

Rosie Ware – sharing Torres Strait Islander culture through textiles

by Catherine Titasey



"I fell in love with the first lino-printed fabric I saw, covered with cultural motifs, dugong and turtle. But when I touched the cloth and felt the rough texture of the cotton, that was something. That's when the seed was planted for my textile career."

Torres Strait Islander Rosie Ware is a self-taught textile artist. Her lino print designs have won awards such as the 2001 *Jaguar New Australian Designer of the Future* and 2006 *Designer Memento of Queensland*. Her work has featured in national and Indigenous exhibitions, is displayed in The National Gallery of Australia, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA). Her sugu (octopus) design was featured on an Australia Post self-stamped envelope from 2001-3.

She is proudly inspired by her Islander heritage, the maritime history of the Torres Strait and the sea. This is a far cry from the eight year old girl who, in an all-European class in Cairns, felt ashamed of her island name, Moilang and began using, Rosie.

Rosie is the youngest of nine children. She was born on Thursday Island and raised at Holloways Beach in Cairns,

"Our house was on the beach so I grew up fishing, swimming in *solwata* (ocean), walking in the mangroves looking for *akul* (mussels) and decorating sandcastles with shells and twigs."

Rosie lived in two worlds; the world of her Islander home where she spoke Broken English and the European world beyond the front gate where she had to speak English.

She watched her older siblings marry young and raise families, but she wanted to experience "life" before settling down.

After attending business college in Cairns, she worked in Canberra as a secretary and then in hospitality on Daydream Island in the Whitsundays. In 1979, she followed her parents to Thursday Island where she reconciled her European upbringing and her Islander culture. Rosie married and between the births of her two daughters, established *Rosie's Shop*, a souvenir and cultural artefact shop.

After a couple of years, the demands of running a shop, printing and raising her daughters exhausted Rosie so much she collapsed. She sold the shop and while her daughters were at school, she threw herself into printing fabric in the shed with a dirt floor and created table cloths, napkins and sarongs.

"In the wet season, the rain flowed under the printing table. I put on my joggers and kept printing. The word got around, 'Rosie's printing at home,' and I couldn't keep up with the demand."



Rosie's interest in textile printing came about by chance, not long after she started Rosie's Shop. Her sister, Isobel was living on St Pauls Island and had established a fabric printing group, *Wag Fabrics*, *Wag* being the traditional name for St Pauls. Isobel sent in two metre samples of lino printed fabric with dugong and turtle designs.

"I was fascinated by the carving techniques, of using lino squares and printing with colours that faded from dark to light on homespun cotton. I'd never seen Torres Strait textiles and it reminded me of the tapa cloth from PNG and Solomon islands."

When *Wag Fabrics* ceased operating, Rosie knew there was demand for locally printed material so she started printing in the shed in the front yard.

In 1998, Rosie successfully applied to the Australia Council for the Arts for her first grant. She travelled to the Tiwi Islands to investigate the fabric painting practices of the Islanders and the trip inspired much new work.

Rosie's diligence and ongoing research of textile printing paid off with her first award, 2001 *Textile and Fabric Category of the Jaguar New Australian Designer of the Future*. She has gone from strength to strength although she works from her studio, complete with a dry floor.

When creating a new print, Rosie thinks about a design, always drawing on her culture and environment. She makes a rough sketch on paper which involves "lots of rubbing out." Much of her work features sea creatures, shells and luggers.