

Hattie Wragg from Queen's Wood Studio: Perfect things aren't necessarily the most beautiful things



Hattie Wragg is a British jewellery designer living in Brno, founder of a contemporary sustainable jewellery brand Queen's Wood Studio. I discovered her outstanding collections via Instagram and I was mind-blown by the pure synergy between recycled materials and stunning organic shapes of pendants, earrings and rings. I visited Hattie in her lovely studio, shared with 4 other designers in the centre of Brno, where she makes jewellery by herself surrounded by design books, pictures and objects. We talked for more than an hour about the creative process behind her ethical jewellery, sustainability and about her expat life in Brno.

text and photography: Veronika Ohrádková

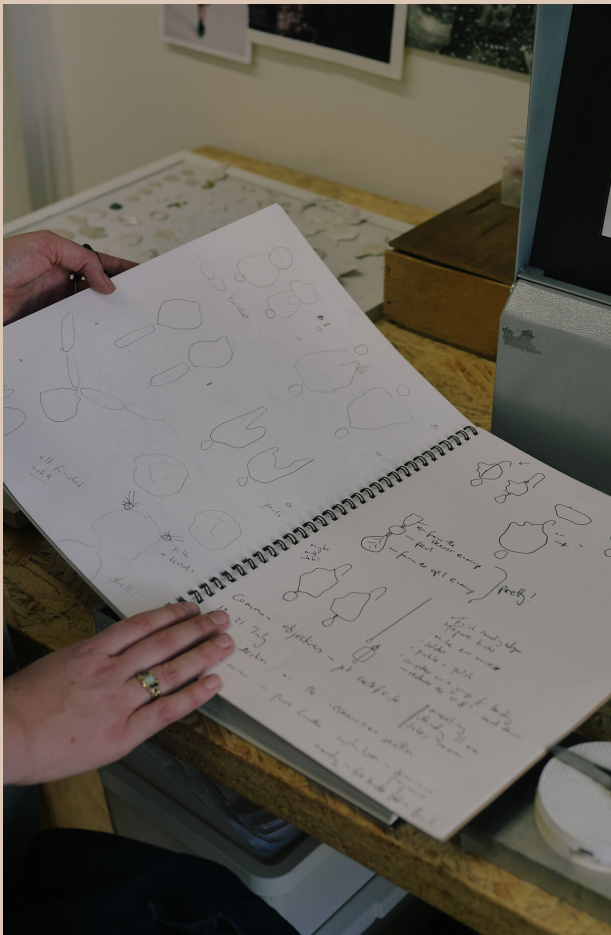
Can you tell me more about the beginning of your brand Queen's Wood Studio?

I was living in London when I started my brand. Actually, I made my first jewellery for it in the corner of my living room in my flat. The view from the window where I worked looked out over Queen's Wood in Highgate in North London, which is why I chose to name my brand after it. The trees are really beautiful and the wood is really old - some say it could be a piece of the original wildwood that used to cover the British Isles thousands of years ago. When you are in there, you can't feel the edges, even though it is quite small. It feels quite magical - like entering Narnia - there's even an old-fashioned lamppost in the middle of it!

My brand name is also quite exclusive because apparently you are not allowed to use King or Queen in your name in the UK, unless you have a proper reason for it. You actually have to get permission from the Crown, so it has to have some relationship to what you're doing. Because I was located there I was allowed to use it. So it felt quite special. Jewellery to make you feel like a queen! But not in the usual way. For me to be royal is to be like a tree - a magnificent, slow being, connected to the living world around it. My brand is deeply rooted in nature, and the strength that comes from being a conscious propagator of beauty in the world.

Do you have a remarkable memory from your childhood?

Well, both my parents are artists so I had a really creative upbringing. We went to a lot of art galleries, and spent our holidays visiting stone circles and ancient tombs in Cornwall and Scotland and Orkney. My parents definitely gave me a creative way of seeing the world and how to train your eye to see what is beautiful.



Did your parents motivate you to create art from very young age?

Well, yes and no. Art was a really important part of my childhood, and going round an exhibition with my parents could be quite wonderful as they pointed out interesting things to look at, how certain marks might be made, and stories about the artists. We saw a lot of outsider art too, and archeology and anthropology exhibitions. We'd sometimes take our sketchbooks and draw - it was a great art education. But my parents always warned us that trying to earn a living from being creative could be quite a thankless existence. My mum always said we should use our brains if we had them and I was very academic at school. I loved reading so I went to Cambridge to study English literature, and I was following that path - all the way to a PhD at Oxford - before I realised academia wasn't the way I wanted to spend the rest of my life. However, it was also my mum who spotted my love of jewellery-making and signed me up for a silver-smithing course when I was 17. So, while I was doing my A-levels I was also learning all the techniques that I now use to make my jewellery. It's really wonderful that she did that.

