



**Crafts Council / Education**

## **Craft Journey**

Tom Sutton / Craft Educator, Early Career Researcher and Designer Maker



Tom Sutton. All photos courtesy of the artist.

### **What I do**

I am an Assistant Teaching Professor within the School of the Arts & Creative Technologies at the University of Bolton. In addition to this role, I continue to practice as a designer maker working with a range of materials including metal, wood, and concrete, each informing my research.

Within my academic role I teach on the BA(Hons) Textiles & Surface Design programme sharing skills and knowledge towards applied design, digital surface pattern, professional practice and self-promotion.

Alongside teaching, other duties include coordinating the Industry Advisory Board for which we have a wide range of industry specialists representing the contemporary craft and textile design sectors. Industry engagement is at the heart of our programme with live projects, guest speakers and visits embedded into each year of study.



Ultra Glow Lamp, Tom Sutton. Photo © Joel Chester Fildes.

## Jobs in craft

Crafts & design provide a wealth of career opportunities within the UK and abroad with many creative skills transferable to the wider industry sectors. Whether working self-employed, as part of a collective, for a studio / company, or within education as an academic or technician, a strong foundation in the arts can provide you with the creativity, knowledge and skills that open doors to a world of opportunity.

At heart I will always primarily consider myself a practitioner but respect that my role as an educator has increasingly taken precedent as my professional identity evolves. I genuinely believe that each role continues to inform the other and this certainly provides direction for my current research.

My creative practice has provided opportunity to work on a wide range of domestic and commercial focussed commissions spanning fine metal craft, furniture, and interiors, even some freelance graphic art working for a fashion company in the early years. A major benefit of working within the creative sector is collaboration and working with respected makers has directed some fantastic projects and initiatives leading to joint exhibitions across the UK and Europe.

## Why craft?

I must confess, I never intended to pursue a career within education but in the early years found myself balancing multiple roles as freelance designer, practicing designer maker, and lecturer. Having gained strong ancestral knowledge for making as part of my childhood I naturally shared this with peers throughout my undergraduate studies but, at the time, remained unconscious that this would eventually become my main vocation.

As regards to being a creative practitioner I don't think there ever was a conscious choice as I have worked with my hands for as long as I can remember. Most of my childhood years were spent experimenting in my dad's wood workshop so, I guess I always assumed I would follow a practice led path.

I was naturally drawn towards the vocational subjects throughout school with applied arts being my strongest area of interest. This led to continuing my studies through college and university where I developed a great appreciation for both material and process, which I uphold to this day. I am intrigued by and embrace new technology but, primarily advocate the importance for developing knowledge and skill of applied processes. I believe this informs and complements technology whilst broadening learners' appreciation for material and materiality.



Lily Vessel, Tom Sutton.

## What I studied at school

I enjoyed both academic and vocational subjects throughout school including Woodwork, Metalwork, Design Communication, Domestic Sciences and Art & Design. By no means a Grade A student, I respected the value of mathematics through my practice whilst enjoying English Studies, History and all the Sciences, choosing Biology for my final exam. I managed to achieve respectable grades for all subjects apart from French which I failed dismally. This was much to my disappointment as I am continually fascinated with languages yet never developed an ear for them.

I had to make a choice whether to study A-Levels or a vocational qualification and the experimental maker in me not wanting to be tied to a classroom any longer opted for the latter. I attended Southport College of Art & Technology studying on a National Diploma in Art & Design for two years and loved every aspect of it. I learned so many techniques and processes exploring 2D and 3D visual language, my eyes were opened to a new creative world, for which I still owe a debt of gratitude to the tutors who inspired me so much during that time.

## What I studied after school

Time for another confession, despite gaining so much from my time at college I never intended to go to university. No one else in my family had, although my grandad a former officer in the Second World War spent the remainder of his career as both a tutor and education manager so I was familiar with the higher education environment. However, I didn't think it would be right for me or rather, I didn't think I would be right for university.

