing the lace projected in the Bonhoga Gallery gives an impression of how the finished work will look in Mareel. The projections will appear inside and outside of the building. Changing light and lace patterns will wash across parts of the architecture (and people) in and around the new venue.

According to Roxane, "it will illuminate the threshold, pools of light and lace will be directed on to the pavement as you approach the building entrance. Inside there will be feature walls as well as intimate spaces where the works appear."

Kathy Hubbard, arts development manager at Shetland Arts, says that *Mirrie Lace* had been developed by the artists to directly involve the wider community.

The use of light, such an important part of life in Shetland, is central to the project but so is the idea of drawing on the islands' textiles heritage whilst embracing new ideas.



"Celebrating Shetland's traditional skills and artistry whilst re-interpreting them in a contemporary context is something we have been promoting since we started the indigenous craft development project in 2002; this project complements and further develops that work," Kathy says..

She believes that Mareel provides both a "terrific" opportunity for public art, and a chance to show Shetland knitter's skills to a wide audience, "We're very proud and pleased that their work will be seen by people visiting Mareel for years to come."

The *Mirrie Lace* knitters are Kathleen Anderson, Angela Irvine, Minnie Mouatt, Anne Eunson, Ina Irvine, Helen Robertson, Bab Fraser, Wilma Johnson, Jan Sawford, Verinia Fraser, Elizabeth Johnston, Christine Smith, Laura Friedlander, Mary Kay, Jessica Smith, Catherine A. Gibb, Pearl Keith, Zena Thomson, Janette Henry, Joan Manson and Gwen Williamson

*Mirrie Lace* runs at The Bonhoga Gallery until 1 August.

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