Are you self-trained?

I have technical training as a silversmith. The City and Guilds course I took as a teenager gave me a foundation and I've done top-up courses more recently in stone setting and other more advanced techniques at Central St Martin's. I've learnt a lot through practicing by myself though, of course. There was a time I really wished I'd gone to art school - to have all that time to play with ideas and be mentored by tutors and inspired by the other students. However literature is still very important to me and gives me quite a poetic way of approaching my jewellery work, which is quite unique I think, so maybe it's all worked out for the best.

Did you always know that you want to create jewellery?

I think I always wanted to wear beautiful jewellery but found all the jewellery available to me quite uninteresting. I started making jewellery out of tin cans and bottle tops, and various of my parents' artist friends encouraged me, taking me to bead fairs, showing me how to use silver clay, and one had me to stay with her for a weekend to make some riveted pendants with silver, copper and tin. That was probably my first 'proper' jewellery making. I have always loved the design challenge involved in making jewellery, because it needs to be beautiful but it also needs to be wearable and comfortable. I want to make jewellery that is striking, but can also be your companion every day. Jewellery is a very special thing, because it can really become part of you, and also lift you up - make you feel better. I feel honoured to be a part of that, because I think sending people out into the world feeling confident and good about themselves... I think it's a really powerful force for change.



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The jewellery you made has a very organic shape. Where did you find inspiration for organic forms?

Actually, it started with folklore. When I first came to the Czech Republic, I saw these folk patterns everywhere and I thought that's interesting. We don't have a very established folk culture in England. So I was looking in that direction for inspiration when I first got here.

Then I heard about fortune telling done by pouring metal into water that lots of people do here at Christmas. So I thought I would try it with silver and it made all these beautiful colours - pinks, golds and purples - as it oxidised in the water. So for a while, I was working with that, making pendants and earrings. I felt that there was a magical element to it too, because as I poured the silver I would ask the fortune of the person who was going to wear it. So each piece came with a special unique message.

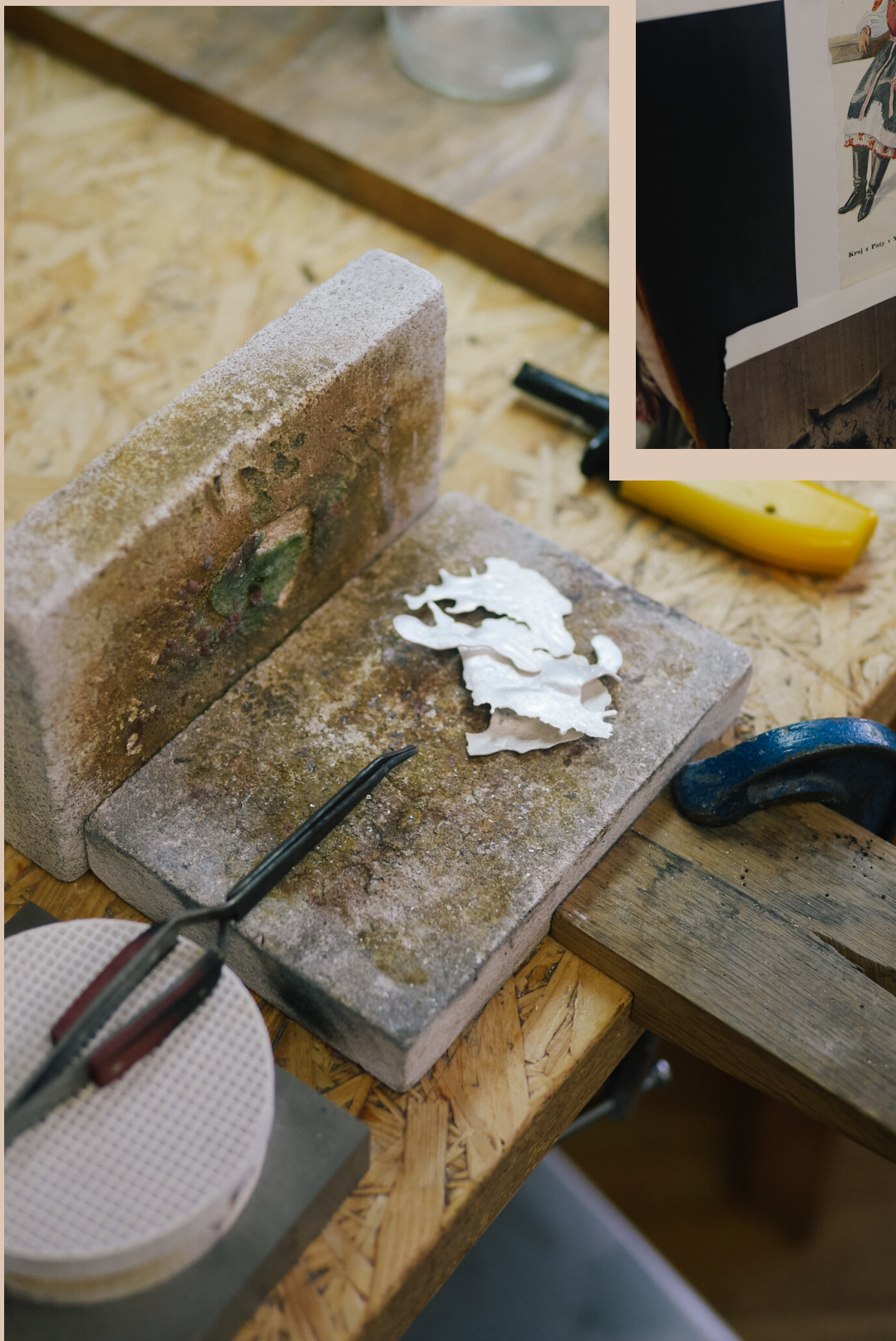
So that is where the organic shapes began. Then I heard about another ancient technique - casting silver in charcoal. The idea is to carve into the charcoal and you can make quite crude elemental objects that way which felt like an appealing thing to try. So I started by carving and filling the shapes with silver. But then I noticed that the silver that splashed off the sides was really beautiful and much more interesting than any carving I could do. Just the way the silver flowed out over the edges. So that's how I started experimenting with what the silver wanted to do without me directing it in any way. It's a funny process because you can't be sure that you will get something good.

