

Endangered Arts

BY DONALD HUTERA

Like most major cities with a thriving, multi-disciplinary cultural milieu, London is littered with artisans. These are the people who honour, practice, and continue to refine the traditional skills — the milliners, scenic artists, shoemakers. The patience and the talent found in their hands and their imagination has not been replaced with automation and computer chips. Clothes are still sewn one stitch at a time, costumes are still created from natural fibres, time is still taken to create products of quality. As the world progresses furiously onward, they remain in place. These craftspeople are part of a lost world — the sort who, in the proverbial olden days, might have taken apprentices, or been apprentices themselves.

The quartet interviewed here satisfy that romantic notion of a true artist — one who works as much for enjoyment of the process as for what he or she earns from it. None is under 30, nor have any of them been pursuing their career for less than five years. They belong less to the world of business than to their particular calling.

Harry Ellam, Embroiderer

Great things can happen in the unlikeliest places. Take *Little Dorrit*, the 1987 film version of Charles Dickens' novel. This six-hour, two-part epic was conceived, shot and edited over five years by Sands Films, a virtually self-contained movie studio based in a couple of converted warehouses along the river Thames.

Sands is located in Rotherhithe, an area of southeast London that supports a well-balanced mix of artists and craftspeople, young businesses with the accompanying upwardly mobile young businesspeople, and the less upwardly mobile occupants of government housing. Rotherhithe has been Harry Ellam's home all his 55 years. "Where I live, I can see where I was born," he says in a voice resembling Alfred Hitchcock's. Ellam is a warden of the local church, St. Mary's. His sister ran the famous pub, the Mayflower Inn, for 17 years. Both church and pub are within spitting distance of Ellam's 'office,' a well-lit corner of Sands' long, wood-beamed research library. There the former accountant sits and embroiders. He started late — seven years ago — and claims to have had little formal training, but everything he does is a labour of love.

This fits in perfectly with the attitude and philosophy at Sands, where the 25 permanent employees constitute an extended family, and where most tasks are

accomplished by tried and true, non high-tech methods. "We've only got one sewing machine," Ellam confides, adding, "but nobody uses it."

Dorrit entailed making authentic period costumes for some 250 actors with speaking parts, plus an unspecified number of extras, entirely by hand. Although he says he's never signed his work, Ellam's delicate, painstaking signature is visible in every one of the film's frames, in the needle and thread work for countless shawls, waistcoats, purses, braces, flounces, collars, ribbons, and even the slippers worn by Sir Alec Guinness.

Ellam is currently in the thick of Sands' next hush-hush project, another period piece that covers at least a century of historical styles of dress, architecture, and manners. Once again, he is basing his contribution of images from reference books, postcards of paintings, actual clothing, and anything else necessary to truthfully duplicate the subject matter, colours, and patterns of the past. The overriding directive at Sands, he explains, is that everything is "made up exactly as it would have been at the time — not like it, but exactly!

"Embroidery is really painting with threads," Ellam continues, "although unlike brushstrokes, the threads have a nasty habit of going only one way." Rather than experiment with a lot of different materials, he has mostly stuck with silk. He prefers working on "something you