

Tapestry to honour Edinburgh Seven comes home

A tapestry which honours the first women allowed to matriculate at a university in Britain – who became known as the Edinburgh Seven – has been unveiled at its new home in the city.

The colourful three-part artwork created by Dovecot Studios is now on public display at the Edinburgh Futures Institute – on the former Royal Infirmary site on Lauriston Place – as a tribute to the women who enrolled to study medicine in 1869.

Dovecot Studios commissioned the celebrated Scottish artist Christine Borland to design the tapestry, which took seven weavers at more than 4,000 hours to create, using more than 90,500 metres of yarn in bold hues of pink, blue and orange. The artwork's organic shape is based on a cellular structure in motion, and can be shaped into sculptural forms.

Previously exhibited at the V&A in London, the piece is now on display for visitors to view on a central staircase of its long-term home at the newly-opened Edinburgh Futures Institute.

The magenta and cyan colours represent the dyes used in both the scientific staining of cells under a microscope and textiles in the 19th century. The tapestry contains linens, cotton and nylon yarns and was produced with traditional and modern techniques.

The Tapestry was funded by Sir Ewan and Lady Brown and the Dovecot Foundation and has been on display at the V&A London. Now it can be viewed from numerous angles above the central stairwell.

Patricia Erskine, Culture & Community Director for Edinburgh Futures Institute said: "The tapestry is a beautiful tribute to the Edinburgh Seven, who continue to inspire more than 150 years later. The placement of the tapestry in the old teaching hospital is a fitting homecoming for these women of science and reminds us all of the importance of inclusivity in learning."

Christine Borland, artist, said: "It's been a privilege to work with the Dovecot team to experiment at the boundaries of contemporary tapestry. The capacity of tapestry to interpret history with integrity and imagination makes it a fitting medium for the extraordinary story of the Edinburgh Seven."

Dovecot Studios Director Celia Joicey said: "This extraordinary tapestry was created by all seven Dovecot Weavers during the pandemic. The innovative use of technique, structure, colour and texture reflects the skill of the weavers and represents the power of tapestry to communicate complex ideas."

The Futures Institute – which has been set up to encourage 'trailblazing' across disciplines – is a fitting home for the work, with the institute's emphasis on innovation capturing the spirit of the Edinburgh Seven.

The celebrated group, which included pioneering figures such as Sophia Jex-Blake and Edith Pechey, met with resistance during their time as students, most notably at the 1870 Surgeon's Hall riot, when protestors attempted to block the women from sitting an exam. The campaign they fought to graduate and qualify as doctors at the University of Edinburgh was ultimately unsuccessful.

The women's efforts attracted support from figures including Charles Darwin, and eventually led to the Medical Act of 1876, which legally permitted women to practice medicine.



Liz Wallace standing beside the huge triptych at Edinburgh
Futures Institute

