Creative Embroidery in New South Wales, 1960 – 1975

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

Susan G Wood
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Abstract

In the years between 1960 and 1975 in NSW there emerged a loosely connected network of women interested in modern or creative embroidery. The Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW served as a focus for many of these women, providing opportunities for them to exhibit their work, and to engage in embroidery education as teachers or as learners. Others worked independently, exhibited in commercial galleries and endeavoured to establish reputations as professional artists. Some of these women were trained artists and wanted embroidery to be seen as ‘art’; others were enthusiastic amateurs, engaged in embroidery as a form of ‘serious leisure’. They played a significant role in the development of creative embroidery and textile art in NSW and yet, for the most part, their story is absent from the narratives of Australian art and craft history. These women were involved in a network of interactions which displayed many of the characteristics of more organised art worlds, as posited by sociologist Howard Becker.¹ They produced work according to shared conventions, they established co-operative links with each other and with other organisations, they organised educational opportunities to encourage others to take up creative embroidery and they mounted exhibitions to facilitate engagement with a public audience. Although their absence from the literature suggests that they operated in isolation, my research indicates that there were many points of contact between the embroidery world, the broader craft world and the fine art community in NSW. This thesis examines the context in which creative embroiderers worked, discusses the careers of key individuals working at this time, explores the interactions between them, and evaluates the influence that they had on later practice in embroidery and textiles in NSW.

Chapter 1

‘In our world what is not documented does not exist.’
Grace Cochrane

Rationale for the project

In 1985 Grace Cochrane was commissioned to write an account of the historical and theoretical underpinnings of the crafts movement in Australia, a task that culminated in the publication in 1992 of *The crafts movement in Australia: A history*. Cochrane’s task was enormous – to document almost one hundred years of activity covering a vast array of crafts and to shape this information into a coherent account. The result was a book that is widely regarded as the definitive account of craft in twentieth century Australia. In her introduction Cochrane explains that the book takes a broad approach, looking at the links that existed between ‘people, events and ideals’ both in Australia and internationally, with the intention of rendering visible that which was omitted from previously published histories. ¹ The irony is that with respect to embroidery in New South Wales, the volume perpetuates the problem it was intended to solve.

Embroidery as a whole occupies a relatively minor place in *The crafts movement in Australia: A history*. Two paragraphs are devoted to an account of the establishment of Embroiderers’ Guild branches in New South Wales and Victoria and a summary of some of their activities. ‘Creative embroidery’ as it was practised in the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies is mentioned only briefly. When discussing the years from 1964 to 1972 Cochrane wrote:

> Within the embroiderers’ guilds, which maintained traditional practices, orienting themselves towards London qualifications and standards, small groups appeared with an interest in ‘creative’ embroidery. The small ‘62 Group’ in London had set up in association with the guild there in order to work more professionally in embroidery. The Australian creative embroiderers probably modelled themselves on this group and were similarly motivated by their interest in also being involved in ‘art’.²

Cochrane’s account of embroidery in NSW is drawn largely from her reading of the crafts publications of the time and from a summary of the history of the Embroiderers’ Guild published in its newsletter *The Record*.³ On the basis of these sources her conclusions are

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perhaps reasonable, but they do not present the full story. Some activities of the Embroiderers’ Guild in NSW were indeed intended to teach and maintain traditional practices, but the following statement by Margaret Oppen, founder of the Guild, suggests a broader vision:

As in the past Embroidery has given a picture of the times in which it was produced, so present day Embroiderers should give a picture of their own times. In a period of change and development such as this, all arts must also change and develop. There have always been original minds to break away from tradition or to develop tradition in a new way and these minds are the leaders of thought in all periods. Originality must not be denied, it enlivens and refreshes and leads to new discoveries.4

From the outset the Embroiderers’ Guild in NSW was interested in a wide range of approaches, not just traditional practice. Margaret Oppen, the founder of the Guild, wrote and spoke often of the importance of adopting a contemporary approach to embroidery. Although local embroiderers did maintain links with the Embroiderers’ Guild in London, as they were a branch of that organisation until 1971, the suggestion that they oriented themselves towards London qualifications is not entirely accurate. In the late 1960s and early 1970s members were encouraged and supported in their efforts to attain City and Guilds qualifications, but this was seen as an essential step in the process of establishing Australian qualifications, either within the local Guild or in tertiary institutions. It was not that embroiderers specifically desired British qualifications; it was rather that there was no suitable course of study in embroidery available in NSW at the time.

Furthermore, Cochrane’s suggestion that the 62 Group in England and the small groups in Australia were established because some women were interested in ‘being involved in art’ does not accurately reflect the intentions of those who established either group. The 62 Group was formed in 1962 by a group of art school graduates, with the aim of encouraging ‘embroidery designers and craftsmen to produce work of high quality in a twentieth century style’.5 It was intended as a professional organisation, with aims that included the promotion of embroidery (later textile art) as a modern art form and the maintenance of high standards and professional commitment on the part of its members. The New South Wales based Creative Embroidery Association, which was not in fact formed until late 1973, is almost certainly the main ‘small group’ to which Cochrane refers. It was not the only group of creative embroiderers to emerge in the seventies, but it was the earliest, it had the most

4 The Record, No 36, October 1963, p.9.
organised structure, and it had the highest profile. Many, although not all, of the women in New South Wales who were involved in ‘creative embroidery’ had prior qualifications in art. More traditional art forms such as painting and printmaking had often been their starting point and, rather than becoming interested in art, they had in fact chosen to take up embroidery. For example, Margaret Oppen, although not a member of the Creative Embroidery Association, had trained at the Julian Ashton School in Sydney and at the Slade in London and in 1973 was awarded a British Empire Medal for her services to art (not embroidery). Those who established the Creative Embroidery Association saw it as a professional support organisation, not a group of hobbyists. 6 As with the 62 Group, membership was restricted; and the group’s goals included holding regular exhibitions, teaching and publishing in the field, and developing an international profile for its members.

Three of the embroiderers mentioned in passing by Cochrane – Prue Socha, Heather Joynes and Pat Langford – were founding members of the Creative Embroidery Association in Sydney. They ran successful residential workshops, which attracted participants from across Australia; they travelled the state, the country, and even overseas, teaching embroidery. They organised group exhibitions; they had embroideries selected for inclusion in NSW Crafts Association and Crafts Council of Australia exhibitions in Australia and overseas; and they all exhibited at various times in commercial galleries. Articles about their work were published during the 1970s in *Craft Australia* and in popular women’s magazines. Given this level of activity, the limited coverage of creative embroidery in Cochrane’s text is surprising. With the exception of Heather Dorrough, whose career has been more visible than most NSW embroiderers, other NSW embroiderers are not mentioned by Cochrane at all.

The idea of history as a grand narrative may have lost some of its power in a post-modern era, but even when the goal is to provide an alternate story the historian’s task is to look for causes and effects and to create a coherent narrative from the data that is available to them. Grace Cochrane’s *The crafts movement in Australia: A history* challenges the notion of the grand narrative by exposing aspects of Australian cultural life ‘omitted from general social, political or cultural histories of Australia’. 7 However in order to do this Cochrane, in effect, created an alternative grand narrative. Her account begins by explaining how the ideals of the British Arts and Crafts movement were transplanted to Australia and continues by

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6 Members of the Creative Embroidery Association who had attended an art school, either in Australia or overseas, included Pat Langford, Ann-Marie Bakewell, Robin Jeffcoat, Audrey Bernays and Mardi Holcombe.

providing an overview of craft activity between the First and Second World Wars. Cochrane then describes the post-war period as one of increasing sophistication, as revealed by the language of some of the chapter headings: ‘Beginning again’, ‘Organising for change’, ‘The heady years’ and, penultimately, ‘Serious intent’. While this approach is perfectly appropriate to her task, arguably it is also the reason why a detailed discussion of creative embroidery is absent from her narrative.

There is an ongoing perception that embroidery is less significant than other forms of creative activity, due in part to its domestic connotations. Embroidery does not require complicated equipment or lengthy technical training; it can be practiced anywhere and fitted in around the other activities that make demands on a woman’s time; and its end product is often an article intended for private rather than public consumption. As a consequence it is often considered a frivolous pastime rather than a serious pursuit. As this thesis demonstrates, creative embroiderers did have high aspirations for their own work and for the craft more generally, but because they were only partially successful in gaining acknowledgement from the wider art and craft community, embroidery is still not widely accepted as a vehicle for creative expression and as a consequence does not fit comfortably in a narrative that emphasises reassessment, reconstruction and progress. Cochrane’s solution to the dilemma was to downplay the significance of creative embroidery, providing only a brief account of its development. However, as an embroiderer myself and a member of both the Embroiderers’ Guild and the Creative Embroidery Association I was acquainted with a number of creative embroiderers who were active in the sixties and early seventies, and thus was aware that the story of embroidery in New South Wales was far richer than that presented by Cochrane.

Marion Fletcher’s *Needlework in Australia: A history of the development of embroidery*⁸, the only substantial publication specifically about the history of Australian embroidery, also has shortcomings. This text deals in detail with the earlier years of European settlement but provides limited discussion of more recent practice and very little on embroidery in New South Wales. Despite its title, the book is not an exhaustive study of embroidery in Australia. This highlights a major shortcoming of the survey approach to history, which is one of logistics and which is difficult to avoid. It is impossible to include every individual in an historical survey, especially when both the time period and the geographical area covered are broad. The researcher must always make choices about what can be included and what must be left out. Often the decision is made to focus attention on well known examples

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because these are the most familiar and the most readily accessible to the researcher.

Fletcher, who at one time taught embroidery at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, notes that some of the examples included in her book were included for a very pragmatic reason: they were available. She also draws attention to the limited range of examples from some states. With respect to contemporary work, she was clearly more familiar with embroidery in Victoria than in other states. Apart from the work of Dawn Fitzpatrick and Heather Dorrough, both of whom undertook major public commissions in the mid to late 70s, few New South Wales embroiderers are mentioned. Although Cochrane’s book is quite rightly regarded as the most comprehensive account written so far on the history of craft in Australia and Fletcher’s book provides an interesting account of embroidery in the early years of European settlement, there are aspects of embroidery practice that are not fully explored in either text.

No doubt a significant reason for these omissions is that much of the source material required to provide a more detailed account of embroidery in New South Wales is in private hands or in the archives of groups such as the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW and the Creative Embroidery Association, and is therefore not readily available to researchers and students. Neither Cochrane nor Fletcher used this material. Cochrane identifies numerous textile related publications, such as the Australian Handweaver and Spinner and the Batik Association Newsletter, as being important sources, but Embroiderers’ Guild of New South Wales’ newsletter The Record is not among them. Given the scope of The crafts movement in Australia: A history it is clear that there would not have been time to trace and then consult unpublished documents relating to every craft organisation in Australia. Fletcher lists no primary sources for her chapter on contemporary embroidery and although Cochrane spoke to numerous craft practitioners and administrators in the course of her research, the only New South Wales embroiderer she lists as a source is Heather Dorrough.

Grace Cochrane notes in the introduction to her book: ‘In our world what is not documented does not exist’. Her point is that those events and activities that fail to find a place in official records and which are omitted from standard historical narratives are easily forgotten. Two examples of the consequences of limited documentation serve to illustrate this point. In 1999 Joan Kerr wrote an essay about several exhibitions of women’s work

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10 The Creative Embroidery Association existed between 1973 and 1995. Archival material including minute books, slides and correspondence from its later years is currently in my possession.
11 Although according to Cochrane, she would have read some copies of the Record, primarily those that referred to the history of the Guild (email from Grace Cochrane, 9 July 2002).
held in the first half of the twentieth century, exploring the reasons why each was claimed to be ‘the first’, even in instances where the claimant was clearly aware of earlier exhibitions. In this essay, Kerr cited catalogue introductions written by Thea Proctor in 1934 and Margaret Preston in 1946; both women had been participants in exhibitions prior to the ones they were discussing, but wrote as if these had never occurred. Kerr suggests the primary reason was a strategic one, enabling women to recast their careers to accommodate changes in thinking about art. If an earlier exhibition did not fit the new narrative, it was simply removed from the story.

Similarly, although Margaret Oppen had exhibited embroideries at the Grosvenor Galleries in Sydney in 1949, Pat Langford had exhibited ‘embroidered paintings’ at the Chatterton Gallery in 1961, and Vivien Hadgkiss had exhibited at the Frances Jones Studio in 1969, the Woman’s Day still reported in 1973, presumably on the basis of discussion with the women themselves, that a recent exhibition of work by Pat Langford and Prue Socha was ‘the first occasion in Sydney that embroidery has been exhibited in a commercial gallery’. The positioning of this exhibition as ‘the first’ was also likely to have been a strategic one, a means of emphasising the point that this particular form of embroidery was being presented in an ‘art’ context, rather than a domestic one. Nevertheless there is no doubt that Pat Langford and Prue Socha knew about the earlier exhibitions, even as they chose to overlook them. In this case, and in that cited by Kerr, such a strategy would have been untenable if the earlier exhibitions had been written into the literature of Australian art or craft; since they weren’t it was possible to proceed as if they never happened.

On the basis of the accounts in Fletcher and Cochrane, one might conclude that embroidery languished while other forms of textiles flourished. This is not the case. Articles in the popular press and in early issues of Craft Australia indicate that numerous artists were creating and exhibiting embroidery by the early 1970s. In 1971 Hannah Frew, a lecturer in embroidery at the Glasgow School of Art, spent several weeks teaching embroidery workshops throughout the state. Embroidery was included in the Art Gallery of New South Wales Travelling Exhibition Craft 70’s (sic) in 1972, and in many of the exhibitions organised by the Craft Association of NSW. By 1976 there was sufficient interest in

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15 The invitation to Pat Langford’s exhibition in 1961 had stated: ‘This exhibition is the first of its kind to be arranged in Australia’; Pat Langford had also attended the exhibition by English embroiderers Ann Butler and Janet Grahame that was held in 1971 at the Denis Croneen Galleries in North Sydney.
embroidery for the Crafts Board to sponsor a lecture tour by English embroiderer David Green, at the time a lecturer at Goldsmith’s College in London. It seems reasonable to assume that this level of activity had its roots in the previous decade – a period that is not covered in any detail by currently available histories. The evidence strongly suggests that the embroiderers of the sixties and early seventies established a foundation upon which later developments in embroidery and textile art in Australia were based. Despite this, many of them are unknown today.

As many of the women involved in the creative embroidery in the sixties and seventies are advancing in years, a compelling reason for undertaking this research project was to record their role in the history of embroidery before valuable sources were lost forever. Pat Langford, one of the key figures in embroidery in NSW in the period covered by this thesis, died while the work was being undertaken. She left a substantial archive comprising embroideries retained in her personal collection, sketchbooks and drawings, teaching notes and slides. Her family has taken steps to ensure that the archive remains intact. The future of similar collections is not secure. Cynthia Sparks, another embroiderer discussed in this thesis, also has a substantial archive. However, she has no descendents to act as custodian and has been unable to find a textile institution interested in housing the material. She has already passed her collection of embroidery slides on to me and it is likely that her papers and embroidery collection will ultimately be dispersed among friends and colleagues. In the case of other embroiderers it may already too late to reconstruct a complete picture of their involvement in embroidery. Ruth Arthur, who exhibited several times with the Craft Association of New South Wales and regularly in Embroiderers’ Guild and Creative Embroidery Association exhibitions, is remembered as a talented embroiderer by several of the women with whom I spoke. Photographic records indicate that she produced a sizeable body of experimental work in embroidery. However, I have located only two extant examples of her work and virtually no biographical information. There is no indication of when or where she was born and what, if any, art or embroidery training she may have had. To date, efforts to trace family members who may be able to provide information have been unsuccessful.

Documentation and publication plays a vital role in the creation of history; it also plays a role in establishing and maintaining discourse on any form of artistic practice. Ultimately the lack of a documented history becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because so little has been published, the assumption is that nothing happened and therefore there is nothing to research and write about. This has certainly been the case for ‘creative embroidery’ in New South Wales. One of the reasons for the lack of research in this area is undoubtedly the afore-mentioned difficulty in accessing source material, but others can also be suggested.
Creative embroidery is difficult to categorise. Despite the aspirations of its makers, it is not commonly accepted as art, and although it involves the use of craft based processes and materials, it is dissimilar in many ways to other craft genres. For instance, it generally does not involve the production of functional objects. As a consequence creative embroidery has not been studied by art historians and is only of marginal interest to craft historians. Because it was practised by a section of the community commonly perceived as being relatively privileged, it has also been overlooked by many feminist historians. Grace Cochrane expressed the hope that other researchers would “further evaluate and document more specific aspects of the contemporary crafts movement.”\textsuperscript{16} The field of embroidery is ripe for such a study, for until the circumstances under which creative embroidery is produced are made visible the work will remain unknown to any but a very small audience.

**Parameters of the study**

One of the tasks faced by any researcher is the need to establish parameters for a study. Decisions must be made as to the focus of the work, about what to include and what to leave out. This study of embroidery is limited, in terms of time frame and geography. Rather than contributing another broad survey of embroidery, the project takes up Grace Cochrane’s challenge, studying a small but significant aspect of embroidery history in detail. The research focuses on those working in and exhibiting embroidery in NSW, concentrating on the period between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s, crucial years in the evolution and positioning of embroidery, yet neglected in the literature to this point. Joan Kerr’s *Heritage: The national women’s art book*\textsuperscript{17}, written to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of International Women’s year and which documents five hundred art works and five hundred women, including some embroidery and embroiderers, has the year 1955 as its upper limit, while Marion Fletcher’s *Needlework in Australia: A history of the development of embroidery*, deals in detail with the earlier years of European settlement with limited treatment of more recent practice. Grace Cochrane’s *The crafts movement in Australia: A history* deals in some detail with textile practice in the sixties and seventies but focuses more on weaving, printing and quilting than on embroidery.

