

Crafts Council / Education

Craft Journey

Millie Ashdown / Exhibition Builder



Millie Ashdown. All photos courtesy of the artist.

What I do

I work for a company that builds scenery for the entertainment industry, focusing mostly on exhibitions. I'm the CNC machinist, which means that I run and programme a CNC machine.

As a machinist the bulk of my work involves cutting scenery for the fabricators to piece together and build, however there are some jobs that are CNC-specific and need more precise machining to be completed. One example is when a job will require signage with a lot of text on it, another example is when a job requires a 3D texture and we mill the exact texture into the material.

Jobs in exhibition fabrication

In my company there are many jobs to choose from; you can become a CNC machinist, programmer, carpenter, metal worker, painter, production manager or draftsman. With all of these jobs you aren't limited to just working in the scenery-building industry, you can explore other areas outside the art sector such as domestic work. As a CNC machinist you can also look at other areas of machining, like engineering, and other machines such as plasma/ laser cutters, knife cutting, water jet, manual machining, and 5 axis machining.



Millie Ashdown

Why craft?

I've always had a love for art, theatre and film but I originally wanted to be an architect or design engineer. When applying for universities I took a trip to the Harry Potter studios in Watford, and while walking around I fell in love with the idea of scenery and backstage. It was a pure moment of "this is exactly what I want to do and where I should be". Working in the craft sector fills all of me with joy, it satisfies my need to be creative while also challenging the intellectual part of me that enjoys working through complex problems.

What I studied at school

GCSEs: English Language, English Literature, Maths, Additional Maths, French, Physics, Biology, Chemistry, ICT, Music, Art, Business Studies, PE

A-Levels: Physics, Mechanical Maths, Art, Music, Photography and Architecture as an extra-curricular subject

I have always been a creative person but have also really enjoyed the academic subjects such as science and maths. When choosing my subjects at school I always had the thought of "choose something you enjoy but that will also help you get into the career you want." At the time I wanted to be an architect or design engineer so chose the subjects that would help me pursue that path – Art, Physics, Mechanical Maths – the other subjects I chose because I enjoyed them.



Woodcut lettering.

What I studied after school

After changing my career path from architect/ engineer to set design and construction, I started looking into art and drama schools. I ended up taking a theatre production degree at Mountview Academy of Theatre Arts. It was a degree that involved exploring all areas of backstage theatre – stage management, lighting, sound, AV, prop making, set design, scenic art and scenic construction. After a few days in the workshop being trained in carpentry and metalwork I realized that that was what I wanted to specialise in. This meant in my third year I would have to produce all the drawings for the carpenters, lead the build, attend production meetings, work with designers, and lead the fit up and the get out.

My career path

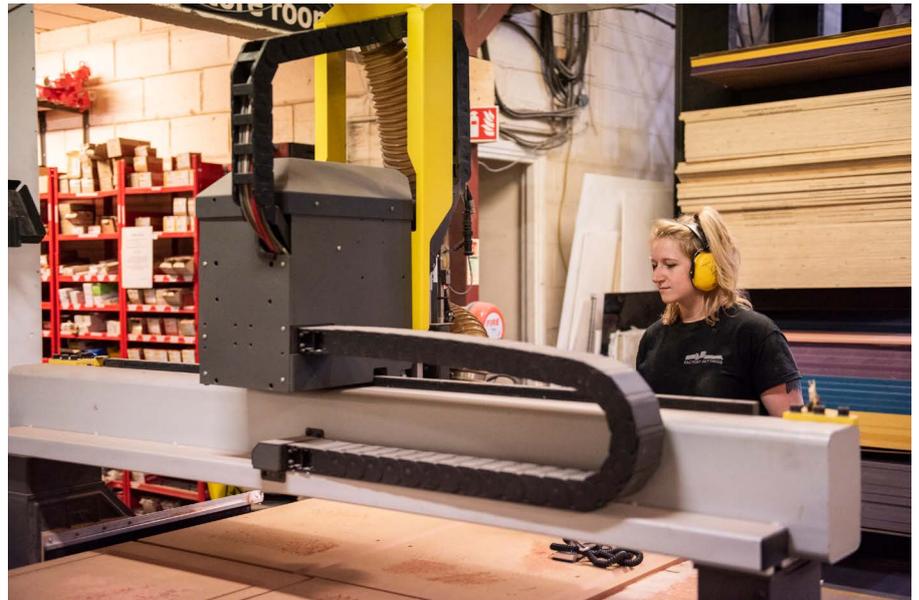
I secured my job at Factory Settings five months before finishing my degree. While I was studying, I did as much freelance work as I could in Fringe Theatre, but I also took unpaid work experience where I could. In my first year I had work experience at Elstree studios, in my second year I spent two weeks at the Royal Opera House in their metalwork and carpentry departments and in my third year I spent three weeks at Factory Settings in their paint, carpentry and metalwork departments. When I was offered the job, I asked the head of CNC to teach me everything about machining. It wasn't until I'd finished my degree and began working that I learned how to program and machine. I feel that my career journey has been eventful; I began wanting to be more office and design based, then wanted to work as a builder in theatre, and then changed again to adore being in both a workshop and office space running and programming a CNC machine. Every experience I've had, whether its been good or bad, has led me to where I am today. I have made a lot of mistakes, but I have used these as learning curves rather than setbacks. The opportunities I've had are because I've gone out searching for them, each one has taught me something new has helped me develop as a person.

Important decisions

I don't shy away from learning something new. I feel that sometimes we get so caught up in what is "our job" we stop learning new things and new skills because we think that they aren't going to benefit us at all. I try to work with other departments, and this helps me understand material properties as well as building processes. I give myself time to explore my interests; if I hadn't created a project on set design, I wouldn't have looked into doing a course in it, therefore not ending up in the position I'm in now. It's so important to understand that you're constantly growing and changing, you shouldn't fight these changes, they could lead you to the best decision of your life.

Challenges

The subjects I chose at school were all very intense subjects that required a lot of work. Time management became a huge thing in my life, I had to learn how to balance work/study, hobbies and personal life. In my career I've faced a lot of judgement from other people who either don't understand what I do and therefore think it isn't a worthwhile career to pursue, or who don't believe that females should work in a workshop environment. When faced with this I've just reminded myself that this is my life, I'm doing this for me and not for the acceptance of others.



Millie Ashdown.

My advice to you

If you are passionate about it and it sets your soul on fire, absolutely do it. The arts sector is such an amazing place to work, every day you'll face a new challenge and you'll always be learning something new. Don't think "this is my job, this is all I'm interested in, I'm not going to learn anything else." It is so important to keep learning all the time; even if you feel the skill you're about to learn will not benefit your career, it may help you develop as a person, build confidence or even help you create a new way of thinking. Keep trying new things and working on your passions; developing as a person is just as important as developing your career.

Craft Careers

Craft generates £3.4 billion for the UK economy each year, with the contribution of the wider creative industries now growing at twice the rate of the UK economy. British craft has never been so sought-after and craft skills are revolutionising industries from aerospace to architecture.

To learn more about craft careers visit:
www.craftscouncil.org.uk/learning/craft-careers



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