





A slab of bark covered in silvery lichen lies on Amanda Cobbett's work table, glinting in the light from the window. It looks as though it has just been picked up from the forest floor, but all is not as it seems.

The whole piece is cut from dyed fabric, the bark and lichen made up of multiple layers of embroidery. Amanda 'draws' with her sewing machine needle into paper or soluble material, building up threads until they are three-dimensional. She machines about 150,000 stitches a day. Once this is done, she dabs away the backing with a damp brush to leave what looks like lichen, the trumpet of a chanterelle or the lacework of *Laccaria bicolor*.

Her bark complete, Amanda meanders in the Surrey Hills, her three-year-old black Labrador, Frank, bounding ahead. Now and then, she picks up a lichen-clad branch or photographs a fungus. Autumn provides plenty of inspiration for her embroidered sculptures, which she mounts in glass cases for exhibitions and fairs. When she took her work to the RHS Chelsea Flower Show a couple of years ago, it all sold out.

#### A NATURAL PATH

Amanda has worked with textiles for more than 25 years, although it took a while to develop the idea and technique for these designs. Both her mother and grandmothers were seamstresses, while her father was a draftsman and her grandfather an engineer. She has inherited many of these skills and says that her talent must be in her genes.

After training at Chelsea College of Art, Amanda spent a decade in printed textiles, specialising in botanical designs. "I didn't have any formal botanical training, but I ended up doing countless flowers and leaf patterns and I loved it," she says. Its appeal dwindled, however, as the process became digitalised and Amanda reassessed her options.

She took the next five years out, looking after her two children and exploring The Hurtwood – 2,000 acres of private common land, near her house in Peaslake, with her dog Bramble (Frank's predecessor). "I walked for hours and hours," she recalls. Amanda got to know the character of the trees – pine, ash, silver birch, beech and oak – and discovered the beauty of fungi and lichen. Examining specimens in detail, she developed a deep curiosity about them and wondered if she could incorporate them in her art. She has also long been fascinated by Victorian display cases of birds and butterflies (despite finding them rather macabre) and had the idea of recreating specimens in fabric and paper and mounting them in a similar way. So ▶

THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE  
Textile artist Amanda walks  
her Labrador Frank every  
day, scouring the forest floor

near her home in Surrey for  
interesting bark and fungi,  
which she then recreates in  
her lifelike pieces of work



*"My motivation is to make something as lifelike as possible – and to make only one of them"*



*"If I can interest people in the science of these organisms, I feel I am doing my bit"*

she started experimenting. Today, Amanda works like a botanical illustrator, reproducing colours, contours and textures in meticulous detail, right down to the tiny spots of 'decay' burnt into the surface of a stem with a pyrography pen. The making process is as important as the finished piece, each stitch marking a moment. "My motivation is to make something as life-like as possible," she says, "and to make only one of them." Her accuracy impresses both gardeners (Alan Titchmarsh is a fan) and scientists.

Often, Amanda makes several pieces before putting a collection together, picking out items from a pile on her table. This might be a line of shaggy inkcaps, with strands of stitched soil clinging to their rolled papier mâché stems ("Inkcaps are so beautiful. They emerge a whitish colour, then, as they mature, they darken underneath and frill out a bit") or a single section of ash bark ("The ash tree outside our house is laden with lichen, a constant source of inspiration").

Her working day is broken up with regular dog walks. "Frank needs masses of exercise and has taken me into parts of the forest I didn't know existed," she says. She works up to midnight, if necessary, her photographic lamp lighting up the studio like a beacon.

After her collection sold out at Chelsea, Amanda decided to make sure she didn't take on too many commissions. "It was all running away with me," she says. She wants to guarantee she can spend enough time on each piece, although, as a perfectionist, this can be many hours. She already adds notes to each work about the species, as well as map references for where she found the original lichen or mushroom, and she would love to do more. "If I can interest people in the science of these organisms, I feel I am doing my bit," she says. "Someone needs to shout about them." Amanda is doing that in her own novel way.

**TO SEE MORE OF** Amanda's embroidered sculptures, go to [amandacobbett.com](http://amandacobbett.com).

**THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE** By building up layers of thread, and machining around 130,000 stitches

a day, Amanda creates a fabric that she moulds into textile copies of the natural features around her home