It was important to investigate the historical background to explain how the development of modern or creative embroidery in New South Wales had its origins in the events of earlier decades and was closely linked to similar developments in Britain. Thus one chapter of the thesis discusses the events leading up to the establishment of a branch of the Embroiderers’


Guild in Sydney in 1957. However, the research was focused primarily on the years between 1960 and 1975. By 1960 the Embroiderers’ Guild branch was well enough established to expand the range of activities it offered and Pat Langford’s arrival in Sydney heralded a new phase in the development of modern embroidery. 1960 was also the year that the Embroiderers’ Guild began publishing a monthly newsletter, *The Record*, a resource which provided a level of detail about activities, events and ideas that was not available for earlier years. Coincidentally it was also the year that Heather Dorrough arrived in Australia, although it was to be a few years before she became actively involved in stitchery.

Identifying an appropriate end date was not quite so straightforward, since interest in all forms of textile practice including creative embroidery continues to the present day. However, such a long time frame would have made the research project unmanageably large so, following the rationale outlined earlier, I decided to end the study at 1975.

Ultimately my research indicated that there were other reasons why this date was appropriate. Margaret Oppen died in June 1975, depriving creative embroidery of one of its chief advocates. In the same issue of *The Record* that published her obituary, Jeanette Kerr, then Chairman of the Embroiderers’ Guild, indicated that the organisation would no longer seek funding from the Crafts Board or from other government funding sources. It was a symbolic drawing back from engagement with the broader arts and crafts community. At the same time, Lucy Lippard’s visit to Australia in 1975 gave great impetus to the Women’s Art Movement: many younger women became interested in the use of textiles and embroidery as a vehicle for feminist art. This, together with the introduction of textiles and fibre – but not embroidery – into art schools in the mid seventies, resulted in what could be described as a generational shift. As the Embroiderers’ Guild became less engaged with the wider art and craft community and as younger embroiderers pursued other directions, the genre of creative embroidery was increasingly seen as a conservative form of art practice. The year 1975 can thus be seen as a turning point in the history of stitched textiles in New South Wales, and therefore a logical end point for the research.

The decision to limit the study to NSW was also based on several considerations. While other states, Victoria in particular, have a rich history of embroidery and undoubtedly warrant studies of their own, much of the innovation in embroidery in the 1960s was based in Sydney. This was due in part to the influence of Margaret Oppen, who was the driving force behind the establishment of the Embroiderers’ Guild in NSW, and whose interest in modern embroidery shaped the direction of the organisation in its early years. Her entrepreneurship resulted in exhibitions and educational opportunities which provided a

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18 *The Record*, No 154, August 1975, p. 4.
focal point for many of those interested in contemporary approaches to embroidery. A series of fortuitous migrations also played a role. Sydney was the destination for immigrant British artists Pat Langford and Heather Dorrough, while later in the nineteen sixties Cynthia Sparks arrived in the city. Each of these women played a significant but different role in the development of embroidery, not just in Sydney but Australia wide. It is possible to identify many links, direct and indirect, between events and activities that originated in New South Wales and developments in embroidery in other states. Women travelled from interstate to attend workshops organised by the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW, teachers were sent from Sydney to other states, and the Embroiderers’ Guilds in several other states began initially as groups affiliated with the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW. Workshops held at the University of New England in Armidale from 1969 on also attracted interstate participants and were a means by which knowledge of creative embroidery spread to other parts of the country. From the start of this project, it was apparent that New South Wales was the state in Australia where interest in ‘creative embroidery’ was most intense and therefore the appropriate location on which to concentrate.

Ultimately the focus of the research narrowed further. Although there were pockets of interest in creative embroidery throughout the state, it is fair to say that innovation began in the metropolitan centre and spread outwards. As a consequence the thesis deals primarily with people and events located in Sydney, although people and events in other areas of the state are discussed where relevant. It should also be noted that the research deals with a form of embroidery which was significantly influenced by British precedents and largely practised by middle class women. As a result, there is almost no discussion of embroidery influenced by other ethnic traditions. Many of the women who arrived in Australia from Europe as migrants and refugees in the post-war period brought with them and maintained embroidery traditions from their country of origin, and in recent years embroiderers and textile artists have increasingly drawn on such traditions in their work. However, there is little evidence that connections were established between these traditional embroiderers and the women who were interested in ‘creative embroidery’ during the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies – and even less evidence that Sydney embroiderers were familiar with embroidery from non-European cultures. The only reference to embroidery of non-European origin to appear in The Record in the years between 1960 and 1975 appears to be a comment that Mona Hessing had brought some old pieces of Indian embroidery to show the students at the 1970 summer school. To attempt, in the light of more recent developments,

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19 See, for example, M Rolfe, Many voices: 13th Tamworth Fibre Biennial, Tamworth City Gallery, Tamworth, 1998.

to make connections where none appear to have existed would simply present a false picture of the period being studied.

**Conclusion**

The parameters of this study are narrowly defined with respect to dates, location and the type of embroidery being discussed, but within those limits the thesis takes a broad approach, looking at the context in which creative embroidery was produced and at the network of interactions between embroiderers. The impression gained from earlier accounts is that creative embroiderers were a small and relatively insular group who had little involvement with, and even less influence on, the events that took place in the broader art and craft communities, and that if there was any interaction between those who gained some measure of critical success and lesser known embroiderers, the influence went in one direction only. The orthodox view is that a successful embroiderer like Heather Dorrough influenced other practitioners through her teaching and her exhibitions; the possibility that she, in turn, was influenced by other embroiderers is not canvassed. Such assumptions are based on a limited number of secondary sources and to date there has been no account of the development of creative embroidery to challenge them.

This thesis fills that role, providing an account of events in the creative embroidery world which, unlike earlier work, is firmly based on primary sources. Most of the sources used are relatively conventional in nature: published and unpublished documents and physical artefacts, in this case, extant embroideries. However the research also uses less conventional data sources. Only a small proportion of the embroideries created during the years covered by this study have survived and are accessible to the researcher, but unofficial photographic records, mostly in the form of slides, exist for many more. In the field of art history photographic images are often, quite understandably, considered an inferior source of information about art works. However in this study the absence of physical works meant that photographic images were an important source of information, providing evidence that creative embroidery was more diverse in its nature and in some cases more sophisticated than previously thought. The techniques of oral history were also used to gather and document information from embroiderers who had been working in the sixties and seventies, thus generating new data of value not only in this study but for future researchers.

The application of Howard Becker’s sociological theory of art worlds\(^{21}\) to what is essentially an historical study may also be seen as an unusual strategy. However, this theory proved very useful as a tool for analysing the context in which creative embroidery was produced in

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NSW in the sixties. A common approach in history and art history has been to study those people who have achieved public success and critical acclaim, the result being that those who are less well known are overlooked and gradually lost from the public record. If there are no publicly successful individuals, and especially if the products of creative endeavour are ephemeral, a genre may not be studied at all. But Becker draws attention to the fact that many areas of creative practice have characteristics in common with mainstream art worlds and points out that studying these characteristics can illuminate fields of practice in ways that are not possible when attention is focussed primarily on elite artists and their work.

In this thesis I have used the structural characteristics identified by Becker to organise my analysis and discussion of creative embroidery practice in the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies. I use Becker’s theory to suggest that the women involved in creative embroidery in New South Wales developed an ‘art world’ based upon conventions adopted and adapted from British models. His analysis of the ways that participants in an art world cooperate with one another provides a loose structure within which I discuss the growth and development of this art world. The thesis demonstrates that the context in which creative embroidery was produced was far more complex than previous accounts have suggested, with a greater level of interaction between elite and less well known embroiderers than is usually acknowledged. By exposing these interactions, this research makes possible a reassessment of the careers of many embroiderers. It demonstrates that while well known creative embroiderers like Heather Dorrough and Pat Langford had a broad ranging influence on the field, they too were influenced by others. It also reveals the significant role played by Margaret Oppen in promoting the genre of modern or creative embroidery in New South Wales and it demonstrates that Cynthia Sparks, whose exhibition record is quite modest, played a critical role in the development of creative embroidery through her teaching and writing. The thesis documents what is known at this time about less well known creative embroiderers, many of whom warrant further investigation. In doing so it makes a significant contribution to current knowledge of creative embroidery in New South Wales, providing a solid foundation on which further research can build. In its methodological approach it also provides a model that might usefully be applied to the study of other ‘art worlds’, especially those which are poorly served by more conventional approaches to history and art history.

Because of the complex nature of the subject matter, considerable thought has been given to the most appropriate way of organising the discussion. Although the thesis does not provide a strict chronological account, the earlier chapters deal largely with earlier events and activities, while the later chapters deal with issues that arose as the creative embroidery community became more established. Some topics, such as the definition of craft and the
relationship between amateur and professional practice in embroidery, arguably could have been covered in the introductory chapters. However, given the variety of issues covered in the opening chapters it seemed more appropriate to delay the discussion of these topics until I was dealing with those aspects of creative embroidery to which they are most relevant.

In Chapter Two I discuss the methodological principles on which the research is based. This chapter begins with an account of the career of Ann Gillmore Rees, a woman who played a small but significant role in the emergence of modern embroidery in Sydney. I discuss the reasons why she is missing from the literature on art and craft in Australia and discuss the implications of this for historians interested in women artists and embroiderers. I also explain how feminist historians have dealt with the topic of women’s embroidery, explaining why in this thesis I have chosen not to adopt such an approach. Finally, I discuss the practical research strategies and data sources used in this project. In Chapter Three I discuss the difficulties involved in defining embroidery and creative embroidery and assess the advantages and disadvantages of common approaches to writing about embroidery, before proposing the use of Howard Becker’s theory of art worlds as an alternative.

Chapters Four to Six focus on the development of creative embroidery practice in New South Wales. In Chapter Four I discuss the emergence of an ‘embroidery world’ in New South Wales, tracing its origins back to the Arts and Crafts Movement in Britain, and providing a brief overview of embroidery in New South Wales in the first half of the twentieth century. This chapter concludes with the establishment of a branch of the Embroiderers’ Guild in Sydney, highlighting the close links that existed between local and British practice. In Chapter Five I discuss the shared conventions that enabled creative embroiderers to work together cooperatively in this fledgling embroidery world. I outline the ways in which British conventions were transmitted to embroiderers in New South Wales, before discussing the ways in which these conventions were adapted to develop Australian ways of working. Chapter Six deals with the strategies used by embroiderers to consolidate and expand the practice of creative embroidery in New South Wales. In this chapter I discuss the role played by exhibitions and the use of the media in promoting creative embroidery and outline the educational activities intended to spread the conventions of creative embroidery to new practitioners. I also discuss the efforts of embroiderers to have creative embroidery introduced into secondary schools in New South Wales.

Chapters Seven to Nine examine the broader context in which creative embroiderers work and deal more explicitly with the status of creative embroidery and those who practised it. In Chapter Seven I discuss creative embroiderers’ aspirations to have their work viewed and reviewed as ‘art’ and outline the strategies they used in an effort to achieve that end. This chapter looks at the use of exhibitions as a means of positioning embroidery as art, at the
links that existed between creative embroiderers and the fine art world, and at the critical response to creative embroidery in the late sixties and early seventies. In Chapter Eight I discuss the relationship between creative embroiderers and the broader craft world in the late nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies. The issues of what craft is and the relationship between art, craft and design are dealt with only briefly, since to deal comprehensively with these complex and contested topics would have involved the introduction of material that was not relevant to the key theme of the chapter. Having outlined a view of craft that is consistent with the thinking of the period being discussed, I describe the emergence of a ‘craft world’ in New South Wales during the nineteen sixties, before discussing the individual and institutional links that existed between embroiderers and the broader crafts community. Chapter Nine begins by looking at the issue of amateurism and professionalism in the creative embroidery community. I discuss the ways in which amateurs and professionals are defined and outline the strategies used by creative embroiderers to promote themselves as professional practitioners. Finally, I look at the careers of six individual embroiderers, discussing the ways in which they created careers for themselves within the embroidery world they helped to create and assessing the contributions they made to the development of creative embroidery in New South Wales.

In the conclusion I re-affirm my view that the network that arose around the practice of creative embroidery was much more complex than previously thought. I draw conclusions about the success and failures of the creative embroidery world – which aspirations it fulfilled and which it didn't – and I suggest possible topics for further research.
Chapter 2

‘Very little has been recorded about the life of this artist, who seems to have had an exceptionally short working career.’

Brigid Peppin and Lucy Micklethwait

The Story of Ann Gillmore Rees

At an early stage in this project I began calling it ‘The Case of the Missing Embroiderers’. The name referred to the absence of embroiderers from the literature on Australian crafts rather than to the idea that no information about them had been retained. Because of my background as a member of the Embroiderers’ Guild of New South Wales and the Creative Embroidery Association, I felt I was relatively well informed about the period I was researching. I expected to discover additional information about embroiderers I already knew and to identify previously unknown women who were occasional exhibitors during the 1960s and 1970s. However, it seemed inconceivable that anyone who had played a role of any significance in the development of embroidery in New South Wales should have disappeared from public memory within a generation. I didn’t expect to encounter any significant ‘unknown’ individuals; but that is what happened.

One of the names that appears in some documentary sources on embroidery in NSW from the early 1960s is that of Ann Gillmore Rees, a woman previously unknown not just to me but to all of the Embroiderers’ Guild members I questioned. According to these documents Ann Gillmore Rees introduced Margaret Oppen, the founder of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW, to modern embroidery, and she taught the first creative embroidery workshop for the Guild in Sydney in 1959. In a magazine article reporting on the workshop she was described as ‘one of Australia’s leading teachers of embroidery’. ¹ For a researcher interested in the development of modern embroidery in NSW, Ann Gillmore Rees was a figure worthy of further investigation. It seemed reasonable to assume that researching the life and work of such a woman would be relatively straightforward. In fact, the opposite was true.

Ann Gillmore Rees was born in Bristol in England on 29 November, 1900, the second child of Thomas Moravian Carter and Ada Carter. Her birth certificate names her as Doris Adeline Carter. Under that name she attended the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London during the 1920s.² Doris Carter studied wood engraving with Noel Rooke and the

¹ ‘Pictures made from your sewing scraps’, Woman’s Day, 12 October 1959, p.53.
² A college web site records that she was a student in the mid to late twenties. The Central Saint Martins Museum and Study Collection. Makers Details: Carter, Doris A.<http://courses.csm.arts.ac.uk/museum/alumniresult.asp?alumniname=Carter;Doris%20A.;&alumniid
college collection holds a number of her wood engravings and other works on paper. She was also involved in fabric printing, designing textiles for the Footprints Studio, an enterprise that produced textiles for a shop in London called Modern Textiles. Since needlework and embroidery had formed part of the curriculum at the Central School since it was established, it is likely that she also studied embroidery while at art school. Sometime in the late 1920s Doris Carter began working under the name Ann Gillmore Carter and, using that name, illustrated at least three books. One of these was Shaw Desmond’s *The tales of the little sisters of St Francis* (1929), a collection of poetry and Irish folk tales, where sections of text are divided by her wood engravings. Another was *Turn again tales* (1930) by Laurence Housman, where she was one of several illustrators. A third was the *Book of Tobit*, published in 1929 by Mandrake Press but apparently not widely distributed. During the early 1930s Ann Gillmore Carter was living in London and working as a freelance

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4 In 1985, in the catalogue of an exhibition of the work of The Mandrake Press, R.P. Carr, indicated that “No copy of The Book of Tobit has been located … There is presumptive evidence only that this item, decorated by the woodcuts of Ann Gillmore Carter and printed in black letter type, was produced in 1929…” (R Carr, *The Mandrake Press 1929-30: Catalogue of an exhibition*, Cambridge University Library, September-November 1985, Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, 1985, p.48). Dr Carr subsequently acquired a copy of the book from an Australian book dealer which is now in his own collection; one other copy is in a private collection in England. The British Library also holds a copy. Dr Carr now believes that only a small number of copies was printed due to financial problems experienced by the publishing company (Email from Reg Carr, 3 December 2005). Some of the wood engravings used in this edition of the *Book of Tobit* are held in the Central St Martins Archive and Study Centre in London.
illustrator and printmaker. In 1937 she married William Rees and became Ann Gillmore Rees. Shortly thereafter she moved to Australia with her husband.

In 1939 Ann Gillmore Rees exhibited in the Society of Artists annual exhibition and in 1940 and 1941 she participated in exhibitions with the Contemporary Group, which had been formed in 1926 by Roy de Maistre and Thea Proctor. She taught classes at the Children’s Library and Crafts Movement, an organisation that had been established in 1934 to provide free library facilities and craft activities for children. A profile of Ethel Richmond in the Embroiderers’ Guild Record states that she had attended classes in bookbinding and embroidery with Ann Gillmore Rees at the Children’s Library Movement. No other details are given, but the sequence of information included in the profile suggests that the classes that Ethel Richmond attended were aimed at adults rather than children. During the Second World War Ann Gillmore Rees trained volunteers for the Red Cross at Concord Hospital. She also gave a talk on ABC radio in 1943. The talk, on the role of handcraft in rehabilitation work and presumably informed by her work for the Red Cross, was reproduced

5 In a letter to Dent’s publishing company Ann Gillmore Carter indicates that she had done illustration work for a variety of publishers, including Cape, Cassells, Chatto and Windus, and Redfern Publishing (J.M. Dent Records, #11043, Folder 1704, Manuscripts Department, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).

