

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Cultural Artefact

Entry ID: AWE4886

Parliament House Embroidery

(1988 -)

Born 25 May, 1988

Occupation Artwork

Summary

In 1988 the Embroiderers' Guilds of Australia presented a commemorative embroidery to the Commonwealth Parliament as a gift to celebrate Australia's bicentenary. This presentation was the culmination of eight years of unprecedented collaboration among the eight State and Territory Guilds, overseen by a standing committee of the ACT Guild – the Parliament House Embroidery Committee – convened by Dorothy Hyslop. Over 1000 women from all over Australia were involved in the work and the Guilds donated not only their embroidery skills but also the fabric and thread and the administration of the project.

The embroidery is one of the two major artworks hanging in the Great Hall of Parliament House. Designed as an eight-panel frieze in the tradition of the Bayeux Tapestry, 16 metres long and 65 centimetres deep, the embroidery's theme is 'the settlement of Australia', in tune with the theme of 'the land' for all the public areas of the House. The exquisite embroidery is universally acknowledged as a nationally significant artwork and has given prominence to a long undervalued medium.

Details

An international architectural competition was initiated by the Australian Parliament in 1979 to design a new Parliament House, to be completed in time for the bicentenary in 1988 of European settlement in Australia. Canberrans naturally took a strong interest in the winning design by architects Mitchell, Giurgola and Thorp which was announced in June 1980. However, when Dorothy Hyslop proposed to her fellow members in the ACT Embroiderers' Guild that an embroidery be created by all the eight embroiderers' guilds and presented to the new Parliament House as a gift to the nation, the initial reaction was 'stunned silence'. The ACT Guild was small; few members thought the idea worthwhile and the eight State and Territory Guilds did not then enjoy regular communication and had only lukewarm interest in formal connections.

Nevertheless, the ACT Guild authorised Hyslop and fellow Canberra embroiderer Loma Ruddock to approach the chairs of the Joint House Standing Committee on the new Parliament House. The latter called the idea a 'breath of fresh air' and responded enthusiastically. The Guild then sought and obtained the agreement of all the other State and Territory Embroiderers' Guilds to participate in the project despite some members' trepidation that, as 'amateurs', their work might not be considered good enough.

In October 1980 the ACT Guild set up a Parliament House Embroidery (PHE) Committee, convened by Hyslop, to manage the project. It proved to be a huge, complex and lengthy project during which two states withdrew but later re-joined. Its ultimate success owed much to Hyslop's exceptional project management and communications skills.

The PHE Committee worked very closely with the Parliament House Construction Authority and, in particular, the Art Advisory Committee for the House, and Pamille Berg, the architects' Art and Craft Coordinator, to make the embroidery an intrinsic part of the House's artworks and the architectural context of the building. The first steps were to develop a design brief and invite six designers to submit designs for consideration.

The Committee decided that the embroidery design should be as significant in quality as the craft skills devoted to the fabrication of the work. The theme would be 'the settlement of Australia', stemming from the overall theme of works for the new Parliament House focussing on the interactions of peoples with Australia's vast landscapes from early Aboriginal occupation to modern times. The work had to be long and narrow as it was to hang in the gallery of the Great Hall, and each Guild would work on a section of the embroidery which would later be joined to form a single piece.

The competition was won by Kay Lawrence, a South Australian textile designer and tapestry weaver. Her design was decidedly unconventional, comprising 31 different images, intended as such rather than as one overall design. It refers to each State and Territory in particular images but emphasises common elements in the experience of settlement rather than distinct, State-based differences. It moves from Aboriginal people's harmonious relationships with the land to the changes wrought by European settlers as they sought to develop and control their surroundings. It conveys beauty and ugliness, joy and loss.

The PHE Committee appointed Anne Richards, a highly skilled Melbourne embroiderer, as the national embroidery coordinator and each State and Territory appointed a supervisor to oversee the work in her state and liaise with the Committee, Lawrence and Richards. Over a thousand women around Australia were involved in the work – some in making the hundreds of samplers from which stitches and colours were selected, others in preparing the linen and stretching it onto frames before work began, others in preparing the pieces for transport to Canberra, or in joining the sections and mounting the completed work in its case. The Guilds donated not only their labour but also all the funds needed for the materials. The linen and threads were intensively researched and of the highest quality.

Twelve thousand unpaid hours of embroidered stitching were put into the eight panels by 504 women. Many viewed the work as an important historical, as well as artistic, project. In a number of cases several generations of one family worked on the embroidery. Embroiderers enjoyed the teamwork required not only in the embroidery itself but also in the complex tasks of conservation, joining the sections, and mounting the completed work in its case.

The embroidery was presented to the Presiding Officers of the Parliament on 25 May 1988 in front of more than 600 people. Within a decade it had been seen by over 14 million people. Visitors marvel at the exquisite stitching and the dedication and craftsmanship of so many embroiderers working creatively and cooperatively together.

Published resources

Newspaper Article

An embroidery to remember, Hinchliffe, Meredith, 1986,
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article130626574>

Journal Article

Declaring independence: The enduring impact of Judy Chicago's installation artwork "The Dinner Party" and Kay Lawrence's "Parliament House Embroidery", Baguley, Margaret and Kerby, Martin, 2010

Site Exhibition

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg>

Archival resources

National Museum Australia

[ACT Embroiderer's Guild collection](#)

[Embroiderers' Guilds of Australia collection](#)

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[Records, 1984-1988 \[manuscript\]](#)

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Created 8 February 2013

Last modified 20 February 2013