So, you can not influence the final product, because you don't know how it's going to look like?

Exactly, it's pure chance. In some ways, it's a really silly idea. It's not an efficient way to make jewellery at all. Usually you draw a design and buy the precise materials and know exactly what you're going to get and in what timescale. Whereas this way I am relying on chance and relying on the materials and letting them do what they do. Sometimes the shapes are really amazing and sometimes they are not so exciting, but luckily I can just put those back in the melting pot. That's the beauty of silver. You can keep melting and re-using it. It doesn't lose its quality. There's no waste.

On my casting days I feel like I get into a meditative state, and the silver seems to respond to my mood. Sometimes it seems to flow so beautifully for me. I feel like it's quite special because I am working in collaboration with my materials. I'm not shaping the silver to my will like a designer-dictator, though I am using my aesthetic eye to select. I feel like we're working together on it, in this imperfect, organic, analogue way. It's a bit unusual I think.

And the shapes that occur are the shapes of nature. Coastlines, lakes, clouds, and the textures of wood from the charcoal. Silver is from the earth so it's unsurprising that when allowed to flow unguided it makes the shapes nature does. I think being able to wear a piece of that spirit is quite special.



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Can you tell me more about the sustainable materials which you are using? Was sustainability always important for your creative process?

Making my jewellery sustainable has been a learning process. It started just after I founded my brand. I was living in London, and I was volunteering for a non-profit organisation bringing people locally-grown organic food. So I was thinking about sustainability in my life, like food choices, cosmetics, clothes, and I was also campaigning for the Green Party. But I hadn't thought about jewellery in that context at all. In fact I don't think I'd even consciously realised that silver was mined from the ground. One of my suppliers started offering recycled silver and suddenly the penny dropped. I realised that I didn't want to do something that creates anything negative in the world. If this is my work, it needs to be thoughtful, and not cause any harm. And it's funny because I think it's one of the things we prize about precious stones, that they're a remarkable piece of nature. But it's also the terrible thing about them, because it means we are digging up the earth, we are up-rooting forests, polluting water supplies, we are actually destroying the earth to get its precious stones and metals out and that's not actually very special.

So I use vintage and recycled materials. And I also researched more sustainable ways to do other jewellery-making processes - so I use citric acid (commonly used for pickling vegetables) and washing-up liquid and bicarbonate of soda and boiled egg instead of the usual toxic chemicals. My packaging is recycled and recyclable too. Every time I make a new purchase I try to make sure it is the most sustainable way to do it.

Sometimes this approach means I'm a bit limited. It's difficult to find materials that live up to these standards sometimes. And with stones - I can't get them cut the way I'd like. I have to use what I can find. It's all about chance and working in collaboration with my materials again.

Is it a freedom for you?

Yes, definitely. You have to be more creative when you are limited. For example, I love making collages from patterns and colours in magazines - the best ones are the free supplements that come with newspapers because they're short and I have to work with what's there. I feel like I am a bit of a collage artist in my approach to my jewellery too. Using the stones I've found, and the silver shapes I've made, and trying them out together. I like designing jewellery from what I have, rather than imagining it from scratch. It feels like a more living process.



Can you tell me more about your life in Brno? What do you like and what do you dislike?