6 There is some ambiguity about exactly when Ann Gillmore Rees arrived in Australia. Roger Butler, the National Gallery of Australia’s curator of prints, states that she moved to Australia in 1939 (Sydney by design: Wood and linoblock prints by Sydney women artists between the wars, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 1995, p.46). However Peter Carter, Ann Gillmore Rees’ nephew, suggests that the couple left for Australia soon after their marriage in late 1937, which would place them in the country in 1938 (Letter from Peter Carter, 5 July 2004).


9 1942/43 Australian Red Cross NSW Division Annual Report states that: ‘During the year, the Rehabilitation Committee was fortunate in securing the services of Mrs A Rees for a period of four months, for the reorganisation of handcraft activities, and the training of voluntary workers. For this purpose a school was established in the Red Cross Store, Sydney, for a period of six weeks, during which a considerable number of new personnel were given free training in return for an undertaking to give a minimum of six months voluntary service to the Society.’ (Extract provided in email from Mr Noel Barrow, Archivist for the Australian Red Cross, 18 August 2003).
in the 1943 edition of the *Society of Artists’ book*. During the 1940s Ann Gillmore Rees designed printed textiles for Marion Hall Best, two of her designs being reproduced in the English journal *The Studio* in 1942. According to Michaela Richards she was a source of inspiration for Marion Hall Best. She also became involved with the NSW Society of Arts and Crafts. In August 1944 Ann Gillmore Rees gave a lecture to the Society titled ‘Flora and fauna in art’, in July 1945 she spoke on ‘Design in craft’, and in February 1946 she organised an exhibition of work for the Society to demonstrate her method of teaching design. When the Society decided to establish a crafts training school, also known as the Double Bay Studio, Ann Gillmore Rees was approached to develop a curriculum, becoming the first principal and the first teacher. As the student numbers increased Margaret Oppen assisted with some of the teaching at the school, thus cementing an acquaintance that played a pivotal role in Margaret Oppen’s later involvement in embroidery. In 1947 Ann Gillmore Rees resigned from her position as principal to return to England with her husband.

Sometime early in the 1950s the Rees returned to Australia and moved to Coleraine in western Victoria, where Bill Rees managed a farm. Ann Gillmore Rees continued her involvement in art, despite living for many years in remote farming communities. While at Coleraine she became involved with a group of women who were interested in art. The group, which called themselves The Gropers, included Lady Mary Gaussen and the garden

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12 M Richards, *The Best style: Marion Hall Best and Australian interior design 1935-75*, Art and Australia, Sydney, 1993, p.20. In the excerpts from autobiographical notes included as an appendix in the book, Marion Hall Best comments on Ann Gillmore Rees’ teaching, with specific reference to her teaching on colour theory and on the psychological meanings of colour. It appears from the Accounts Book of the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW Design School (MLMSS 3645 3(9) MLK 02077, Mitchell Library Sydney) that Marion Hall Best may have attended classes there.

13 Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW Minute Book 1938-1943 and Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW Minute Book 1943-1948 (MLMSS 3645 5(9) MLK 02079, Mitchell Library Sydney)

14 The Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW Diary (MLMSS 3645 3(9) MLK 02077, Mitchell Library Sydney) indicates that Margaret Oppen became involved in the teaching of design at the Double Bay Studio in 1946.

writer Joan Law-Smith. Ann Gillmore Rees taught them practical art classes, gave lectures on art history, and showed films on art. In the early 1960s the Rees’ moved to Woorooma West Station near Moulamein where they lived until retirement. During these years she continued to run workshops for the Gropers. By the time she died in Bundoora in Victoria in 1982, Ann Gillmore Rees had influenced many Australian women artists and designers, including Marion Hall Best, Dora Sweetapple, Joan Law Smith and Margaret Oppen. She had pursued a life in art over a period of some fifty years; working as a printmaker and illustrator, a textile designer, an embroiderer, a painter, and a teacher in two countries.

Yet, despite having led an active artistic life, Ann Gillmore Rees barely registers in accounts of art and craft history in either England or Australia. It isn’t accurate to say that knowledge of Ann Gillmore Rees or that her work was completely lost. Some information is found in published texts. Doris Carter is mentioned in *Object lessons: Central Saint Martins Art and Design Archive* (1996), where a textile length she designed and printed is described as one of the most successful designs produced in the school. Ann Gillmore Carter is listed in the *British dictionary of book illustrators* (1983) which notes: ‘Very little has been recorded about the life of this artist, who seems to have had an exceptionally short working career’, while Ann Gillmore Rees is represented by a brief entry in the first and second editions of McCulloch’s *Encyclopedia of Australian art* – although she has disappeared from the third. She also appears in the catalogues from two exhibitions: the first an exhibition of work by The Gropers, held at Hamilton Art Gallery in 1984; the second ‘Sydney by Design’, a National Gallery of Australia travelling exhibition from 1995. However, she is absent from Cochrane’s *The crafts movement in Australia: A history*, despite her involvement with the

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Arts and Crafts Society of New South Wales, and from Fletcher’s *Needlework in Australia: A history of the development of embroidery*, and she is mentioned only in passing in Joan Kerr’s *Heritage: The women’s art book* in entries on other better known Australian women artists. Furthermore, despite the aforementioned description of her as a leading teacher of embroidery, and having been acknowledged by Margaret Oppen as a significant influence, she is omitted from almost all of the published summaries of the early years of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW. Far from having an exceptionally short career, Ann Gillmore Rees had a long and varied one. So how does an active participant in the art world disappear from or fail to be mentioned in standard accounts of art and craft – and what lessons can be learnt from this?

The reasons for Ann Gillmore Rees’ absence from art and craft narratives are various. First, she was a woman and until relatively recently the story of Australian art has been male oriented. As Terry Smith points out in his additions to the third edition of Bernard Smith’s classic text *Australian painting*, the section of the book covering the years from 1788 to 1990 mentions just forty-three women artists, of whom only twelve are represented by illustrations. Those included were, for the most part, artists like Margaret Preston whose high public profile meant they could not readily be overlooked. Even so, Bernard Smith suggested that the prominence of women artists in the 1920s could be explained away (as if it needed to be) by the First World War, which, he implies, resulted in the loss of a significant number of male artists and interrupted the careers of others. Thus, gender is one reason why Ann Gillmore Rees, along with many other women artists, is absent from male dominated histories of Australian art.

In recent years scholars have turned their attention to recovering the stories of Australian women artists, demonstrating that those grudgingly included by Smith were not aberrations but part of a much larger cohort. However, the task is immense. When Joan Kerr undertook to write *Heritage: The women’s art book* she was able to include 500 individual

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women, but noted that there were many, many more for whom there was no space. 24 Women artists whose work is held in public collections and who left substantial source material for art historians to access have attracted the most scholarly interest. The lesser known, like Ann Gillmore Rees, are not so well served. Since the source material necessary to reconstruct Ann Gillmore Rees’ story is limited, for reasons that will shortly be explored, it is not altogether surprising that she does not feature in these texts. On the other hand her absence from Marion Fletcher’s Needlework in Australia: A history of the development of embroidery is surprising. The Embroiderers’ Guild in Victoria has in its collection several pieces of historical embroidery that were originally owned by Ann Gillmore Rees. As these were given to the Guild by Marion Fletcher who is described in Guild’s catalogue as a ‘friend of the [Rees] family’ 25, it is reasonable to conclude that Marion Fletcher knew of Ann Gillmore Rees’ involvement in embroidery – and yet she is not mentioned in Fletcher’s book.

Another reason for the paucity of references to Ann Gillmore Rees in the literature is that much of the work she did falls into the categories of design and decorative arts, areas that are often considered to be less important than painting and sculpture. She was primarily known as a printmaker, a textile designer and an embroiderer. Printmaking is low on the hierarchy of art media, and block printed textiles lower still. In 1996, at a symposium organised by Central St Martins School of Art to coincide with an exhibition of block printed textiles from their collection, Alan Powers wrote that:

block printing is external to any progressive narrative about design and society’ and that if textiles are modern architecture’s ‘other’, ‘block printed textiles – existing at the outer edge of fashion and associated with children, leisure and impermanence – are even more other than textiles.26

It could be argued that embroidery, with its connotations of domesticity, is located in an even more marginal place.

Working in so-called ‘minor’ techniques is a two-fold handicap. It means that work is less likely to be exhibited in the kinds of exhibitions that leave a record in the form of a printed catalogue. It also means that work is less likely to find its way into public collections or, if it does happen to be acquired, is less likely to be put on public display. The archive at Central Saint Martins School of Art contains a number of student works by Doris Carter, but the

25 Email from Pam Breukhoven, curator of the Embroiderers’ Guild of Victoria’s collection, 20 August 2003.
26 A Powers, ‘Blocked out?’, Crafts, No 139, March April, 1996, p.34.
National Gallery of Australia has just one of Ann Gillmore Rees’ woodcut prints on paper. All of the work shown in the Hamilton exhibition in 1984 came from a private collection and has not been publicly exhibited since. None of Ann Gillmore Rees’ printed textiles or embroideries appears to be held in any collection in Australia, not even the specialist collection of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW, despite her close connections with its founder. The only piece of embroidery in the collection with any connection to Ann Gillmore Rees is a sampler worked by Ethleen Palmer, presumably at the Double Bay Studio. At the time of writing, the only examples of Ann Gillmore Rees’ embroidery that I have been able to locate are a very early embroidered tablecloth, now in private hands, which is unlikely to be representative of her mature work, and a poor black and white reproduction of a canvas-work panel in the Spring 1933 issue of The Studio.

Exhibition catalogues and inclusion in public collections are two criteria frequently used by art historians as a means of determining the significance of an artist. The consequences of this are illustrated by the disappearance of Ann Gillmore Rees from McCulloch’s *Encyclopedia of Australian art*. The criteria used to determine which artists should be included in this publication changed between the first edition, in which Ann Gillmore Rees is included, and the third edition, in which she is not. In 1968 the criteria were broad; they included purchase for an Australian public collection, the award of a prize in an open competition, a significant contribution to publications of art or a reference to the individual in an existing publication, and an outstanding general contribution to art. By the 1984 edition of the book, the criteria had been reduced to a single point: ‘representation, through purchase in a … professionally staffed and curated public art gallery or museum’. Ann Gillmore Rees is represented in the National Gallery of Australia, but her work was gifted to the gallery rather than acquired by purchase. She is typical of many artists who are unable to support themselves solely by selling art works and whose careers are therefore made up of a range of different art related activities. Considering Ann Gillmore Rees’ career as a whole, McCulloch obviously felt she merited inclusion in the earlier editions of the book. However, if the value of an artistic career is determined on the basis of a single criterion, as was the case with the third edition of McCulloch’s *Encyclopedia of art*, then Ann Gillmore Rees –

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27 The National Gallery of Australia does hold a collection of print matrices by Ann Gillmore Rees, along with some of her printmaking tools. These items were donated to the gallery in 1992, some ten years after Ann Gillmore Rees died. Where they were in the meantime is a mystery.


and many others like her – fade from the picture. Given the role played by such reference books in the discipline of art history a cycle of cause and effect is established, the result being the gradual disappearance of individual artists from the annals of art history.

The ‘otherness’ of a genre also means those who work in that mode may be overlooked in histories that seek to provide a story of historic progression, such as Cochrane’s *The crafts movement in Australia: A history*. The story of Ann Gillmore Rees and the Double Bay Art Studio is absent from Cochrane’s narrative because, like creative embroidery, it does not fit the overall theme of that text. The studio was a short lived venture. The school was important to those involved as staff and as students, and some of those individuals are featured in Cochrane’s broader story. However, the brevity of the school’s existence, its untimely closure, and the declining status of the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW mean that this intriguing episode is absent from what is widely regarded as the definitive history of the crafts in Australia.

A further reason for Ann Gillmore Rees’ disappearance is that she is more than usually difficult to track. She changed her name; not once, but twice. A name change sometimes works to an artist’s advantage. Rose MacPherson turned into Margaret Preston and never looked back. An article in the *Women’s Budget* tells us that, like Ann Gillmore Rees, Margaret Preston changed her name twice, beginning her career as Rose MacPherson, changing her working name to Margaret Rose MacPherson and finally becoming Margaret Preston. The un-named author concludes that her success under the different names is evidence of the quality of her work. It is true that Margaret Preston’s career did not suffer as a result of this change of name, but she is the exception rather than the rule. For most people it is as if they are erased and begin again with a blank slate. This is certainly what happened to Ann Gillmore Rees. That Ann Gillmore Carter and Ann Gillmore Rees were the same person was known in Australia but, it seems, not in Britain, while the knowledge that Ann Gillmore Rees and Doris Carter were the same person disappeared with time, retained only by members of her immediate family and her close friends. Furthermore, Ann Gillmore Rees moved to from one country to another, an event which led to the severing of one lot of professional connections and necessitated the establishment of new ones. Not only that, she moved around within her new country and to relatively remote locations. At a time when the Australian art community was centred on Sydney and Melbourne this was a great

31 *Women’s Budget*, 16 December 1931.

32 Others, like contemporary critics Sebastian Smee (*The Australian*, 6-7 August 2005) and John McDonald (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 30-31 July 2005), suggest that it may also have had something to do with her capacity for self-promotion.
disadvantage. Her access to specialist art materials would have been limited, as would have been opportunities to discuss contemporary ideas and critique her own work with other artists. Perhaps the Gropers group at Coleraine fulfilled this function in a limited way, but the evidence suggests that Ann Gillmore Rees was looked to as the leader of the group rather than as one of a group of peers. The Gropers would not have been a substitute for the kinds of professional networks that led to exhibitions and other career building opportunities.

Once Ann Gillmore Rees moved to western Victoria her public career faltered – there are no records of exhibitions after this time and no evidence of ongoing work as a designer. In rural Australia Ann Gillmore Rees was out of sight and out of mind. She committed very little to print and appears to have kept no journals or diaries. Finally, she had no children. There was no-one to keep textiles, sketchbooks, photographs or letters; the source material which is so important for the historian’s work. What documentary evidence there is for Ann Gillmore Rees’ life and work is found in small quantities and in relatively obscure places.

Reconstructing the story of Ann Gillmore Rees has involved the acquisition and assembling of shreds and patches of information. Establishing the link between Doris Carter, Ann Gillmore Carter and Ann Gillmore Rees – the three names she used professionally at different stages of her career – resulted from of a combination of luck, persistence and the use of some unconventional research strategies. Once I learnt that Ann Gillmore Carter had studied at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London, I searched the School’s online database for information. There was no Ann Gillmore Carter listed, but there was a Doris Carter. Scanned copies of Doris Carter’s prints, some with signatures, were included in the database. Using the Google search engine, I had previously located the archives of the publishing company J.M. Dent in the library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and as a consequence had acquired a copy of a letter in Ann Gillmore Carter’s handwriting. I was able to compare the signatures on the letter with the signature seen in the digital image of the print. On the basis of this evidence it seemed almost certain that Doris Carter, Ann Gillmore Carter and Ann Gillmore Rees were the same person, but documentary evidence was still required to confirm this speculation. Locating such evidence proved difficult. Carter is a relatively common English name and Ann Gillmore Rees’ date of birth was variously recorded as 1893, 1899 and 1900; I had no indication of where Ann and Bill

33 The wills of Ann and Bill Rees left everything equally to three female relatives: Ann’s younger sister, who died soon after Ann, Bill’s niece Penrose McIntosh; and Ann’s niece Joan Appleton-Jones. According to Penrose McIntosh the settlement was a financial one (letter from Penny McIntosh, 23 June 2004). Although some of Ann’s personal possessions were distributed amongst friends and acquaintance and have been traced, much of her work appears at this point in time to be lost or untraceable.
Rees married, or when; and in Australia access to death records is usually limited to immediate family members for thirty years after a death. It was only a chance conversation with Megan Martin, curator of the Historic Houses Trust in NSW, which lead to the acquisition of a death certificate. It was further good fortune that Ann was survived by her husband Bill, thus ensuring that the death certificate provided the date and place of Ann’s birth and the date and place of their marriage. Once this information was available it was possible to obtain the relevant documents: the marriage certificate identifies the bride as Ann Gillmore Carter, otherwise known as Doris Adeline Carter.

Reconstructing history

Ann Gillmore Rees’ fate with respect to written histories of art and craft is not unusual. It is a fate shared with countless other women. Arguably many of the reasons why Ann Gillmore Rees is absent from the literature on Australian art and craft are the same reasons that embroidery and embroiderers feature so slightly in the same literature. The reason her story is recounted here is that it focuses attention on the methodology required not just to research her life and career, but also to write an account of creative embroiderers and creative embroidery in New South Wales. Projects such as these require a non-traditional approach to history. They are not the stuff of traditional history, with its focus on economics and politics. Nor are they traditional art history of the sort which focused on the study of iconic works, the works of genius (usually European male) artists. Even Edward Lucie-Smith’s _The story of craft_ (1981) is subtitled _The craftsman’s role in society_ (my emphasis), and where it discusses individuals they are more often male practitioners than female ones. William Morris is discussed at considerable length; May Morris, who played an important role in the Morris Company and in the arts and crafts movement in general, is identified only as the embroiderer of two of her father’s designs.

In her reconstructive account of May Morris’ career, Jan Marsh suggests that May Morris is representative of many other women overlooked by earlier historians of the Arts and Crafts Movement because of ‘gender prejudice’ which dictates what is and is not considered important. Needlework, so often associated with domesticity and non-professional production, was not as highly regarded as the work of ‘those architects, furniture makers, metal workers and glass artists whose work dominates [those] histories.’