I was wrong. Thank goodness that in the latter stage of my college course one tutor in particular encouraged me to apply and pull my portfolio together from which I would never look back. It wasn't all plain sailing, having been accepted on my first choice and commencing on the course I knew I had made the wrong selection but, managed to secure a place on a similar course at the University of Central Lancashire.

Studying for three years on an undergraduate degree in 3-Dimensional Design I chose Furniture and Tableware as my design options with Fine Metals as my main craft. The combination of craft and design choices allowed me to work with metal, wood, ceramic and glass, most of which have heavily directed my career from then on.

Nearly thirty years later I am still learning. My practice is now research focussed in response to gaining a place on a teaching professorship programme in 2017 and most recently being awarded a Senior Fellowship in Higher Education in 2019.

## My career path

I would say, for the majority of my career to date, I have gained a broad range of opportunities and experiences that have developed my identity as both a creative professional and educator. Pursuing a portfolio career in this manner has proved challenging to manage at times but the payback makes it worthwhile.

My craft-based activities over the years have led to commissions and work being exhibited in a wide range of touring exhibitions, galleries and events around the UK and Europe including The Goldsmiths Hall, Maison et Objet, International Spring Fair and Pulse/Top Drawer.

Freelance design work and consultancy is equally far-reaching supporting development of extended skills whilst building strong networks not simply just for commercial means but in recent years also towards research and advocacy. I've had the pleasure of meeting and working with an extensive range of private clients, designers, makers, event organisers and networks from The Vintage Clothing Company and Re-Thinkthings to Liverpool Music Festival, 5ml, North-West Craft Network, Great Northern Events and Craft UK.

These experiences shape my knowledge and understanding as a professional that is continually directed towards education whilst also informing ongoing research.

## Important decisions

At the time of graduating from my undergraduate degree I took the decision not to pursue my post-graduate studies. I had a year's worth of exhibitions booked, in addition to securing part-time teaching at two colleges and the university I had just graduated from. This was a difficult decision which I would continue to question for years to come but, I decided that gaining experience in the field would be more beneficial in the short term.

Nine years later having found myself managing two programs of study full-time at the college I was employed, whilst still running my design business alongside, I took the decision to leave my full-time teaching job and focus on my professional practice as a designer and maker. This penultimately prevented me from pursuing a Masters degree yet again and years later, when directing my career towards teaching in H.E. full-time, I would find myself pursuing my Doctorate studies via a Masters in Philosophy as a result of these decisions.

In summary we all make decisions, and not necessarily always the right ones, although important at the time. But time has a way of working things out so, don't get too caught up on them. Use your best judgement and work with outcomes of the decision you make to best advantage.



Aero-Organic Botanical Flower Holder, Tom Sutton.



Tom Sutton in his workshop.

## Challenges

For a long time undertaking wide ranging projects that crossed different creative disciplines took me in multiple directions causing a sense of imposter syndrome and feeling that I never quite fitted in. This applied to both my role as educator and professional and to some small degree possibly still does.

However, knowledge and experience are a powerful ally and I have learned that sometimes it's good not to fit in. Be true to yourself and honest to your profession, celebrate creativity, share knowledge, seek help when needed and look to help others along the way. Enjoy the journey and embrace every challenge.

## My advice to you

Pursuing a profession within the creative industries is undoubtedly fulfilling as it is enjoyable. Everyday can bring new opportunities but, being creative requires continued dedication and commitment. This means putting in the hours and challenging yourself to develop both your level of skill and understanding.

My top 5 tips would be:

- Watch, listen, ask questions, and learn, then continually practice developing proficiency of skills.
- Learn to take advice, respect other's wisdom and experience. Professionals genuinely have your best interests at heart and want to see you succeed and skills they have mastered passed on.
- Be resilient, everything doesn't always work out as planned and sometimes people will reject your ideas and work. Remember, it's not personal just part of working in a professional environment.
- Absorb everything around you and be willing to take on projects outside your comfort zone. This will allow your professional identity to evolve.
- Be yourself, enjoy what you do as this is when you are most creative. Take risks, challenge yourself, try to fit in where required but, don't worry if you don't fully as this is what makes you individual as a creative professional.

# 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](http://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/learning/craft-careers)



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