I've lived in Brno 4 and a half years. There is this really positive feeling about the city. When I compare it to London, I can see a slower pace of life. The weather is lovely (laugh). Nature feels really close. The society feels much more equal than in the UK.

I feel like people here are very thoughtful and quite creative. I also noticed that people here are more hands on and crafty than in the UK. It's much more common here that you'd make something yourself rather than just buy it in a shop. It is also much more affordable to buy handmade things here so it feels quite usual that you'd buy something directly from a local designer. That would never happen when I was living in the UK, except I suppose if you looked on Etsy.

What do you think about the sustainable approach in life?

I think you just have to start being thoughtful. If you buy a new reusable coffee cup every year, or if you don't look after the things you buy, then that's not very sustainable. It takes a lot of resources to make a cotton bag and a reusable coffee cup. A Danish study found a cotton bag should be reused 7100 times to have less environmental impact than a plastic bag. So use your cotton bags! I think the most important thing is to choose things that you will use for a long time. And even better if it can be recycled at the end of its useful life (one of the things I love about silver). Nothing has no impact. The best thing of all is to just buy less.

Can you see some differences between Czech republic and the UK in approach to sustainability?

I think that people here are more open to the idea that a person can make their clothes and things locally, and that it doesn't have to be from a big company. For example, I share my studio with four women, who are making their products themselves. They are all independent business women. The fact that they are successful in what they do, it's quite special. I think it would be much harder to do this full-time in London.

There is also a really nice design community here in Brno. For example Andrea Lojkaskova basically mentored me. I was giving her English lessons and she introduced me to this whole community and also helped me develop my work.

Recycling is much better in the UK though - it gets collected from every building. It was awful when I first got here and realised I had to carry my recycling to bins a few streets away. It must discourage a lot of people from doing it?



How do you feel about Brexit?

Well, I think that we have to break down our borders not create new ones. One of the joys of being human is that we are collaborative. The best things happen when you work together with other people. There has been so much energy and resources put into Brexit it's really depressing. When we need to think about climate change, we think about Brexit instead.

Can you describe you as a person in 3 words?

Thoughtful, creative, gentle.

Do you have a favourite artwork?

So hard to narrow it down to just one! I've been getting into land artists recently. I find Lotte Scott's work with peat and charcoal really inspiring. And poetry and writing about land and place - Emergence Magazine is a brilliant online resource for that. Margit Jäschke is my favourite jeweller - she makes beautiful collages and paintings too.

How does your typical day looks like?

For years I wasn't getting enough sleep - it was the first thing I'd cut. But now I'm trying to get 8 hours every night so if I go to bed late I get up later too - it's a good motivation to go to bed earlier! I get up and read something during breakfast - Emergence Magazine has been a good substitute for news/social media. I then get to the studio for about 10/10:30 and work there til about 6/6:30pm. I have yoga and a contemporary dance class once a week and various swimming dates with friends. I'm trying to find a good balance between jewellery making and marketing and other laptop-based work. I find I tend to binge and get really into making one week, and marketing the next and consequently always feel a bit behind. But maybe that's my work-style and I should just relax into it? Working for yourself is a constant mental tussle.



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Are you a perfectionist?

Yes, but I am getting over it actually. There was a time, when I was trying to do my PhD., when I think my perfectionism really got in the way of my work and I just wasn't able to write anything. I have had to let go and accept and see the beauty in imperfection. And actually perfect things aren't necessarily the most beautiful things. Having a little bit of a roughness is actually much more human and appealing.

What helps you to slow down?

I want to build a life where I am not constantly working and rushing around. That's one of the most positive things that happened since we moved to Brno. I've found life a bit slower here. Having the time to actually think about who I am is really important and I actually feel very privileged to be in this position, where I feel I even can do that. I always want to have an emphasis not on making money and profit, but actually having a spiritually sustainable life. Because otherwise I think we just burn out.

Do you shop in second hands?

Yes - the Nadace Veronica shop on Pekařská in Brno is really good for second hand craft supplies. I like Textile House and Botárna – Oblékárna for clothes. Šuplig is a cute place near me too. Retro Recycle Brno has some great vintage objects - household things - that are good as presents to take home to my family in the UK. But the really great place for second-hand clothes is London... I always make sure to drop into a few places there. One favourite is Mary's Living and Giving near my boyfriend's family in Kew Gardens - they have clothes by amazing fashion designers there.

What book are you reading right now?

I love novels where not very much happens - it's all about minute thoughts and observations. A recent favourite was *Hotel du Lac* by Anita Brookner. *No Fond Return of Love* by Barbara Pym too. I'm currently reading *A Fortnight in September* by R. C. Sherriff, and I have a few books of nature writing and poetry on the go too: *The Seafarers* by Stephen Rutt; *The Living Mountain* by Nan Shepherd; poetry by Elizabeth Bishop and Alice Oswald.