34 As far back as 1976 Gordon, Bule and Dye suggested that the lack of women’s histories is due to traditional

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Feminism and embroidery

The changing context in which embroidery has been produced over the centuries is discussed by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology.* They explain that embroidery has not always been an exclusively female craft. Until the Middle Ages needlework was executed by men and women at all levels of society. However, with the advent of *Opus Anglicanum* embroidery, which was an exacting technique requiring exceptional skill, the practice of embroidery as a commercial enterprise passed into the hands of the Guilds which regulated training and work practices. In effect, these Guilds were a combination of professional association and trade union. At first women had a place in the Guild system, though not necessarily as full members, but eventually a split occurred whereby professional embroiderers were men and amateur embroiderers were women. Parker and Pollock place this change in the mid to late 16th century. They argue that what followed from this was an emerging view of embroidery as a pastime suitable for

36 Gordon, Buhle and Dye, ‘The Problem of Women’s History’, p.82.

This discussion is found in Chapter 2 ‘Crafty women and the hierarchy of the arts’, pp. 58 – 67.
gentlewomen, a practice that symbolized domestic virtue, and which was trivialised as a result.

Parker expanded on these ideas in *The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine*.39 Parker’s central thesis is that since the time of the Renaissance embroidery has been used as a means of subjugating women, of training them to be submissive. She explains how in the sixteenth century amateur embroidery became more widespread, aided by the availability of professionally drawn patterns and printed pattern books, until eventually embroidery came to be considered an exclusively female occupation. According to Parker, over the following centuries the teaching of embroidery, and especially the practice of producing samplers, was used to ‘inculcate obedience, submission, passivity and virtue’ in young women40, until by the nineteenth century embroidery was seen as ‘evidence of the naturalness of femininity’.41 After several chapters in which she lays out the evidence in support of this view of embroidery, Parker goes on to argue that in spite of this history, some women have used embroidery as a form of resistance. Drawing on these precedents she concludes by suggesting that embroidery could be used as a tool in the service of feminism.

The publication of *The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine* was an important milestone in writing about embroidery. It was not the first feminist reading of embroidery. Numerous articles had previously been published in journals such as the *Women’s Art Magazine* and *LIP*, and in Australia an exhibition titled *The D’oyley Show*, organised by a group known as the Women’s Domestic Needlework Group had been held at the Watters Gallery in Sydney in 197942, predating *The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine* by several years. However, at the time of its publication Parker’s book was the most substantial feminist critique of embroidery and it helped to establish domestic embroidery as a subject for academic discussion outside of the context of the museum – at least as far as feminist scholars are concerned.

40 Parker, *The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine*, p.128.
Embroidery and the making of the feminine was followed by an increased interest in the use of 'domestic' embroidery for political purposes; in Britain its publication coincided with an exhibition of the same title curated by Penina Barnett. In Australia, Jennifer Isaac’s *The gentle arts: 200 Years of Australian women’s domestic and decorative arts* and *The champions: Two Queensland embroiderers*, a study of two Queensland women who competed over several decades for embroidery prizes at agricultural shows, can be attributed to feminist interest in women’s domestic craft. However, there are potential pitfalls associated with any theoretical or ideologically driven history. Just as Cochrane omitted aspects of craft history that did not fit her overall theme, the feminist historian also runs the risk of excluding aspects of a subject that do not fit the thesis being expounded.

In *Sightlines: Women’s art and feminist perspectives in Australia*, a survey of women’s art from the 1970s onward, Sandy Kirby writes that:

> The textile crafts, most closely identified with women, were promoted by the women’s art movement from its inception. … As women reassessed the artistic validity and potential of their skills, all types of sewing from machine work to hand embroidery, tapestry, crocheting, weaving and knitting were explored along with newer interests and less well known techniques like basket work, fabric printing and paper making.

Nevertheless, when it comes to specific discussion of individuals and their work, embroiderers do not feature to any significant degree. What is interesting about the account is what is left out, as much as what is included. Kirby writes from the perspective of someone who was involved in the women’s movement in the seventies, and consequently focuses on work that would have come within the realm of these women’s groups – University or art school educated women, mostly younger, and most of them with an overtly feminist ideology. Kirby either didn’t know about people working in other areas, or preferred to leave them out. She was, for example, aware of the proportion of women involved in craft exhibitions in the sixties, but of those women practicing embroidery in New South Wales in the early 1970s the only person who rates a specific mention is Heather

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43. The subversive stitch: *Embroidery in women’s lives 1300-1900*, 27 May – 29 August 1988, Whitworth Art Gallery.


Dorrough, who by the time that Kirby was writing had exhibited a collection of textile self portraits with identifiable feminist content.\textsuperscript{47}

Creative embroidery as it was practised in Sydney in the sixties and seventies does not fit comfortably in feminist accounts of embroidery, particularly those which, like the \textit{D'Oyley Show} catalogue, approach the topic from a Marxist perspective and limit their analysis to embroidery produced for domestic purposes. The solution adopted by most authors is to leave them out of the accounts altogether. In one respect this is regrettable, leading to the omission of a significant aspect of embroidery history from the literature on textiles and embroidery. However, although it is possible to see the activities of the Sydney creative embroiderers, in particular the shift of embroidery during the from a private and personal activity to a more public endeavour, as part of a broader changes in the role and status of women, to explain them in terms of feminist politics would misrepresent them. Rather than following an overtly feminist agenda, these embroiderers followed a less rebellious path, first developing a supportive environment in which they could practice their chosen craft and then attempting to engage cooperatively, rather than confrontationally, with the broader art and craft community.

The women involved in creative embroidery in New South Wales in the period covered by this thesis would have neither described themselves, nor have been described by others, as geniuses – and the embroideries that they produced are not considered to be iconic art works in the field of art history. It could be argued that many of the women involved in creative embroidery in New South Wales in the 1960s were atypical – in some cases even eccentric. When discussing her life in art, Fay Bottrell described herself as a bohemian, in contrast with some of her colleagues who she characterised as quite conventional. She dressed differently; she mixed with the ‘Sydney Push’, a group of left wing intellectuals; and she ‘was not very ladylike’.\textsuperscript{48} Others, like Dorothea Allnutt, were not radicals; but neither were they typical suburban housewives. The Allnutt family home is remembered as being very eclectic or ‘arty’, with polished floorboards at a time when wall-to-wall carpet was \textit{de rigeur} and Dorothea’s granddaughter recalls her grandmother’s dress sense as being ‘pretty out there’.\textsuperscript{49} Nevertheless, to the casual observer most creative embroiderers were ordinary upper middle class women with relatively conventional lives whose involvement in embroidery was an enjoyable, but perhaps slightly frivolous, pastime. Because they were not involved in cutting

\textsuperscript{47} Heather Dorrough’s ‘Self portraits’ exhibition was shown at the Crafts Council Gallery in Sydney in 1982.

\textsuperscript{48} Conversation with Fay Bottrell, 23 February 2004.

\textsuperscript{49} Conversation with Frances Brownscombe and Kitty Blackman, 23 February 2003.
edge developments in the art world, and were not ‘oppressed’ or ‘heroic’ in feminist terms, their activities have not attracted the interest of art historians or of feminist scholars. Nor have they attracted the attention of scholars in the area of ‘visual studies’, who are more often interested in popular and working class culture than they are in middle class culture.

However, the development of creative embroidery in New South Wales as a form of personal visual expression was part of a broader set of cultural changes occurring in NSW in the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies, and the activities of the embroiderers involved were the foundation on which later developments in textile art were built. David Green was brought to Australia as a visiting artist by the Crafts Board of the Australia Council in 1976, a visit that is sometimes identified as being the catalyst for developments in embroidery and stitched textiles in Australia. 50 The fact that the Australia Council looked for an embroiderer rather than someone working in another area of textiles, as well as the enthusiastic response to his workshops and lectures, is evidence that there was already a flourishing local embroidery community. To acknowledge this fact – or that he was not the first overseas embroiderer to undertake a teaching tour in Australia – does not diminish his impact; although it does help to account for it. He was working with an audience that was prepared by fifteen years of exposure to the idea that embroidery could used as a medium for creative expression. By 1978 fibre or textiles was being taught in some form in fourteen tertiary institutions in New South Wales, surpassed only by ceramics 51, while surveys of the crafts in Australia indicate that textiles in its various forms was – and still is – among the most widely practised of all the crafts. The Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Crafts in Australia (1975) indicated that when spinning, weaving and other forms of textiles were combined, the textile crafts were a close second to ceramics in the number of practitioners, while in 1997 Claire Bardez and David Throsby reported that 35% of craftspeople surveyed worked in fibre and textiles, surpassing potters and ceramicists who made up 23% of those surveyed. 52 Craft histories that overlook creative embroidery present what is, at best, an

50 David Green, Des. RCA, is currently Professor of Visual Art at Charles Sturt University. He first came to Australia in 1975 on a lecture and workshop tour organised by the Australia Council and returned in 1978 to take up a position as Senior Lecturer in Textile Design at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. He is widely acknowledged to have played a significant role in the development of textile art in Australia. For a discussion of his influence, see J Montgarrett, ‘Remembering the memorable’, Textile Fibre Forum, No 74, 2004, pp. 14-17.

51 D Williams, Craft education and training in Australia. A report to the Crafts Board of the Australia Council, Arts Information Program of the Australia Council, North Sydney, 1978, p.29.

52 Committee of Enquiry into the Crafts in Australia, The crafts in Australia : report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Crafts in Australia, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1975,

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impoverished view of the cultural landscape. They also perpetuate the myth that those
embroiderers who did achieve public recognition were maverick individuals who somehow
emerged from their studios fully formed. A study of the development of creative embroidery
in New South Wales is one way of redressing these problems.

The influence of feminism, Marxism, semiotics and post-structuralism, which has broadened
the scope of historical investigation, has created a space in which such research can occur. It
has also led to a reassessment of other tenets of history, including the idea that it is possible
to write a definitive account of any set of events. History is no longer seen as a science in
which it is possible to interrogate data and determine an objective and uncontested historical
narrative. In *The new art history: A critical introduction*, Jonathon Harris argues that we
should not do away with the notion of ‘truth’ altogether, but that we should adapt our
concept of what it means:

> truth understood as an [my emphasis] account of the world, and of artworks within it, that is
based on certain assumptions, ideas and values that can be stated, backed up with evidence as
part of an argument, and that therefore remain subject to dispute.  

In the case of this project, as in many historical investigations, the quantity and nature of the
sources available mean that although it is possible to reconstruct an account, such an account
can only ever be partial. Thus, this thesis should be seen as a provisional account of the
development of creative embroidery in New South Wales, one which is potentially subject to
revision or reconstruction at some point in the future as new information comes to light –
just as the account of Ann Gillmore Rees’ career has developed over time.

If post-modernism has called into question the notion that there can be one definitive account
of any set of historical events, it has also challenged the notion of objectivity. There are
those who continue to believe that the historian should aspire to objectivity. Barbara
Tuchman writes:

> I believe that the material must precede the thesis, that chronological narrative is the spine
and the bloodstream that bring history closer to ‘how it really was’ and to a proper
understanding of cause and effect; that whatever the subject, it must be written in terms of
what was known and believed at the time, not from the perspective of hindsight, for
otherwise the result will be invalid.  

Although Tuchman’s use of the phrase ‘how it really was’ was made in the context of a call
for history writing that provides a robust and readable narrative, the underlying assumption

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is that it is somehow possible to provide a definitive, objective account of a particular set of
events.

By contrast, post-modern historians argue that no historical account is completely objective.  
Every historian and the history they produce is a product of the time in which they write, of  
the data that is available to them, and of prevailing ideologies.  According to Jonathon  
Harris, the work of ‘traditional’ early 20th century art historians like Wolfflin and Panofsky  
demonstrates that ‘intellectual work always has a base of social values and interests which  
initiates and then drives the enquiry in certain directions.’ These may be identified as  
prejudices, but that this is not to say that they are a bad thing:

…the positive meanings of ‘prejudice’ and ‘discrimination’, within scholarly activity, are to  
do with acknowledging that all intellectual tasks begin with the identification of a problem or  
issue that requires examination. This is always a problem or issue identified by an actual  
person, for whom that problem or issue is important – significantly linked, that is, to their  
understanding of the world and of the importance of specific things within it. The genesis of  
all intellectual activity, therefore, is inevitably related to a person’s world-view, perspective,  
and the interests and values associated with it.  

Gaye Tuchman expresses a similar idea:

Whether done by social scientists or historians, historical work requires a point of view. A  
point of view necessarily includes an interpretive framework that implicitly contains some  
notion of ‘the meaning of history’.  

In other words, since the act of ‘doing history’ involves the researcher in setting parameters  
and priorities for their work, history can never be completely objective. What the historian  
must do is to make every effort to ensure that their own perspectives do not taint the  
research; that the motives for carrying out the study don’t affect the historical activity itself.  
As John Tosh puts it, ‘our priorities in the present should determine the questions we ask of  
the past, not the answers.’  

The effect that an individual world view can have on the writing of history is demonstrated  
by a comparison of the accounts of embroidery in Parker’s The subversive stitch:  
Embroidery and the making of the feminine and The embroiderer’s story, written by  

55 Harris, The new art history: A critical introduction, p.36.  
56 Harris, The new art history: A critical introduction, pp.36-37.  
57 G Tuchman, ‘Historical social science: Methodologies, methods and meanings’, in NK Denzin and  
Thomasina Beck. While it is hard to argue with some of Parker’s conclusions, for example that embroidery was used at certain times to instil in young girls the values of obedience and piety, one cannot help concluding that her feminist reading presents only half the picture. For some women, it is true, embroidery was a tedious and unrewarding pastime, as indicated by the quotes that Parker includes as evidence: ‘and for my needle I absolutely hated it’ and ‘Polly Cook did it and she hated every stitch in it’. However for many women, embroidery was, and remains, a source of pleasure and intellectual stimulation. The stories included in Thomasina Beck’s *The embroiderers’ story: Needlework from the Renaissance to the present day*, which covers the same time period as Parker but from a completely different perspective, are evidence of this other side of embroidery.

Roszika Parker writes from a feminist perspective and, one suspects, from the point of view of someone who is not an embroiderer. For her, embroidery is complicit in the subjugation of women and while she writes about the use of embroidery by feminist artists, it is clear that she has an ambivalent attitude to the craft. The contemporary embroiderers she cites are women who use embroidery for its connotations, not those who chose to embroider for the pleasure of the process and the sensuous qualities of the materials used. Thomasina Beck, on the other hand, is an embroiderer and writes from the perspective of one who knows that many women derive great pleasure from designing and producing original embroidery. At times both writers use the same primary source material, but interpret the data in very different ways. Between 1654 and 1656 Hannah Smith worked an embroidered casket, now in the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester. According to Parker, this project represents an example of the use of needlework as: ‘an instrument of suppression’, one of a ‘series of needlework projects imposed on small girls’, intended to inculcate feminine behaviour.

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60 Parker, *The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine*, p.84

61 Parker, *The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine*, p.132


63 Parker, *The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine*, p.205-207. On these pages Parker discusses the work of Beryl Weaver, Kate Walker and Catherine Riley. Weaver uses the iconography of twentieth century fancywork to comment on the negative impact of domestic femininity; Walker stitches samplers with subversive aphorisms and Riley’s use of whitework embroidery ‘parodies the emotions associated with needlework’ (p.207).

64 Parker, *The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine*, p.87.
This reading is undermined by a note recording details of the casket and her feelings on its completion which Hannah Smith placed into the casket. Beck discusses the note placed by Hannah Smith in this way:

… she expresses feelings that we as embroiderers can relate to at once, as we too have experienced the same pleasure and satisfaction when a special project is completed, and we too want it valued. She ends her note telling us that it was written not only for her benefit, but for ‘those that shall enquire about it’.65

On the one hand we have suppression; on the other pleasure and satisfaction. The work of both writers is profoundly influenced by their distinctive values – Parker’s by her perspective as a feminist academic historian; Beck’s by her experience as an embroiderer.

The way to deal with the issue is not to pretend that such ‘prejudices’ don’t exist, but to acknowledge your standpoint, allowing it to enrich but not compromise your work. This account of embroidery in the sixties and seventies is influenced by my own perspective as an embroiderer, and by my acquaintance with some of the individuals whose careers I discuss. The project was motivated from the outset by my belief that creative embroiderers were more active and more inventive than has generally been acknowledged, that they were ambitious in their desire to raise the profile of embroidery, and that the network of interactions between embroiderers and other participants in the art and crafts communities was more complex than previous writers have revealed. On a practical level this insider’s position and perspective proved useful. It facilitated access to data held in private hands, it opened avenues for further investigation and it was of considerable help when I was faced with trying to identify unknown embroiderers or the writers of anonymous articles. The challenge has been to maintain a degree of objectivity when interpreting the available data, especially with respect to the final research question which involved evaluating the influence of embroiderers on later practice in the field.

Using source material

History writing, however conceived, involves collecting data, interpreting it and constructing a narrative. Traditional history relies heavily on documentary evidence, much of which has been carefully preserved and made available to researchers in libraries and archives. By contrast, non-traditional areas of study, where documentary evidence is either fragmentary or non-existent, require a more lateral approach. A wide variety of theoretical approaches have been used to assess, analyse and interpret recent craft practice in Australia. In Craft in society: An anthology of perspectives, Noris Ioannou suggests that research and writing on the crafts requires an interdisciplinary approach, one that will ‘borrow and meld theory and

65 Beck, *The embroiderer’s story: Needlework from the Renaissance to the present day*, p.7.
methodology from various disciplines’. A similar belief is expressed by the historian John Tosh, with respect to the tools and methods of history. Tosh suggests that history is a hybrid discipline and as such can usefully employ a variety of different approaches to source material. This project required just such an approach. Thus the documentary sources that were available were supplemented by the use of oral evidence, and examination of extant embroideries was supplemented by reference to photographic records.

