

Fibre Spectrum

By Sue Schneider

Real souvenirs aren't "Made in China". And when you visit a place as beautiful as Nelson, at the top of New Zealand's South Island, you want something special.

That's a lesson learned over the past 20 years by a cooperative of fibre artists who own and operated Fibre Spectrum in downtown Nelson.

Local craftswomen use the ancient techniques of dyeing, spinning and weaving to transform the myriad fleeces of New Zealand sheep into works of art.

The Nelson City motto challenges locals and visitors to "Live the Day", and there does seem to be something here that encourages creativity. Artists of all kinds abound - painters, sculptors, photographers, musicians - inspired by the bright sun, green mountains and playful Tasman Bay.

While the Fibre Spectrum artists may not seem typical — most are mothers and grandmothers creating their work around busy families and careers — they are no less inspired.

Fibre Spectrum feels like a cross between a boutique and a warm, welcoming home. Racks of handcrafted sweaters, shawls and scarves, bins of handspun yarn and artful tableaux of hats and slippers invite shoppers to reach out a hand.

One touch makes you realize this is not the wool of olden days. In place of scratchy, utilitarian garments you find colourful and imaginative items both useful and artistic.

New Zealand wool, alpaca, silk and possum fibre are combined in a rainbow of colours and variety of textures and styles.

Most of the items are unique in style and substance.

"Given the same materials, each of us will create something very different," explains member Joanne.

In the 1980s, a weaving supply shop occupied the space at 280 Trafalgar Street near the steps of the Cathedral. Several local weavers sold their own creations there, including Jackie Archer. *"In 1987 we learned the owner was giving up and we thought what a shame"* remembers Jackie.

"We could run a shop, we thought, but can we find enough people? We thought we'd need at least ten."

They found more than that, and after a few meetings, 12 weavers committed to the new fibre artists' cooperative, each working in the shop for a half-day per week.

Twenty years later, 3 of the original members are still guiding the group.

"It's no secret, really," says Jackie. *"Our group thrives because, from the beginning, we were prepared to share responsibility, be flexible-minded and respectful of each others opinions."*

Weaving was very popular at the time, partly because of a course taught at the local polytechnic. *"We were all weavers,"* recalls Georgina. *"But we decided to call it 'Fibre Spectrum' because we didn't want to limit ourselves."*

That farsightedness has stayed with the group, and served them well. Over the years they have responded to their customer base, changing with the times and styles of fashion.

"At first it was all about natural colours," remembers Mary. *"Then we began to hear people say how much they liked our bright colours."*

Keeping the spirit of the simple crafts is important to them. Knowing that their ancestors performed the same tasks of spinning, weaving and knitting by candlelight is at the very heart of Fibre Spectrum.

A long debate took place over the idea of buying a system to process bank cards. “*We got by,*” remembers Jackie. “*People could always go down the street to the ATM to get cash. Now we’re very glad we updated, but we still have the old manual credit card machine in case the power goes out*”.

In time, the group expanded the shop from the small front room they occupied. “*We were worried at first that we wouldn’t be able to fill up the space,*” remembers Joanne, “*but that really wasn’t a problem for long*”.

As word spread, non-member artists from the Nelson area began to bring in pieces to sell. In time, knitters began to come in and then felting of wool became popular.

Through the years, the fibre artists got ideas from each other and from their customers, expanding on their technical and creative skills, treading the line between the joy of artistic expression and the necessity of making money from their craft.

“*We began the business during an economic downturn,*” says Jackie, “*and wondered if we’d still be here in three months, let alone 20 years.*”

Each woman contributes her own business talent - keeping the accounts, purchasing supplies, designing displays — and attends monthly meetings where they talk business and socialise.

The women have developed their own unique way of communicating, and behind the counter, where each member sits for her half-day stint as saleswoman, there is a simple book that may be the true secret to their success.

“*We take the time to make notes in the book,*” explains Joanne, “*passing along customer comments and feedback on our work. If there’s something really important, we’ll ring each other.*”

Customer contact is one of the most valuable rewards of the cooperative, say members. “*I used to send my pieces off to Queenstown and other places for sale,*” recalls Georgina. “*It is so much better to sell right here, meeting our customers and finding out what they like.*”

There is also no economic “middle man” between artist and customer, and members agree that both groups benefit - customers get a better bargain and artists receive more for their efforts.

As saleswomen, Fibre Spectrum members are not only committed, but creative. Jackie recalls the time a visitor was disturbed over the fate of the sheep. “*I explained that the wool is cut from the sheep and it isn’t harmed,*” she says. “*But he didn’t believe me, so I demonstrated, miming how you grab the sheep and hold it against your legs and cut the wool off in strips.*”

Many times, customers buying gifts request that an item be modelled. If the saleswoman on duty isn’t of suitable size, they’ve been known to bring over a waitress from the pub next door.

Joanne recalls a tour bus company that had a local stop overnight, but outside regular shop hours. “*I’d run over with my Morris Minor,*” she explains, “*and pick up a load of them and bring them down and open the shop.*”

While most of their customers are visitors to Nelson, fully half of those are fellow New Zealanders on holiday from other parts of the country, according to the group’s records. The women are understandably proud that many return year after year and spread the word about Fibre Spectrum. “*We’ve even had Americans come in with recommendations from friends who have visited. That makes us feel pretty good,*” says Jackie.