

# Career story: Breaking career barriers

This career story features a couture dress maker who pursued her passion for creating 3D caricature fabric characters. The account is a great resource for understanding the importance of doing what you love. When reading the account, reflect on what you have learned in your degree and how this may position you to follow your passion.

At the back of this resource, you will find more information as well as sample questions on learning from biographies and career stories.

## Louise's story

U.K-born and based Louise Evans grew up in Wrexham, Wales, surrounded by textiles. She was raised in a household filled with people making things, whether it was her mother and grandmother sewing clothing, knitting and making trinkets for local fairs, or her father who worked as a joiner.

Naturally, she found herself studying textiles and fashion in high school and then working as a couture dressmaker. Later, Louise decided to pursue a passion of her own, establishing herself as the '[Felt Mistress](#)' by making 3D caricature fabric characters for commercial and pop culture art. Louise made characters for the Oxford branch of the department store, Selfridges, for the Christmas display in 2010.

She also exhibited in the UK and internationally, collaborating with various artists including Jon Burgerman, Jon Knox, Pete Fowler and Ben Newman. She travelled with partner and fellow illustrator [Jonathan Edwards](#), in 2011 to Nara, Japan, for a six-week artist residency and contributed to the Headspace arts festival in Osaka.

We asked Louise to share how she pursued and persevered in forging a career as a contemporary artist.

## Pursuing your interests

During her years as a dressmaker, Louise never stopped being creative. She often used the illustrated characters her artist friends had drawn on Christmas cards to create 3D fabric models as gifts. But it wasn't until 2008, when she made 3D versions of character designs Jonathan had done for a clothing company that things changed. The models were bought by the clothing company as part of the product display. Her work was also discovered by former [The Fall](#) band member Brix Smith-Start, who wanted models for her own fashion clothing line. From there, word spread about Louise's unique work.

Gradually, her textile characters developed into a full-time occupation. Alongside commissions, Louise often worked with Jonathan to design and create characters, quite like an author writing a story. She mentions that the two of them like to take inspiration from their surroundings and observations of people around town.

*You never know when you are going to spot something or someone that may spark an idea. Snippets of overheard conversations in shops, on train journeys and people talking loudly on their phones (even though sometimes annoying) are entertaining, and sometimes if you can't see the person talking it's great to imagine what they look like.*

For Louise, the process of creating the textile models begins not at cutting out the pattern, but at developing a full understanding of the character. Much like a writer, she gives life to the illustrations, asking herself "what music they listen to, what they like, what they eat [and] do and where they hang out".

An individual's choice of clothing says a lot about who they are and how they want to be perceived. As Louise says, "If I don't know them, how do I know what to dress them in?" From here, the creations develop "a life of their own" and this helps her create eccentric, memorable characters.

## Career motivation

Louise mentions that, without being honest with herself, she would never have found her calling. After years of working to support herself, she learned the importance of having passion for her work.

Louise enjoyed being a dressmaker and making custom wedding dresses, but found she didn't like other aspects of her occupation.

*Life's too short to be doing something that you've got a little bit of interest in, but not the whole picture. Now, I am more selfish with what I want to do. Over the last few years, I've been quite direct about refusing work, only taking on what I want and luckily, because I've had support from John, I've been able to do that. I think that's why this business took off.*

Louise lets her interest and enjoyment in textiles guide her career. She refuses to take shortcuts or adopt processes that make production easier, as that would "spoil the fun" for her.

*I didn't want to do anything that would perhaps make it easier to do but effectively take out the middle section, the actual bit that I found enjoyable. I prefer the sewing, the flat-pattern cutting; I want to be able to construct it from a flat piece of paper.*

Even for commercial commissions, where her creations were to be photographed and weren't required to be sewn and stuffed completely, Louise did not compromise her methods.

*I didn't want it to just be about the end product. I still made each part, which sounds crazy and unnecessary, but it is still important to me. Otherwise, I'm not doing the job I set out to do.*

## Moving forward with perseverance

Louise admits that being the 'Felt Mistress' has its struggles sometimes, as her work is fairly rare and there was no specific career path to follow. In 2015, only 1000 people in Wrexham—a large town of approximately 61,603 people—were employed in the arts and entertainment sector, excluding artists who were self-employed. Louise mentions the lack of fellow artists in Wrexham and how this made it harder to socialise, though she says that it's nice to be able to choose when to go out and when to step into a quieter life to make things.

Louise also talks about a degree of stigma around textiles being part of the visual art industry, explaining that it can be a struggle to be seen as a contemporary artist and not someone who just makes crafts. Despite the challenges in placing textile art within the visual art industry, she is passionate about her work, staying true to her desire to make her art in the way she finds enjoyable.

*I find that people in the UK are a little more reluctant to accept these things. They think toys are things children have and sewing is what a grandmother does. It's tricky for people to just take it for what it is - just enjoy it as a piece.*

But the stigma aside, Louise says that all the people who have been in contact with her work have enjoyed it. Louise loves making the characters and hopes to be able to branch out into digital animation with interactive elements. One of her recent commissions was for the character of 'John Evans,' who starred alongside [Super Furry Animals](#) lead singer Gruff Rhys in his 2014 film [American Interior](#). The John Evans character survived months of filming and travelling from place to place. It was a delight for Louise to get back her model when he needed repairs, and to find him carrying grass or sand from different filming locations.

By having a clear mission, being steadfast and uncompromising, Louise was able to convert her unique skills into a fulfilling art career.



Image 1. Felt Mistress original. Source: Felt Mistress



Image 2. Felt Mistress original. Source: Felt Mistress, photography by Omer Knaz

## Make it count!

For more information about design visit the [Australian Design Alliance](#) and the [Design Institute of Australia](#).

Louise emphasised that having a clear mission was essential to her success. What is your mission? If you're not sure, complete the resource '[What is your mission](#)' and create a career goal or aspirations statement. Add this to your CV.



Image 3. Felt Mistress original. Source: Felt Mistress,

## Learning from biographies and career stories

### *What do you see when you meet a professional?*

Most of the time, we see only the role someone holds now. It is likely, however, that the person has experienced a career with lots of twists and turns.

Get the most out of reading career stories or biographies by asking yourself some of the questions to the right.

1. What do you expect you will have to learn during your career?
2. What might you need to do in order to keep learning?
3. What differences, common issues, and links can you make to your own career journey?
4. Identify and reflect on key decision points in your personal and professional development, and then consider:
  - a. Who played a significant role at these times?
  - b. To whom did you go to for advice?
  - c. What can you put in place for the next time you face a major decision?
5. Biographical accounts raise a number of challenges and opportunities. These include innovative collaborations, work within other sectors, diverse locations, and different modes of work. Look for examples of these in your discipline and reflect on what might be of interest to you:
  - a. What interests you, and what can you do to make this a reality?
  - b. What challenges do you foresee, and how will you prepare for these?
6. Biographical accounts often tell us something about the interests, passions, and motivations of the people involved. Can you think of ways to combine your interests and your future work?
7. What would you like to achieve as a professional?

This resource was developed by Sarah Richardson, Philip MacKinnon, Marian Mahat, Lisa Schmidt and Dawn Bennett.