**Documentary sources**

Written sources have played an important role in this research; although rather than the lofty sources of political history the sources in this case are more humble. If, as Grace Cochrane and others have observed, history is that which is written down, one of the problems faced by a researcher studying women’s craft is that so little is written down, and that which is written is often not easily found by researchers. Fortunately for this project, the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW has since 1960 produced a monthly newsletter titled *The Record* which has served, as the name suggests, as a record of the activities of the organisation. Included within its pages are descriptive reports of guild activities, advance notice of outside activities of interest to the members, commentary by various individuals, and biographical information about key members. In later years black and white photographs of work were also sometimes included.

*The Record* proved to be a rich source of information, providing leads to be followed up elsewhere and valuable insight into the changing philosophies that influenced the direction of the organisation. However, its use presented some difficulties. The first of these was the practice, adhered to until the early 1970s, of referring to married women by their husband’s name. In instances where the family name was unusual, where the women played a major role in the Guild over several years, or where they were women known to me, this was not a major problem. I knew, for example, that Mrs Jack Joynes was Heather Joynes and that Mrs Sydney Langford was Pat Langford. However in some cases persistent enquiries were necessary to make a confident identification, and in others it proved to be impossible. Another difficulty was that the name of the author was rarely appended to an article. In some instances it was possible to work out who the author was. It was usually possible to identify an entry written by Margaret Oppen, internal evidence helped to identify articles written by Cynthia Sparks, and it can be assumed that a certain amount of copy was written by the editor of the day; but in many cases the authorship of an article remains uncertain.

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67 Tosh, *The pursuit of history*. 

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Since written records are almost always influenced by the particular ideas and concerns of the individual who generates them, this is a potential problem. Where the author of an article remains unidentified, consideration must be given to the possibility that an account of events may reflect the ideas and concerns of an individual or sub-group rather than a more widespread view. In the case of the Embroiderers’ Guild this is of particular relevance, given what appears to have been the existence of ‘creative’ and ‘traditional’ factions from the very early years.

Articles on embroidery and related activities are also found, in modest quantities, in the newspapers of the period. Most of these articles are found in the women’s pages, with additional relevant articles sometimes being written by the newspaper’s arts reporter. It is apparent from the clippings found in the archives at the Embroiderers’ Guild that articles on embroidery were published in suburban or regional newspapers, although these newspapers are less likely to be collected by libraries than the major daily newspapers. Craft related articles were also frequently included in women’s magazines such as the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, the *Woman’s Day* and the *New Idea*. My initial intention was to study long runs of the major print publications from the fifteen years covered in the thesis. As the time required was disproportionately high for the amount of data gathered, this plan was eventually abandoned in favour of a more targeted approach. *The Record* generally noted press coverage of embroidery related activities, while many individual embroiderers kept scrapbooks of clippings or recorded the details in their curriculum vitas. This information enabled many of the original articles to be located. The clippings found in the archives of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW and in the scrapbooks of individual embroiderers provided useful additional information, although in many cases their value was limited by the fact that they are not labelled as to source or date. Much of the time it was possible to use external evidence to ascribe a rough date to an article but it was more difficult, sometimes impossible, to identify the publication itself. These sources were supplemented by the strategy of looking for press coverage around the time of significant events like exhibitions. No doubt some newspaper articles were overlooked as a consequence, but sufficient were collected to develop a picture of the way that embroidery was reported in the popular press. For the later years *Craft Australia* was an important source, not only for articles on embroidery but as a record of the growth and development of the crafts in general in Australia, while *Embroidery*, the magazine of the English Embroiderers’ Guild was a valuable source of information on British practice and also provided some data on Australian embroidery.

Published material on embroidery was supplemented by the use of unpublished documents, although the availability of such material proved variable. The Embroiderers’ Guild archive includes material such as minute books and copies of some correspondence, as well as
exhibition catalogues from the early years of the organisation. Unfortunately, apart from books recording the dispatch and receipt of the lessons of a creative correspondence course which began in 1974, records of attendance at workshops and classes have not been retained. The Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales archive is preserved in the Mitchell Library in Sydney and provided useful information on the earlier experiences of many embroiderers. The Creative Embroiderers’ Association kept minute books, slides and records of their exhibitions, but when the organisation dissolved in 1995 no permanent home could be found for this material. At present it is in the care of the author, a solution that proved extremely convenient during this research and has ensured its survival, but which is less than satisfactory in terms of making it accessible to other researchers.

The availability of unpublished documents relating to individual embroiderers depends on at least two things. First, the embroiderer has to have maintained a personal archive. Second, this archive must be preserved. Whether or not a personal archive exists in the first place depends to a large extent on the way that an embroiderer perceives their own embroidery practice. Those who trained as artists and saw themselves as professional practitioners, like Pat Langford and Heather Dorrough, are more likely to have maintained a personal archive than those whose involvement in embroidery evolved from a pastime to a serious pursuit. However, maintaining an archive is no guarantee of its long-term preservation. In the case of Pat Langford, all of her papers along with the embroideries that remained in her possession have been preserved by her family. By contrast, Dorothea Allnutt had kept records of her teaching and the lectures she gave when she travelled to Great Britain in the early 1970s, but when she entered a nursing home towards the end of her life these documents were disposed of by her family, who thought at the time they were of no lasting value.  

**Oral history sources**

The lack of documentary evidence is not an uncommon problem for researchers in less traditional areas of historical investigation. One solution is to be found in the approaches of oral history, in which information is gained by interviewing individuals about past events. Retrospective interviews – the primary tool of the oral historian – enable the collection of evidence about the recent past which is not supplied by documentary sources. In this project oral evidence was used in conjunction with other data. The approach I used does not adhere strictly to the principles of oral history that would be applied if oral evidence was the primary or sole source of data, those which govern matters such as sampling, interview

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68 Conversation with Jenny Blackman, 24 November 2002.
Two categories of oral evidence were used in the research. As the Embroiderers’ Guild approached its thirtieth anniversary Dr Ann Ross, a Guild member at the time, undertook to interview women who had been actively involved in the organisation during its early years. The tapes of these interviews were transcribed and the transcripts lodged in the Guild archives. As a number of the women who were interviewed have since died, the transcripts are a particularly important source of information about those individuals, despite the presence of some inaccuracies. Information was also gathered through interviews or conversations. I spoke with a number of embroiderers who had been actively involved in creative embroidery as exhibitors and/or teachers in the sixties and early seventies, and also with relatives and acquaintances of some of the embroiderers who are no longer alive. Since each person’s experiences within the embroidery world of the period were different, a different set of questions was prepared for each conversation, based on my existing knowledge of the individual’s career. These were used as a general guideline for the conversations rather than as a formal interview schedule, for new questions inevitably arose as the conversations evolved. In most cases the conversations took place face to face, and were recorded and subsequently transcribed. However, in some instances it was not possible to meet with an informant in person and the conversation took place by telephone, with notes being made. In one or two cases the ‘conversation’ occurred solely through written correspondence. Although not strictly speaking ‘oral history’ the information obtained through the written communication must be evaluated with the same degree of caution as that gathered in a face to face conversation.

Those who write about the techniques of oral history raise the question of the fallibility of human memory. They agree that memories are constructed, influenced by emotions, and subject to change; nevertheless they argue in favour of using oral sources, with certain provisos. An example of an incorrectly remembered details appears in the transcript of one of the interview carried out by Dr Ann Ross, where Chiquita Cullip, who had previously served as the Guild’s secretary, recalled a workshop taught for the Guild by Dora Sweetapple:

… she had this marvellous sense of colour, and we had to do a kitchen. In fabric, [sic] and we were given the design … a bottle and a frypan and some leaves. We threw in pieces of

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material into the middle of the floor and each one of us chose our pieces, and then we had to
cut them up and sew them together, and Diana [Pockley] and I were very surprised because
the Woman’s Weekly had chosen to do a picture and mine was chosen, and Diana said she
couldn’t think why mine was chosen?  

The workshop did, indeed, take place – but the teacher was Ann Gillmore Rees, not Dora
Sweetapple, and the magazine which reported it was the Woman’s Day, not the Woman’s
Weekly. Thus, the most obvious caution in the use of oral evidence is the importance of
cross-checking information wherever possible.

Different people interpret events in different ways and they construct their narratives to suit
their own values and intentions, even though they may not be aware that this is what they are
doing. In assessing the information obtained from oral sources it is important to pay
attention to context – who is speaking and in what context, as well as the concerns that may
have influenced their interpretation of particular events. Joan Sangster notes, for example,
that women’s narratives are often characterised by understatement, that women often
emphasise the role of other family members in their recollections and they often use events
in their family life cycle as markers. The former was in evidence during my conversation
with Heather Dorrough when she drew my attention to the times that her career intersected
most closely with that of her husband. The latter was most obvious when I spoke with
Dorothea Allnutt’s daughter, Jenny Blackman, when details about the timing of the events in
Dorothea’s life were established by cross-checking them with significant events in her
daughter’s life. In neither instance does this devalue the information provided. The issue is
to be vigilant when interpreting the data, identifying that which is fact and that which is
interpretation of a particular set of events or circumstances. In the latter case, a broader
perspective can be obtained by seeking alternative views of the same situation.

Material artefacts and other visual sources

Finally, some comment must be made about the use of material artefacts, in this case
embroideries, as a primary source. The importance of the object to the art historian is self
evident: without art works there would be no art history. Art historians are concerned with a
vast array of topics, from the lives of individual artists, to matters of aesthetic judgement, or
the operation of the art market; but the central objects of study that make all the other things
matter are the individual art works. Art objects are treated by art historians as evidence

70 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross, Mrs Isabel Craig and Mrs Chiquita Cullip, 9 March,
1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.

71 J Sangster, ‘Telling our stories: feminist debates and the use of oral history’, Women’s History
which reveals something of the time, place and circumstances of their production. Works of creative embroidery can serve as evidence in the same way. In the case of Ann Gillmore Rees, I have argued that the small number of extant art works and the limited access to these has contributed to her absence from the literature of art and craft histories in Australia, while the lack of extant embroideries makes it impossible to evaluate her success as an embroiderer. In the case of creative embroidery, the situation is not quite as dire – but the availability of, and access to, extant embroideries is limited by comparison with more traditional art forms.

By far the largest evidence of embroideries from the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies exists in the form of photographic images. Today concerns about copyright are such that photographing work in exhibitions is generally not allowed, but in the sixties and seventies it was common practice. Most of the embroiderers I spoke with had significant slide collections which documented their own work, work of their students, and work from exhibitions they had seen. The archives of the Embroiderers’ Guild and the archives of the Creative Embroidery Association also contain many slides. While these photographic records have been a useful source of information, there are limitations involved in using these slides as data. One obvious problem is the degrading of images, particularly with respect to colour balance: which is more noticeable in some slides than others. Another is the poor quality of those slides taken by photographers with limited technical skills. Many of the images are badly framed and slightly out of focus. And of course there is the problem that photographs are a less than adequate way of assessing the full impact of work where the use of texture is one of its essential qualities.

A more serious issue is that of identification of the images. A considerable number of the slides to which I had access have no labels at all, while many more were minimally labelled. Many are labelled only with the name of the embroiderer, some include a title, and in some cases there is also a date. Some slides also contain a date impressed into the slide mount during processing. These dates can be used to establish the latest possible date that a work was made, but since it is not possible to identify whether a slide is an original or a duplicate, they cannot be used to positively date a work. Cross checking with exhibition catalogues can assist in identification and dating of an image, but since the catalogues from the period often contain several works with similar names and since there is clear evidence of work being exhibited on repeated occasions, any conclusions can only be tentative. Another problem when an image is the only record of a work is that of scale; it is very rare to find a

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slide labelled with the dimensions of the work. The practice of labelling slides with information about the media used was almost non-existent. The likelihood is that the vast majority of these slides will remain anonymous, providing a broad picture of the type of embroidery produced during the period but of little use in building records of the embroidery careers of the women who created them.

Viewing photographic images of work from the period enables one to draw conclusions about the subject matter common in the period, the style of the work and, to some extent, the materials and the techniques employed. However, this must be supplemented by an examination of those examples that are extant and accessible. In a medium where the haptic qualities of the work are central to the meanings it conveys and where these qualities are often poorly conveyed by photographic reproduction, there is no substitute for direct study of the embroideries themselves. There were numerous opportunities for exhibiting embroidery from the mid-sixties on, but while many embroiderers took advantage of these opportunities, for most of them selling embroideries was not a goal. Although the work may have been publicly shown at some point, and perhaps even recorded in a printed catalogue, much of what they created stayed within the private sphere – displayed in the family home or given to relatives and friends. While it is quite likely that many of these embroideries have been preserved, the difficulty of identifying and locating them often makes them inaccessible to the researcher. As the unfolding account of Ann Gillmore Rees’s career demonstrates, public records can be useful in this regard. However access to such records is restricted in many places due to privacy laws and often there is insufficient information available to make use of such records even if they are accessible.

It is the work of those embroiderers who saw themselves as professional artists and who did offer their work for sale that is more readily available to current scholars, for two reasons. One is that some of this work was purchased by collecting bodies, or was acquired by private collectors and subsequently donated to museum collections. The collection of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW includes a number of embroideries from the period. In the early years of the organisation Margaret Oppen often purchased embroideries from exhibitions and donated them to the collection. Over the years the collection of work from the era has been expanded, some works being donated by the maker and others from private collections.

A number of embroideries are also held in the collection of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, although the Museum does not appear to be actively adding to the collection. In 1989 the Powerhouse Museum was offered the opportunity to acquire Dawn Fitzpatrick’s work *The Prime Ministers’ Wives*, a large work from the late 1970s, but declined because the
piece did not fit with the Museum’s current priorities.\textsuperscript{73} Similarly, the National Gallery of Australia holds within its collection a number of creative embroideries, including works by Pat Langford, Prue Socha, Heather Dorrough and Fay Bottrell. Most of these entered the collection in 1980, when the Gallery acquired the collection of the Crafts Council\textsuperscript{74}, but although the National Gallery of Australia has a Decorative Arts and Design collection there have been few recent additions to its holdings of embroidery.

The second reason that the work of professionals is relatively accessible is that most of these embroiderers retained a representative collection of their own work, and not infrequently also collected the work of their peers. My ability to access these works was no doubt enhanced by my existing contacts with many embroiderers from the period and by the close links that existed within the embroidery community in the sixties and seventies. In cases where I wasn’t personally acquainted with an embroiderer, one of the women I did know was usually able to provide a note of introduction, facilitating my access to the individual and to their work.

Despite the fact that embroideries are frequently preserved within the domestic sphere and some find their way into museum collections, long term survival of embroideries is never a certainty. Three examples demonstrate this point. In the mid-1960s the Metropolitan Water, Sewerage and Drainage Board acquired a large appliquéd wall hanging by Heather Dorrough, for display in the organisation’s head office. The work was exhibited in the Fourth International Crafts Exhibition in Stuttgart in 1969 and reproduced in Patricia Thompson’s \textit{Twelve Australian craftsmen} in 1973. It was a significant work of the period. However, when Sydney Water, the current incarnation of the Board, was contacted for information about the whereabouts of the hanging, MacLaren North, the Heritage Manager, reported that: ‘A few people remember the hanging, but as a fairly distant memory. It is definitely no longer hanging on our exec (sic) level, and I doubt it is up anywhere else in the building.’\textsuperscript{75} Its fate is unknown.

Another example of lost embroidery is a large canvaswork hanging \textit{The Moment of Temptation}, designed by Margaret Oppen and worked by a group of women who attended classes at her home, which was shown at the Adelaide Arts Festival in 1968. A photograph depicting the hanging was used by the \textit{Women’s Weekly} to illustrate an article about

\textsuperscript{73} Letter from Grace Cochrane to Justin Fitzpatrick, 1989, Dawn Fitzpatrick artist’s file, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

\textsuperscript{74} R Bell, \textit{Transformations: The language of craft}, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 2005, p.viii.

\textsuperscript{75} Email communication from MacLaren North, 13 February 2004.
Margaret Oppen.\textsuperscript{76} At over a metre square, this embroidery was a major undertaking and yet it has disappeared. Conrad and Alice Oppen, Mrs Oppen’s son and daughter-in-law, do not know what became of this work; nor does Pat Olney, one of the women who embroidered the panel.\textsuperscript{77} The Oppen family retains only a very small number of embroideries and paintings and much of Margaret Oppen’s work in embroidery is untraceable.

The final example is that of Heather Joynes’ \textit{Cascade} (c.1973). This embroidery was selected for display at the 1974 World Crafts Exhibition in Toronto. It was also exhibited at the Art Gallery of NSW in 1973, one of the few embroideries to have been shown in that venue. For that reason alone it would be regarded as a significant work of embroidery from the period covered by this thesis. When questioned about the work, Heather Joynes indicated that, faced with the difficulties of storing such a large work, she recycled the beads used in its construction and threw the rest of the work away.\textsuperscript{78} No doubt, many more embroideries have suffered similar fates to the three examples cited here.

