

EMBROIDERERS' GUILD OF TASMANIA GOLDEN ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITION
SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
PUNCHBOWL CHRISTIAN CENTRE, LAUNCESTION, WEDNESDAY 3 OCTOBER 2018

Good afternoon and thank you very much for inviting me to open the Golden Anniversary Exhibition of the Embroiderers' Guild of Tasmania.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land, the Panninher and the Leterrermairrener. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

Fifty-year anniversaries always have about them a special feel: a time to reflect back on those colleagues of yours who made the start – in your case in Launceston in 1968 – and the many members and friends who have been active in the Guild since then.

And that history is beautifully presented here, in the works on display, with past members' embroidery loaned by their families.ⁱ

May I also at the outset say how touched I was to read in the words of your President Lucille Gee to me about the Guild members – and I believe your membership is about 90 – that, “We care for each other and we care for our State of Tasmania and together we are always aware of troubles within our community.”ⁱⁱ

That is a fine and noble basis for any community group of like-minded artists to work together.

The theme of “Golden” is, naturally enough, so appropriate for this Exhibition, hence the choice of the Tasmanian Golden Whistler featuring significantly, among other Tasmanian birds.

I must say I had not known that the Golden Whistler is so widespread, from Tasmania to northern Queensland, Indonesia and some Pacific Ocean nations, although I understand that the Tasmanian Golden Whistler is a sub-species of the Australian Golden Whistler.ⁱⁱⁱ But its vibrant, clear and energetic musical notes are unmistakable.^{iv} Perhaps it echoes, with its clarion call, the universal nature of your practice of embroidery.

Returning to 1968, and to your founding President Mary McKean: you certainly got off to a good start with her expertise and experience, she having been a member of the Royal School of Needlework in London before she migrated to Tasmania.

So I was intrigued to learn of the Royal School of Needlework connection to your invited tutoring guest last year, namely UK-based Jenny Adin-Christie, who took you through some of the intricacies of 17th century embroidery.

Jenny is, I understand, a renowned specialist in traditional whitework techniques and her latest major commission was as part of the RSN team, working on the wedding dress for the marriage of Catherine Middleton to Prince William.^v

And I believe that her tutor session here also involved birds – that your members made wrens during the four-day workshop. Jenny had said that “It initially took [her] about six months of research and a week of needlework to complete the wren that [she taught] in Launceston.^{vi} That’s something I confess I wasn’t fully aware of either! – the sheer time that can be involved in the research into this craft, which thereby evolves into an art.

Lucille has also made the observation that, “There have always been groups of women all over the world, who have used embroidery to document history [and] we have always been very proud to contribute to preserving a piece of Tasmania’s history.”^{vii}

Recording history through embroidery is fascinating, given that the default position of the telling of history is through the written word. We all know how deceptive the written word can be!

But here is an intriguing story of scholarship, which has in recent years unpicked – if you’ll excuse the pun – a centuries-old visual history accepted as true. I refer to the famous Bayeux Tapestry. I’ll quote to you:

“The Bayeux tapestry isn't a tapestry and wasn't woven by nuns ... The tapestry is revealed to be an embroidery, with the two requiring differing techniques ... [And] The widely accepted theory that nuns made the Bayeux tapestry has been disputed by experts, who say that it was made by a group of professionals.

“The idea that nuns across England made the Bayeux tapestry in nine sections which were then stitched together has been thrown into doubt by the new research ... The 900-year old tapestry, which depicts the events leading up to the Norman conquest of England culminating in the battle of Hastings in 1066, was

[instead] woven by the same group of people, likely to have worked on under one manager ...

“Alexandra Makin of the University of Manchester, a professional embroiderer who conducted the research, said: ‘It’s clear from my analysis of the Bayeux Tapestry that the style of work is consistent throughout. Some people argue that the style of some figures are so different they must have been embroidered by different people. But my view is it’s not the embroidery which is different – but the way the characters were drawn. By looking at the embroidery techniques at the back of the tapestry I would suggest that it was done by what we would call professional embroiderers.”

“Questions still remain over how many embroiderers worked on the tapestry ... who they were and where their ‘workshop’ or ‘workshops’ were located.

“What is not in dispute is the amazing skill of the embroiderers. Mrs Makin said: ‘The achievement of these people is quite remarkable when you consider the conditions they worked in. They would have almost certainly worked in daylight hours only, using basic equipment – such as shears to cut the cloth – with little formal training as we know it today, on what was a massive project even by today's standards. But they would have been well regarded by society: in one example from the Domesday book, the Sheriff of Buckingham gave land to an embroiderer, as long as she taught his daughter her skills.’” ^{viii}

So now, Embroiderers’ Guild of Tasmania, by way of celebrating your fiftieth anniversary by referencing the 17th century and the 11th century, it seems most appropriate to congratulate every 2018 member of the Guild, and your members and friends past and to come, here in Tasmania and across Australia and internationally, wherever embroiderers gather. I say to you: stitch, stitch, stitch, possibly struggle with French and Bullion Knots – but above all, laugh, enjoy and be creative.^{ix}

I now happily declare launched the Golden Anniversary Exhibition of the Embroiderers’ Guild of Tasmania.

Thank you.

ⁱ “This exhibition we plan on reflecting on past members’ embroidery loaned to us by their families. Some wonderful embroidery, we can always learn from our golden oldies.” Lucille Ball email dated 30 September to David Owen and earlier to Malcolm McWilliams.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱhttps://www.researchgate.net/publication/269985665_Taxonomic_consequences_of_cryptic_speciation_in_the_Golden_Whistler_Pachycephala_pectoralis_complex_in_mainland_southern_Australia/figures?lo=1

^{iv} <http://www.birdsinbackyards.net/species/Pachycephala-pectoralis>, accessed 30 September 2018.

^v <http://www.jennyadin-christieembroidery.com/Home.html> accessed 30 September 2018.

^{vi} Examiner 15 August 2017.

^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/9679761/Bayeux-tapestry-isnt-a-tapestry-and-wasnt-woven-by-nuns.html> (2012).

^{ix} <https://www.thesprucecrafts.com/stitches-every-embroiderer-should-know-4122123>