\textbf{Conclusion}

As the story of Ann Gillmore Rees clearly demonstrates, the absence of information in published sources cannot always be taken as proof that there is no story to tell. Even as I have been writing this thesis, more information has come to light about Ann Gillmore Rees and the same is true of other women I discuss. For instance, I have only recently discovered that June Scott Stevenson, described by Margaret Oppen as ‘the doyenne of our Guild … [and] the inspiration of our beginning’\textsuperscript{79}, was in fact one of a family of creative women – her younger sister was the renowned British tile designer Peggy Angus – and that archival material of potential relevance exists in the United Kingdom. These experiences reinforced my initial belief in the existence of rich and complex stories about creative embroiderers in New South Wales, even as my investigation also suggests that some of these stories have already been lost.

What is readily apparent is that where published sources are limited, the researcher must be willing to use a broad range of practical research strategies in order to accumulate the raw material from which to construct a historical narrative. In this chapter I have discussed the research strategies and outlined the data sources used in this research project on creative embroidery in New South Wales, explaining the rationale for using less conventional source

\textsuperscript{76} E Honey. ‘She “paints” with needle and thread’, \textit{The Australian Women’s Weekly}, 17 January 1968.
\textsuperscript{77} Conversation with Pat Olney, 7 December 2005.
\textsuperscript{78} Conversation with Heather Joynes, 27 November 2002.
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{The Record}, No 26, October 1962, p.6.
materials, such as oral sources and the use of photographic records of embroideries where actual examples are not available. I also identified the potential problems associated with using such sources and outlined the steps taken to ensure that both factual information and interpretation of the facts is credible and reliable. Having determined that not only was there an interesting story to tell, but that there was sufficient data on which to base such a story, it was then necessary to identify an appropriate way of analysing the data and structuring the ensuing narrative: this is the subject of the following chapter.
Chapter 3

‘How we name things determines what they are perceived to be, how they are used and thought about. How you are called is what you are.’

Paul Greenhalgh

The problem of definitions

The initial title of my research proposal was *Embroidery as Art: A NSW Perspective*. The title was chosen in an attempt to differentiate the kind of work produced by the embroiderers I have focused on from ‘fancywork’ and other forms of traditional embroidery. The embroiderers discussed in this thesis certainly aspired to make art and wanted their embroidery to be seen as art. However, with a few exceptions, their work was not, and is still not, considered as such by the people and institutions that make up the mainstream art world. I concluded that the original title could be read as implying that the status of embroidery as art is uncontested, when in fact this is far from the case, and the thesis was renamed *Creative Embroidery in NSW, 1960 – 1975*. ‘Creative embroidery’ was the term the embroiderers themselves settled upon to identify their form of embroidery practice. It was used within the embroidery community to differentiate embroiderers working in an experimental fashion from those embroiderers who followed more traditional models. It was also used to promote this type of embroidery to the broader public, appearing in exhibition titles, newspaper and magazine articles and so on. Incorporating the term into the title more accurately reflected the kind of embroiderers I intended to write about and helped to situate the study in a particular time frame: the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies when this term was in common use.

However, while the term ‘creative embroidery’ is readily understood by most embroiderers, it did not make it any easier to explain what I was studying to non-embroiderers. Embroidery has a problematic image. The word ‘embroidery’ conjures up images of little old ladies embroidering d’oyleys and duchesse sets and, if asked, most people can point to someone they know, usually an older female relative, who embroiders now or did so in the past. They do not think beyond this conventional view. At best, embroidery is regarded as domestic and familiar; at worst, as a source of amusement. Despite its long history, in the early 1980s the embroidery department at Glasgow School of Art, one of the most prestigious embroidery departments in Britain, was disparagingly referred to as ‘the knitting and darning department’ by students from other discipline areas.¹ This is not an isolated

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example. At the time that I was developing the proposal for this research project I attended a gathering of early career researchers at Charles Sturt University where I work. During the introductory session, participants were asked to indicate their areas of research interest: among them wine chemistry, computer programs for economic modelling and the morphology of spider webs. None of these raised an eyebrow, but when it came to my turn and I explained that I was intending to research embroidery, there was laughter. The idea that embroidery could be the subject of serious scholarly research was a source of amusement.

An article in the colour supplement of the Saturday edition of *Sydney Morning Herald* in March 2000 reveals a similar attitude. Ostensibly this article was exposing embroidery as a popular pursuit among trendy young women. But although it ends by adapting a quote from Marx to form a battle cry suggesting that embroiderers should stand up and be counted, the article treats embroidery as a kind of a joke: ‘It took me a long time to admit that I’m addicted to embroidery. Mostly because if you are under 50 and you embroider, people think there is something wrong with you.’ The author suggests, in not quite so many words, that embroidery is something that is taken up when your love life fails and which should be practised in the privacy of your own home, lest anyone discovers your secret. She also fails to differentiate, for example, between the young woman stitching Beatrix Potter designs in cross stitch for her own pleasure and the art school trained embroiderer creating work for the gallery wall. All are treated as a more than a little eccentric.

On a more serious note, critics in various disciplines have used embroidery as a metaphor for the superficial. To cite one example, in 2002 Van Ikin, literary critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and an academic at the University of Western Australia, wrote a piece titled ‘Big ideas versus embroidery’, contrasting a book which ‘canvasses provocative ideas’ with one offering ‘intricate surface detail [or embroidery] at the expense of delving into deeper attendant issues’. But perhaps of greater significance is the writing of the influential American art critic Clement Greenberg who used embroidery in a similar way in an ambivalent review of the work of Morris Graves in 1942:

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Graves … takes most of his motifs from zoology and embroiders them decoratively – birds, snakes, rodents, and the like. All except his very latest pictures are unsatisfactory in one respect or another.4

Greenberg’s use of craft – and in this particular instance embroidery – in his writing, as a means of reinforcing the hierarchy of art and craft and thereby asserting the superiority of particular modes of abstract art, is discussed by Elissa Auther:

To describe Graves’ treatment of the surface as embroidered … connotes a set of negative associations about needlework that consistently underscore Greenberg’s pejorative use of the decorative. Here embroidery evokes images of applied embellishment without any integral relationship to its ground. It follows that [in Greenberg’s writings] embroidery and other related modes of ornamentation or surface adornment are perceived as lacking meaning.5

For Greenberg, as for Van Ikin, the use of embroidery as a pejorative is dependent on the common view of needlework as mindless and uncreative. According to Auther, the fact that embroidery is almost always produced by women is an integral, if unspoken, component of Greenberg’s argument. Auther’s central theme is the persistent influence of Greenberg’s ideas, which she says have resulted in the continued ‘subordination of craft within the field of artistic practice despite its extraordinary expansion and vitality since the mid-1960s’.6 But if Greenberg’s ideas are problematic for the crafts in general, they have even more significant consequences for embroiderers. Embroiderers who want their work to be considered seriously as art have to contend with the fact that influential critics like Greenberg view their chosen medium as decorative, frivolous and non-serious.

The domestic connotations of embroidery and its unfashionable reputation have led some embroiderers to seek alternative labels for what they do. In 1975 the Committee of Enquiry into the Crafts presented the results of its lengthy investigation to the Australian Council for the Arts. In this report embroidery does not appear in the listing of crafts undertaken by those who responded to a detailed questionnaire, despite the fact that many embroiderers were included in the survey.7 The relevant question required a free response, so presumably

6 Auther, The decorative, abstraction, and the hierarchy of art and craft in the art criticism of Clement Greenberg’, p.356.
7 Committee of Enquiry into the Crafts in Australia, The crafts in Australia : report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Crafts in Australia, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1975. Table 4D-2, p. 65. The Newcastle Branch of the Embroiderers’ Guild made a submission to the
those embroiderers who responded chose to identify themselves in some other way; perhaps as those working in ‘textiles – fabric’. What to call their particular kind of embroidery and how to differentiate it from traditional approaches was a question that concerned creative embroiderers in the nineteen sixties, and it remains an issue today. In the words of Paul Greenhalgh: ‘how we name things determines what they are perceived to be, how they are used and thought about. How you are called is what you are’.  

**Defining embroidery**

In 1906 Grace Christie wrote, ‘Everyone knows what embroidery is, and a formal definition seems unnecessary. As a matter of fact, it would be a difficult task to give one, since weaving, lacemaking and embroidery are but subtle variations of the same art.’ Originally trained as a painter, Grace Christie taught embroidery at the Royal College of Art between 1909 and 1921 and through her teaching and her writing was influential in raising the profile of embroidery in England.  

For Mrs Christie, like those people today who assume they know what embroidery is even if they do not know anything else about it, embroidery was so familiar that there was no need to define it. For others, definitions are limiting – and something to be challenged. David Green is known for his expansive view. In 1976 *Craft Australia* reported that during his Australian tour he said: ‘What is a stitch? … It can be a rolled joist in a concrete slab.’ I have also heard him tell students that ‘embroidery can be anything’, a claim that is intended to encourage lateral thinking in students, to provoke the conservatives in the embroidery world, and also, by erasing boundaries, to facilitate attempts to position embroidery as a form of modern art. Nevertheless most writers on embroidery do attempt a definition, although they deal in very different ways with this challenge. Definitions of embroidery range from the very broad to the very precise.

enquiry, as did Heather Joynes and Mardi Holcombe (who responded on behalf of the Handweavers and Spinners Guild, although she was also involved in creative embroidery). Dorothea Allnutt, Anne Baker, Ann-Marie Bakewell, Heather Dorrough, Robin Jeffcoat, Heather Joynes, Pat Langford, Prue Socha and Win Thorvaldson were among those embroiderers who were sent surveys. (pp. 51-54).  


10 As well as *Embroidery and tapestry weaving*, Mrs Christie wrote *Samplers and stitches. A handbook of the embroiderer’s art*, published by Batsford in 1921.  

In 1882, Sophia Caulfeild and Blanche Saward defined embroidery as ‘an art which consists of enriching a flat foundation, by working into it with a needle coloured silks, gold or silver thread, and other extraneous materials, in floral, geometrical, or figure designs.’ This definition separates embroidery out from other types of needlework including patchwork and appliqué; an approach adopted a hundred years later by Marion Fletcher, who equated ‘needlework’ with ‘embroidery’ in her book, *Needlework in Australia: A History of the Development of Embroidery*. Fletcher’s stated definition of embroidery is very broad: ‘embroidery is the ornamentation of cloth’, but although she includes in her account mention of artists working in appliqué and machine stitchery, she clearly had doubts about the status of this work: ‘Some may question whether work of this nature can truthfully be designated as embroidery’. Judging by the work discussed in her book, Fletcher believed that embroidery should comprise traditional hand stitches, worked on a pre-existing background fabric.

Other writers, while acknowledging the need for a definition of some kind, are reluctant to constrain the craft and offer an expansive view of what is meant by the term ‘embroidery’. Anne Morrell, formerly Professor of Embroidery at Manchester Metropolitan University, defines embroidery in the following way:

> Embroidery encompasses many different techniques which involve fabric and thread, a needle or sewing machine. It is used to decorate evenly woven, netted and other fabrics. It is added from the back or front of the fabric and involves negative-space and construction techniques, as well as being part of edges, hems, seams or fastenings like buttons.

For the purposes of explaining creative embroidery as a subset of the broader field of embroidery a relatively flexible definition is most useful, and Anne Morrell’s provides a starting point. Embroidery is work that is executed using fabric, thread and needle, where the emphasis is on creating a pattern or texture, adding marks, or building up an image on a pre-existing background fabric. This definition is broad enough to include work executed by hand and machine, since any consideration of work from the early twentieth century on must surely include machine embroidery. It also allows for the inclusion of techniques such as appliqué, which involves making patterns or images by applying fabric shapes to a

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background cloth, for to exclude appliqué from a consideration of embroidery is to exclude a large body of twentieth century work that combines the use of applied fabrics with stitchery. The definition does however exclude techniques that could be categorised as lacemaking and weaving and which involve the construction of a new fabric, unless they are worked into or later applied on to the surface of an existing fabric. From the mid nineteen eighties on, the development of an expanded range of vanishing fabrics led to experimental work that further challenges the boundaries between lace making and embroidery. However during the years covered by this particular study it can be safely said that the generally accepted view of embroidery was stitchery added to an existing fabric, not stitchery that created a fabric.

**Defining Creative Embroidery**

Such a definition is broad enough to encompass the forms of embroidery common in the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies, including that of the women discussed in this thesis, who used techniques such as machine embroidery and appliqué, along with the hand stitches most often associated with embroidery. However, there were differences between the work they produced and that with which most embroiderers were occupied. Their embroidery practice emphasised original design and experimentation with materials and techniques, rather than an adherence to traditional patterns, materials and techniques. The work they produced was original in design, not worked according to predetermined patterns. A large proportion of it was intended to be hung on the wall and appreciated for its aesthetic qualities, while some of it engaged with contemporary issues and concerns. Margaret Oppen explained how contemporary (or creative) embroiderers approached their work in a talk given at Newcastle in August 1971 and later published in *The Record*:

> In traditional work most decisions are made beforehand, apart from transfers in which all the decisions are made for you. You decide, beforehand, your own design, the cloth suitable for it, the colour scheme, the type of embroidery, and the thread in which it will be worked … you then transfer your design to your material by powdering, tracing or sketching through thin paper. …

> In contemporary work the idea comes first, last and all the time. It may begin in many ways – seeing an interesting group of unusual colours, noticing some natural form which fires your imagination, in the working out of an exercise in class, or a multiple of other accidents.

Contemporary workers have many resources, not just conventional material, colour, threads and stitches. As they go through their daily life they are always on the watch for things which appeal to them – materials of good colour and interesting texture, from tweed, furnishing material, ordinary linens silk or gauze (two or three of these may appear on the same work) – threads range from rope, string, linen, silk, gold or silver to the ordinary cottons – objects such as stones, shells, buttons, sequins, beads even the works of old
clocks\textsuperscript{16} and bits of glass. The final choice from all these things is not made at once, colours are planned by experiment as one goes along, keeping in mind the flow of various colours through the design and the arrangement of tones and textures. Even the original idea may be modified. … Design goes on until the last stitch is ended off.\textsuperscript{17}

Perhaps the best way to explain creative embroidery is to look at some specific examples and to compare them with a piece of embroidery worked in a more traditional way. Margaret Oppen’s \textit{Wattle and Flannel Flowers} (c. 1971) (Figure 3.1) depicts Australian native flowers freely worked in surface stitches. It is the most conservative example, in terms of design and the use of materials and stitches. Nevertheless it differs from traditional embroideries in a number of ways. It is a large work and has been framed as a painting would be. It uses a wider range of threads than is seen in fancywork and is worked on furnishing fabric rather than embroidery linen. The stitches are worked with concern for their textural qualities, rather than their neatness of execution, and the composition suggests that Margaret Oppen approached this work in the same way that she would have made a painting: by gathering information and making preliminary sketches, but then working out her ideas in stitches rather than paint.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Margaret Oppen, Wattle and Flannel Flowers, c.1971, collection of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{16} Several students at the Armidale Summer School in 1970 incorporated watch and clock parts into their goldwork embroideries. \textit{The Record}, No 99, March 1970, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{The Record}, No 117, November 1971, p. 9-10.
The second example is Pat Langford’s *Hawkesbury Rhythms* (c. 1973) (Figure 3.2) which, like the previous example, is a large panel, intended for the wall. The subject matter, the landscape of the Hawkesbury River near Pat Langford’s home, is depicted using rhythmic shapes and lines. The work is also built up in much the same way as a painting would be, using stitches rather than paint. Although Pat Langford sometimes ‘designed’ work before starting to stitch, a much more common approach for her was to block out a composition and then to work directly.

Figure 3.2. Pat Langford, Hawkesbury Rhythms, c.1973, collection of Martin and Cherylee Langford.

The final example, Prue Socha’s *Golden Glow* (c. 1973) (Figure 3.3) could be considered the most unconventional of the three examples. It is worked on tapestry canvas which was shaped with seams and darts before the stitching was commenced. Rather than limiting the selection of stitches to the traditional choices of cross stitch or tent stitch, Prue Socha used surface stitches like French knots and chain stitch, along with a range of more textural canvaswork stitches, and incorporated chunky wooden beads into the work. *Golden Glow* has no purpose other than to be a sculptural object.
Looking back from a distance of thirty or forty years, the work produced in the sixties and early seventies may appear rather conservative, although it is worth noting that some of the techniques that contemporary embroiderers think of as new and experimental, such as the use of plastic as a substrate or the burning of fabrics to create specific effects\textsuperscript{18}, were used by creative embroiderers in the nineteen sixties. But to an audience whose conception of embroidery was limited to traced linen fancywork or traditional techniques used on clothing or table linen, even the way that creative embroiderers used their materials was unconventional. Rather than working on evenweave linen and cotton fabrics with stranded and perle cottons, creative embroiderers used a wide variety of fabrics and threads. As Margaret Oppen explains in the passage quoted above, they used furnishing and dress materials, even wire mesh. They removed threads from their fabrics to add texture and interest and left raw edges exposed. Handspun wool and silk as well as thick rug and knitting yarns were added to their palette of threads. Photographs of work from the period indicate that a wide variety of found objects were incorporated into the work. Stitches were used in unconventional ways, worked irregularly, and used in what were, at the time, unexpected contexts.

Embroiderers also based their embroideries on a much wider variety of subject matter than was usual. Flowers were a popular motif, as they were in fancywork embroidery, but they were treated in a much bolder fashion. In 1967 Margaret Oppen urged embroiderers to look for ideas in less obvious places, suggesting that pylons, expressways and oil tankers could be

suitable sources. Even a cursory examination of the work done at the time shows that they took her advice. Another feature that differentiates creative embroidery from more traditional approaches is the uses to which it was put. Domestic embroidery is generally applied to functional items, even in instances where the item is really intended for show, or to demonstrate the virtuosity of the embroiderer. However, the vast majority of creative embroideries had no intended function except to be hung on the wall as an object of beauty.

**Finding a name**

The terms used by embroiderers to identify themselves and to differentiate their approach to embroidery from the mainstream changed in the years between 1960 and 1975. Initially they identified their alternative approach as ‘modern embroidery’, a term that had been used in Britain as early as 1933 for the title of a special edition of the *Studio* magazine. This issue of *Studio* presented an array of embroideries of original design, including designs by Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Claude Flight. It was, in effect, claiming a place for embroidery as a form of modern art. In the introduction Mary Hogarth states that ‘Modern embroidery should be the invention of to-day in design, and should express this age’, a view reinforced in the concluding paragraph when she makes reference to Aldous Huxley’s novel which had been published the previous year: ‘There is so much around us to inspire our thoughts … in “a brave new world”’.  

It is not surprising that when the Embroiderers’ Guild of New South Wales was established by Margaret Oppen in 1957, she used the term ‘modern embroidery’, borrowed from the language of British modernism, to identify embroidery of original design and experimental approach. She had been an art student at a time when the aesthetic theories of Roger Fry and Clive Bell held sway, and as she was in London in 1912 it is highly likely that she saw the second Post-Impressionist exhibition organised by Fry. Between 1923 and 1926 Margaret Oppen was living in Kings Cross and involved in the Sydney art scene. These were the years when, as Helen Topliss explains, Margaret Preston and Thea Proctor brought Fry and Bell’s ‘simplification of modernist aesthetics’ to Australia and spread these ideas through

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19 *The Record*, No 74, August 1967, p.9  
22 Margaret Oppen attended the Julian Ashton Art School in the early twenties, exhibited with the Younger Group of Artists in 1924 and 1925, and one of her woodcuts was reproduced in *Art in Australia* (Third Series, No 9) in 1924.
their teaching and writing. It seems inevitable that the language and ideas that Margaret Oppen absorbed during these formative years should have informed her practice, first as a painter and printmaker and later as an embroiderer. The specific concept of ‘modern embroidery’ most likely came from Ann Gillmore Rees who, under the name of Ann Gillmore Carter, was one of the people whose work was illustrated in Modern Embroidery and who was probably the person who encouraged Margaret Oppen’s interest in this form of embroidery.

The accounts of how Margaret Oppen was introduced to embroidery vary. It is quite likely that like most women of her generation she learnt to embroider as a child, although there are no published statements to confirm or deny this possibility. The Record states that Margaret Oppen attended classes with the Scottish trained embroiderer June Scott Stevenson, but it doesn’t indicate when these classes occurred. In an article published in 1968 Margaret Oppen is reported as saying that at the age of 60 [i.e. in 1950] she ‘saw an exhibition at the Embroiderers’ Guild in London and realised that “the needle would be a better tool for me than the brush”’. However, as she was shown with Dora Sweetapple assessing embroideries done by students at the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW Craft Training School in the Sunday Sun Supplement on March 27 1949, and later in that year exhibited embroidery at the Grosvenor Galleries in Sydney, the Women’s Weekly story is clearly apocryphal. Given the evidence, the account in The Record in 1966, which stated that she became involved with embroidery while working with Ann Gillmore Rees in the late 1940s, seems much more plausible.

The term ‘modern embroidery’ continued in use in Australia well into the sixties. It appeared in the titles of classes and exhibitions organised by the Embroiderers’ Guild and it was also used in newspaper reports on embroidery exhibitions. However, by the early nineteen sixties a new term – contemporary embroidery – began to be used as an alternative descriptor. In an article written in 1963 Margaret Oppen set out the Embroiderers’ Guild’s policy on traditional and contemporary embroidery. She argued that contemporary and traditional approaches to embroidery must coexist peacefully, using the term ‘contemporary embroidery’ to apply to work which is both original and modern in approach:

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24 The Record, No 26, October 1962, p.6.
26 The Record, No 60, 1966.
... some members are more interested in one approach, some in the other [that is, a contemporary approach or a traditional approach] ... We have two types of members and both must be encouraged to cultivate that in which they excel. The traditionally minded to study history and to produce work based on the best Embroidery periods, and the original and modern minded to produce designs and work typical of our own times.  

In the following year Mrs Oppen elaborated further, explaining that in her opinion the term ‘contemporary embroidery’ was preferable to ‘modern embroidery’ since: ‘to be always modern, embroidery should change with the times. Contemporary embroidery should be a mirror of contemporary life’. 

When Cynthia Sparks arrived in Sydney in 1967 and began teaching embroidery she also used the term to identify:

a new trend in embroidery ... something which can express the individual ideas of the worker. Instead of working to someone else’s set pattern by chart or transfer she is now trying to make her own creative interpretation, to express her own personality.

The use of ‘contemporary embroidery’ as a descriptor continued into the early nineteen seventies, but by the late sixties the term ‘creative embroidery’ had begun to appear. Throughout the sixties, articles in the English *Embroidery* magazine made reference to creative embroidery, often in the context of embroidery for school students. 

Then in the special Diamond Jubilee Edition of the magazine published in 1966, Constance Howard used the term in an article in which she discussed how embroidery could be a work of art ‘if of sufficient merit in design and workmanship, together with aesthetic sensibility and a creative approach’ and how, under some circumstances, it could aspire to be a fine art. 

Members of the 62 Group also wrote of creative embroidery and by the time Christine Risley’s book *Creative Embroidery* was published in 1969, the term was being widely used in Britain to identify innovative and experimental embroidery that had aspirations to be a form of art.

The term ‘creative embroidery’ soon began to be used in the Sydney, appearing in the Embroiderers’ Guild Record and in press articles about embroidery. In 1969 Margaret Oppen organised for embroidery to be included in the summer school run by the University of New England’s Department of Extension and the workshop was advertised as a creative

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27 *The Record*, No 36, October 1963, p.9
28 *The Record*, No 41, May 1964, p.4
29 *The Record* No 77, November 1967, p.7
30 See for example, J Carter, ‘Creative Embroidery: work in school with students and children’ in *Embroidery*, Vol 6, no 2, Summer 1965, pp. 45-47
embroidery summer school. In 1970 classes within the Embroiderers’ Guild were being identified as part of a creative embroidery programme, where previously they had been described as ‘modern’ or ‘unconventional’ embroidery, and in 1973 the Creative Embroidery Association was formed to support those interested in working in this form of embroidery at a serious level. ‘Creative embroidery’ thus became the term used to identify a particular approach to the craft within much of the embroidery community and in its dealings with the broader public.

Not all of the women who worked in embroidery or ‘stitched textiles’ during the sixties and seventies identified themselves as creative embroiderers. Some, like Heather Dorrough and Fahy Bottrell, participated at times in embroidery related activities and organisations but identified themselves primarily as craftspeople or as artists; others, like Vivienne Pengilley, did not associate with either embroiderers or craftspeople but instead established links with the Sydney art community. What all these women did have in common, regardless of whether they identified themselves as embroiderers, craftspeople or artists, was that they were using needle and thread as a tool for personal expression and that they wanted their work to be seen, valued and discussed as a legitimate form of fine art.

Writing about embroidery

Embroidery in the discourse of contemporary art

The advent of feminism and post-modernism has seen some forms of embroidery accepted in the category of art and therefore discussed by critics and theorists of contemporary art. Examples of embroideries discussed in mainstream art discourse include Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1979), Tracey Emin’s *Everyone I Ever Slept With (1963 – 1995)* (1995) and *Helter Fucking Skelter* (2000) and, in Australia, works by Narelle Jubelin, including her installation *Trade Delivers People* (1990). In each case the maker is identified as an artist, not an embroiderer, and their work is discussed using the language of art theory and criticism. *The Dinner Party* is considered in terms of its feminist content and its relationship

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34 The term ‘stitched textiles’ is used by some writers as a more inclusive alternative to ‘embroidery’ which enables them to discuss patchwork and quilting as well as appliqué and embroidery under the one heading. It is arguably a more appropriate term to describe the work that Fahy Bottrell was producing in the late sixties. The term is also increasingly used by educational institutions in Britain and by contemporary craftswomen who work in embroidery, perhaps as a more neutral term that enables them to avoid some of the negative connotations of embroidery discussed earlier in this chapter.
to the women’s art movement of the 1970s, while a recent monograph on Emin analyses her work from a range of perspectives, including feminism and French theory. Although other women artists, such as Annette Messager, have arguably used the technique of embroidery in their work in a more conceptually integrated way than Emin, the latter’s notoriety means that her stitched works have attracted significant critical attention. In the mainstream art community in Australia embroidery is less commonly seen and discussed. Narelle Jubelin is one artist who does use embroidery, but from a completely different perspective to the way in which creative embroiderers used the medium. Her work draws on and is discussed in terms of the language of postcolonial discourse. It is accepted as fine or ‘high’ art because it is based upon theoretical concepts that originate in the world of academia and museums and it is intended to be seen within that context. Her embroidered panels are presented as installations, requiring the white box of the museum to be displayed effectively. As these examples indicate, embroidered artworks are generally only discussed by art critics and theorists when embroidery is part of the practice of a maker who is recognised as an artist in the broader sense, or when the work is based upon philosophical and theoretical ideas with which the art world is familiar. In these circumstances the work is discussed as art which happens to use embroidery for connotative purposes, rather than as embroidery per se.

Most embroidery however is made in different circumstances. It is made by women who, for the most part, are outside the institutional art world and who choose embroidery as their preferred medium for many different reasons, not just for its semiotic possibilities. This kind of work does not lend itself readily to discussion and analysis using the models employed in the field of art criticism. The acceptance of the use of embroidery by a small number of contemporary visual artists has not translated into a broader acceptance of the medium in the mainstream art world; therefore embroidery is largely absent from its literature.

A focus on artefacts

By contrast, embroidery features more extensively in the literature of material culture, but there too attention is paid to only some forms of embroidery. No-one knows exactly when or where embroidery first appeared. According to Ellen Dissanayake the impulse to decorate using patterns, to make objects special, has been a characteristic of human beings since the

dawn of time. If she is correct then it is likely that embroidery followed fairly closely on
the heels of functional stitching and was used from the outset to add richness to the textile
objects used in everyday life. Its origins were undoubtedly domestic. However, in many
cultures embroidery transcended these domestic origins and became a means by which
wealth, power and privilege were displayed. Embroideries were high status objects; they
were ‘a consistently important element in ecclesiastical splendour …[and] …an integral part
of international diplomacy both as gifts and as impressive attire for king and pope, prince
and prelate alike.’ In medieval Britain professional embroiderers produced embroidery for
both church and state; the work they produced was expensive, by virtue of the materials used
and the time and skill required in its execution. The production of embroidery for the church
declined after the Reformation, but elaborate embroidered garments and furnishings
flourished in the Tudor and Elizabethan eras as a form of conspicuous consumption.

Where embroideries have survived from earlier eras they are almost always these luxury
items. The Victoria and Albert Museum in London is renowned for its collection of
embroidery. Museum staff members have been responsible over the years for a body of
published research relating to the holdings of the museum. A significant proportion of this
research has been on British historical embroidery, particularly those examples associated
with the upper classes in British society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for which
documentary and other evidence is available. These embroidered items are discussed in
terms of their ownership and provenance, materials, production (but not necessarily makers),
sometimes technique, cost, iconography and design sources (related to symbolism rather than
personal expression), and stylistic trends. Examples of this approach to embroidery include
John Nevinson’s, *A Catalogue of English Domestic Embroidery of the 16th and 17th Century*
(1938), George Wingfield Digby’s *Elizabethan Embroidery* (1963) and Santina Levey’s *An

Staff in Australian museums also carry out research into historical embroideries, although
their work is often hampered by the difficulties discussed in the previous chapter. For
example, in 1982 John McPhee discussed an embroidered screen held in the collection of the

38 E Dissanayake, *Homo aestheticus: Where art comes from and why*, University of Washington Press,
40 The Museum includes among its collection some of the most famous pieces of embroidery created
in Britain – the Syon cope, the Stoke Edith wallhanging, Margaret Laton’s jacket – as well as
examples of embroidery from around the globe. It also collects modern embroidery.
National Gallery of Australia. He provided background information about the influence of the English Arts and Crafts Movement on Australian women and described the design of the screen, but no information was provided about the embroiderer, presumably because none was available at the time he was writing. In Australian folk and popular art in the Australian National Gallery, McPhee refers to embroidery in the context of a discussion of quilts in the collection, but apart from this the only other embroidery illustrated in the volume is a cross stitched floor rug which is not discussed at all. Similarly, although the Powerhouse Museum holds an extensive collection of Australian domestic embroidery, its 1991 volume Decorative Arts and Design from the Powerhouse Museum illustrates a single embroidery. In Australia there has been far more interest in research on historical quilts, led by collectors such as Annette Gero and Margaret Rolfe and encouraged by initiatives such as the National Quilt Register, than there has been in research on embroidery.

When embroidery can be accommodated within the conventional discourse of the discipline it also finds a place in the literature of mainstream art history. A case in point is the Bayeux Tapestry, perhaps the world’s best known embroidery and one of the few to be studied in detail by art historians. The narrative content of the Bayeux Tapestry – a pictorial account of the Norman invasion of England – allows it to be seen as a precursor form of history painting and it is in this context that it is sometimes included in art historical surveys. Thus established as an object of interest, the Bayeux Tapestry has been the subject of both historical and art historical research. This research has centred on issues such as who designed and made the embroidery and for whom, the relationship of the embroidery to other works of visual and literary art and the iconography of the embroidery. The language of the museum is adequate to the task of discussing elite embroidery; that which was made for, or by, the upper classes and which has been preserved over the centuries. However, as Canadian writer Stephen Inglis notes, an approach which emphasises objects and their status

45 For a collection of some of the key essays on the Bayeux Tapestry from the last 180 years see R Gameson (ed) The study of the Bayeux Tapestry, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 1997.
has certain shortcomings: it is ‘intrinsically exclusionist from the point of view of wider craft practice, because it is predicated on the object’s being treated like a painting or a sculpture and because only a tiny elite of this work could qualify.’

Australian embroidery has not been extensively studied by museum curators and art historians because most of it does not fit the category of artefacts which are of interest by virtue of the status of the object itself or of its maker. Instead, it is produced in private by anonymous women – and occasionally by anonymous men.

**Embroiderers writing about embroidery**

A significant proportion of writing about embroidery originates from within the discipline itself. Many of those who write about embroidery have been embroiderers themselves, or teachers of embroidery. In recent years the increasing focus on publication within higher education has resulted in some embroiderers directing their energies to research and writing about embroidery in preference to actually making work. A case in point would be Anne Morrell, who in the early seventies worked as a practising embroiderer but is now better known for her publications. Writing about embroidery can be found in surveys of current practice, exhibitions catalogues, articles in magazines and journals, and monographs. Over the years Australian embroiderers have been included in a variety of publications that survey contemporary crafts practice, providing short chapters on a selection of practitioners. For example, Heather Dorrough and Vivienne Pengilley, were included in Fay Bottrell’s *The artist craftsman in Australia: Aspects of sensibility* (1972), and Dorrough was also featured in Patricia Thompson’s *Twelve Australian craftsmen* (1973) while in Allan Moult’s *Craft in Australia* (1983) embroidery was represented by Victorian embroiderer Annemieke Mein.

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48 Annemieke Mein is one of Australia’s most widely recognised embroiderer. She produces naturalistic machine embroidered pictures of Australian flora and fauna, which have attracted a considerable following in Australia and overseas. Her work post-dates the period covered by this thesis, although arguably was influenced by the work of Heather Dorrough who by the mid-seventies was using the domestic sewing machine as a drawing tool and who also created a collection of work which incorporated images of native plants and animals.
There have also been recent surveys that deal exclusively with contemporary embroidery practice in Australia – one example being Jerry Rodgers’ *A sense of place* (1992) – while some Australian embroiderers have been included in survey texts which originated overseas. Three contemporary Australian embroiderers, Rose-Marie Szulc, Jan Irvine and Pam Gaunt, were included in Anne Morrell’s survey of contemporary embroidery⁴⁹ and in 1999 Elsje van Keppel, Jan Irvine-Nealie, Pam Gaunt, Patrick Snelling and Ruth Hadlow were featured in *Art textiles of the world: Australia*.⁵⁰ The approach used in such surveys varies: in some cases it is purely descriptive; in others some analysis and evaluation of the individual’s work is included. However as Anne Morrell and Matthew Koumis both note⁵¹, publications such as these tend to be somewhat arbitrary in the selection of individuals, influenced partly by the knowledge the author or editor has about practicing embroiderers in a particular region and partly by their own likes and dislikes. They provide a valuable record of the work of individual embroiderers but not the broader context in which they work.

The biographical monograph is a format widely used by art historians. It enables the writer to document the career of an individual, to trace the development of their work and to critically evaluate it with reference to the wider art world in which the individual practises. Monographs vary in their aims and their intended audience. Most are written about individuals with well established careers or people whose work is believed to be of historical significance. A British example of the application of this approach to embroidery is Liz Arthur’s monograph on Kathleen Whyte, a major figure in twentieth century Scottish embroidery.⁵² Based on primary source material and conversations with Whyte herself, it traces the development of Whyte’s work, discusses it in terms of iconography and technique, and evaluates the role that she played in raising the status of embroidery as an art form. Other monographs are written for a broader audience and for different reasons. A recent example is Jan Beaney and Jean Littlejohn’s slender volume on Constance Howard, written to coincide with Howard’s ninetieth birthday and to ‘represent her life with emphasis on her memories and her own perception of the context in which she lived her life’.⁵³ In addition to information gained from conversations with Howard, the text includes quotes from colleagues and former students, organised to create a more or less chronological account.

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⁴⁹ Morrell, *Contemporary embroidery: Exciting and innovative textile art.*
⁵⁰ M Koumis, *Art textiles of the world: Australia*, Telos, Winchester, 1999
⁵¹ Koumis, *Art textiles of the world: Australia*, p.4; Anne Morrell, e-mail communication 29/06/02. Koumis is the owner of Telos, a company which specializes in publications relating to textiles.
Although images of Howard’s embroideries are included, Littlejohn and Beaney concentrate more on Howard’s influence as a teacher and mentor than on her own work. In 1996 Beryl Dean and Pamela Pavitt had a similar aim in mind when they published a small book on Rebecca Crompton and Elizabeth Grace Thompson.  These women are recognised as pioneers of education in embroidery whose influence was widespread, but although their contribution is acknowledged by many, little has been written about them. Unfortunately Dean and Pavitt provide only an anecdotal account of Crompton’s and Thompson’s teaching careers, relying heavily on personal recollections and providing little or no referencing to aid future researchers. Like Littlejohn and Beaney they include many quotes from former students, but they fail to identify the source of the remarks, beyond generic identifiers such as ‘a student’. There is no indication of the use of documentary sources and one has to be somewhat sceptical about the accuracy of recollections that have not been tested against other sources.

There are few monographs on Australian embroiderers and most of those that have been published are not impartial productions. The Australian market for art books in general is small, resulting in financial constraints that influence the kinds of books that get published and who it is that writes them. The market for craft books is larger, but for the most part the demand is for ‘how-to’ books rather than critical commentaries. There are examples where a compromise has been attempted, resulting in a publication which documents an individual’s work and provides sufficient ‘how-to’ information to satisfy the hobbyist market. The Art of Annemieke Mein: Wildlife artist in textiles (1992) was one of the first. The book provides a brief and laudatory introduction by Charles McCubbin and a profile written by Mein’s husband, and proceeds to document individual works with photographs and descriptions of their making. Another example is Embroidery from sketch to stitch by Pat Langford (1996), based around images of works from three exhibitions, accompanied by Langford’s own commentary explaining the motivation for each work and by many of the sketches on which the work is based. A concluding section includes line drawings of the featured works and a brief explanation of the techniques used. Books such as these serve as a documentary record of an individual’s work and provide insights into their working methods and creative thinking processes but they do not provide much by way of contextual or analytical discussion.

55 See chapter 2 for further discussion on this point.
Other monographs appear to offer a more critical stance, but on further investigation are not as objective as they first appear. For example a book published in 1997 on the work of Pam Gaunt includes essays by Robert Bell, at the time Curator of Craft and Design at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, and Marco Marcon, a free-lance curator and critic. These essays provide analysis and assessment of Gaunt’s work. However the publication was made possible by an Australia Council grant applied for and awarded to Gaunt herself; presumably she was responsible for choosing writers to discuss her work and would, naturally enough, have chosen writers who were likely to offer a sympathetic assessment. A similar situation is found with the Telos series of monographs, which includes volumes on the Australian embroiderers Anne Marie Power, from Victoria, and Helen Lancaster, from New South Wales. These small books each include a commissioned essay that is intended to place the work in context, but in this case the subject of the book helps to finance the project as well as participating in the selection of the essayist. Such collaboration between subject and author is not unique to embroidery; but perhaps it is more problematic in embroidery than in other disciplines as there are so few voices to provide alternative views.

**An alternative strategy**

The various approaches used in writing about embroidery have been developed in particular contexts, to meet the needs and expectations of particular audiences. However, when it comes to studying the practice of creative embroidery in New South Wales between 1960 and 1975, none of these approaches is sufficient on its own. An approach that privileges the embroideries themselves at the expense of those who made them and the context in which they were made is of limited value. The number of embroideries extant and readily accessible is small; many more exist only in the form of photographic records. Intensive study of this limited number of extant embroideries may well be an interesting and profitable enterprise, but to understand the reasons why these objects were created, to account for their stylistic and technical qualities, and to assess their status as visual artefacts requires reference to data beyond the embroideries themselves.

A biographical approach also has limitations. The available information about individual embroiderers is variable both in quantity and quality; some embroiderers are well served by

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59 J Mendelssohn has described similar arrangements in art publishing. See ‘Problems with Publishing in Australia’, pp. 42-43.
60 See chapter 3 for further discussion of this issue.
documentary sources, others have left few written records behind. In many cases there simply is insufficient data to produce a biographical account. There are, of course, some embroiderers – Heather Dorrough, for example – whose careers have been well documented and public enough to sustain a biographical study. Even so, some feminist writers have argued that this approach is of limited value. For instance, Helen Topliss writes that to single out particular women is simply to ‘co-opt a female artist into male history’\(^\text{61}\), while Melanie Ann Herzog who does support the use of the monograph as a mode of writing about women artists nevertheless argues for an approach which looks at lives and work of individual women in relation to a broader context.\(^\text{62}\) My challenge in writing about embroidery was to find an appropriate framework in which to do this. A solution was offered by the work of American sociologist Howard Becker.

In 1982 Becker proposed the concept of ‘art worlds’, spheres of activity within which art is created, distributed and consumed.\(^\text{63}\) According to Becker an art world is ‘the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world (sic) is noted for.’\(^\text{64}\) Works of art, therefore, are the products of joint activity. Whilst the artist makes an indispensable contribution, he or she cannot continue to make art without the support of the other members of the art world. So, rather than studying individual artists or individual artworks, Becker studies the networks of cooperation within which art works are produced. Becker explains that new art worlds come into being when sufficient people who work according to new conventions cooperate together and that art worlds die when people no longer work according to the set of conventions of that world.\(^\text{65}\)

The birth of an art world may happen in one of a number of ways. Innovation can occur within an existing art world, leading to changes in that world; innovation can occur outside and have a new art world develop around it; or innovation can occur but because people do not know about it, it leads nowhere. Becker notes that innovations often arise simultaneously in several locations. Groups of like-minded people develop around such innovations and, given the right conditions, participation spreads, the groups co-operate, and a more developed art world is established. What is required for this to happen are


\(^{64}\) Becker, *Art worlds*, p.x.

\(^{65}\) Becker, *Art worlds*, p.310.
mechanisms for distribution of work, channels of communication, and the capacity of personnel to cooperate and work in different locations, which then also requires the development of conventions that are widely accepted – that is, a joint ‘language’. Other necessary elements are the development of institutions that validate the particular activity and, finally, a history that seeks to explain and validate current work by placing it into historical context.

As Becker himself points out, his theory has elements in common with institutional theories of art as proposed by the philosophers George Dickie and Arthur Danto. Put simply, institutional theories of art focus on the role played by institutions or their members in designating certain artefacts as ‘art’ and others as ‘not art’. According to Becker, because philosophers deal with hypothetical rather than actual examples neither Dickie nor Danto, nor those who have critiqued their theories, offer a detailed explanation of what constitutes an art world. But Becker is not endeavouring to propose an abstract, philosophical argument. Instead, he sidesteps philosophical and aesthetic questions in order to propose a ‘more complicated and empirically based notion of an art world [that makes possible] some headway on problems in which the philosophical discussion has bogged down’. Thus Becker’s theory of art worlds provides practical framework within which to analyse fields of creative practice that are difficult to define and of contested status.

The establishment of the Embroiderers’ Guild and the gradual emergence in the sixties and seventies of a group of people interested in creative embroidery can be seen in terms of the birth of an art world, as proposed by Becker’s theory. This new art world developed out of the existing art and crafts community in Sydney as a group of women began working according to a set of shared conventions initially introduced from Britain. These conventions were gradually modified to suit local circumstances as more people became involved and as their embroidery practice developed and matured. The women worked cooperatively in activities that were intended to expand and consolidate this emerging art world. The educational activities and exhibitions they organised were a means of educating participants and potential audiences about the conventions of creative embroidery, and were seen by members of the embroidery world as a way of achieving formal recognition and thus


67 Becker, *Art worlds*, p. 150.
legitimising this area of art practice. The exhibitions also provided an alternative means of
distribution for those who were unable or unwilling to engage with the more established fine
art market.

Becker points out that art worlds are not formal structures and that they do not have clearly
defined boundaries. Indeed, according to Becker art worlds themselves and the boundaries
between them are in a state of flux. He explains how makers and the artefacts they create
can traverse the boundaries between one art world and another. This aspect of Becker’s
theory of art worlds can also be applied to a study of the practice of creative embroidery in
New South Wales in the sixties and seventies. Rather than positing a single art world and
seeing everything in terms of its relationship to that entity, as is the case in much traditional
art history, Becker’s theory enables the groups and activities of the period to be considered
as a cluster of related art communities, with the boundaries between the different groups
more or less flexible, and with some individuals involved in more than one group – a view
that is supported by the available evidence.

Finally, because Becker is interested in the network of cooperation involved in making art,
rather than focussing on the artist and artwork, he selects art forms and art works to discuss
on the basis of relevance to his sociological investigation rather than on the basis of
aesthetics. He is not, in this context, concerned about making aesthetic judgements. As
Becker explains it, his decision to look at art by studying the structural interactions that
comprise an art world, rather than by studying individual artists or works, was made not
because it is ‘the only proper way to look at the matter, but because looking at it in one way
lets us see something hidden in a different perspective.’

Conclusion

By following Becker’s model and setting aside questions of categorisation, status and
aesthetic it is possible to study creative embroidery as it was practised in New South Wales
in the sixties and seventies, a particular form of art related activity that is rendered invisible
by the application of more commonly used conceptual and analytical models. My analysis
of this art world, which I will refer to as an embroidery world in order to differentiate it from
the institutions and structures which make up what might be considered the fine or high art
world, studies in detail the structures and networks of interaction that created a community
of creative embroiders in New South Wales. In order to understand why the creative
embroidery world developed in the way that it did, it is necessary to examine more closely
the historical background to these developments. In the next chapter I explain how local

68 Becker, Art worlds, p.351.
interest in the idea of embroidery as art can be traced back to developments in Britain at the
time of the Arts and Crafts Movement and outline the links between British and Australian
embroidery the background that led ultimately to the establishment of a branch of the
Embroiderers’ Guild in Sydney, and the emergence of an art world focussed on the practice
of modern or creative embroidery.
Chapter 4

‘So far away from the rest of the world, it was not easy to be “modern” but they really tried hard.’
Diana Pockley

The emergence of an embroidery world

This thesis has as its primary subject the activities of a group of women in NSW who became interested in the kind of embroidery known as modern or ‘creative’ embroidery. The organisational structures and network of interactions that developed around these women and their activities display many of the characteristics that define an art world, as defined by Howard Becker: shared conventions; systems by which to promulgate these conventions; activities to enable them to distribute the work they produced and engage with an audience; and the development of a set of criteria by which to make judgments about the quality of works and the reputations of individual practitioners. According to Becker’s theory art worlds are neither static nor homogenous; rather they are complex and constantly evolving. Art worlds come into being, they grow, they mutate, they merge, they split, and sometimes they cease to exist altogether.

In Sydney in the early to mid-twentieth century, the arts and crafts community was relatively small. It was certainly not homogenous. There existed a variety of art associations with quite different philosophies and approaches, and some galleries specialized in particular styles of work; but the divisions between art and craft and between amateurs and professionals were not as rigidly defined as they would later become. This is particularly so for the many women artists who worked in both ‘fine art’ media, such as painting and printmaking, and in ‘craft’ media, such as embroidery and fabric printing. Some women worked in a variety of media simultaneously; others altered their mode of practice depending on the circumstances of their life at a particular point in time.¹ After the Second World War the Sydney art world began to fragment, and during the late 1940s and 1950s more

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specialized cultural organisations began to be organized around particular areas of interest. The Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW was one such organisation. It developed to serve the needs of a group of women, many of whom had been a part of the Sydney art scene in earlier decades, who had developed a particular interest in embroidery.

However, the emergence of an embroidery world in New South Wales was not quite as organic a process as this statement might suggest. The initial establishment of a community of embroiderers largely resulted from the efforts of Margaret Oppen, who is widely acknowledged as the driving force behind the establishment of a branch of the Embroiderers’ Guild in Sydney and the promotion of modern or creative embroidery as form of art making. Furthermore, the philosophical justification – the idea of ‘embroidery as art’ – and the modes of working which underpinned this emerging embroidery world did not evolve in Australia; they were adopted, intentionally, from British models. In order to understand why, in the 1960s and 1970s, it was British conventions that were adopted and adapted by creative embroiderers in New South Wales, it is necessary to look at developments in embroidery practice that took place in earlier decades in both Britain and Australia.

**Embroidery, from a private to a public pursuit**

While professional embroidery has been carried out by both sexes at different times in its history, embroidery as a domestic or private pursuit is almost always associated with women. In *The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine*, Rozsika Parker explains how embroidery is inextricably linked with concepts of domesticity and femininity, contrasting attitudes to embroidery with attitudes to painting:

> The art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that the former is artistically less significant. But the real differences between the two are in terms of where they are made and who makes them. Embroidery, by the time of the art/craft divide, was made in the domestic sphere, usually by women, for ‘love’. Painting was produced predominantly, though not only, by men, in the public sphere, for money.³

There have, of course, been many instances of embroidery produced by individual women intended for, or ultimately receiving, public display. For example, in the Georgian era in

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England there were embroiderers such as Mary Knowles, Anne Morrit, Mary Delaney and Caroline Campbell, whose work was known beyond their own domestic circles and remarked upon by writers of their time. However, for the most part embroidery was produced within the domestic sphere, with the audience for embroidery being limited to the family and friends of the maker.

This began to change with the Arts and Crafts Movement. In England in the late nineteenth century numerous organisations emerged, with the purpose of providing ‘impoverished gentlewomen’ employment as needleworkers. The first of these was the Royal School of Art Needlework, which was founded in 1872. Others rapidly followed. According to Anthea Callen, by 1883 there were eighteen such organisations in London and twelve in regional areas. They included the Ladies’ Work Society, established circa 1876, and the Decorative Needlework Society and the Leek Embroidery Society, both founded in 1879. The intention of these organisations was to assist women in earning an income by working in their own homes or in sympathetic company, so in that respect it could be argued that embroiderers had not really moved into the public sphere. Callen suggests that the Arts and Crafts Movement reinforced patriarchal ideology, with sexual stereotypes governing the nature of women’s involvement. Certainly much of the contemporary literature on embroidery stressed that it was the male prerogative to design and the woman’s role to embroider. In 1900 Lewis F. Day wrote:

"Perfect art results only when designer and worker are entirely in sympathy, when the designer knows quite what the worker can do with her materials, and when the worker not only understands what the designer meant, but feels with him (my emphasis)."

For Day it was the natural order of things for the designer to be male and the embroiderer female.

However, Lyn Walker believes that the situation was more complex than Callen suggests. Walker argues that the Arts and Crafts Movement ‘provided women with alternative roles, institutions and structures which they then used as active agents in their own history’. Her

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conclusions are based on research carried out on a large number of organized arts and crafts groups in existence between 1880 and 1914. She agrees with Callen that there was a sexual division of labour and that ‘rigid sex roles and sexual stereotypes determined the crafts in which women could participate’.\(^9\) Nevertheless, she believes that Arts and Crafts organisations offered a way for women, especially single middle class women, to participate in the public sphere and that for many women this led to personal and financial independence of a kind that had not been possible before.

Although many of these women worked in private or semi-public spaces, the embroideries they produced were exhibited in public. Work from the Royal School of Needlework was exhibited very early on, being shown at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876 and the Paris International Exhibition in 1878\(^10\), and the school continued to exhibit regularly through the latter part of the nineteenth century.\(^11\) The Leek Embroidery Society also organised an exhibition very soon after it was established. This exhibition, the first of twelve significant exhibitions featuring the Society’s work, was held at the Leek School of Art and included work from Morris and Co. and the Royal School of Needlework.\(^12\) The embroiderers themselves, however, for the most part remained anonymous. The (male) designers of individual pieces are often identified and, in many cases, records indicate the organisation responsible for the work. But unless the embroiderer was a well known person in their own right or was related to the designer, as in the case of Jane Morris, the wife of William Morris, their identity is generally not recorded. This began to change with the establishment of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1888.

The name of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society indicates its purpose. It was established in response to the Royal Academy’s refusal to expand the scope of its exhibitions, in order to create opportunities for the decorative arts and the so-called fine arts to be exhibited alongside one another.\(^13\) When the Society held its first exhibition in the New Gallery in Regent Street in London, embroideries were included. Work was submitted by groups, including the Leek Embroidery Society and the Decorative Needlework Society, as well as by individual embroiderers. Further exhibitions followed, initially annually and then at


longer intervals, with embroidery comprising a significant proportion of the textile exhibits on each occasion.\(^{14}\)

One of the features that differentiated the Society’s exhibitions from other exhibitions of the decorative arts in Britain in the latter part of the nineteenth century was the identification of individual designers and craftsmen. According to Stella Tillyard:

> The formation of the society had tremendous symbolic significance in the history of the Arts and Crafts movement, because it marked the moment when, for many, previously anonymous endeavour gave way to the display and sale of the signed work of individuals. The craftsman was, in effect, demanding the same status as the contemporary fine artist, and his product would cease to be a purely utilitarian object. Instead it would become an art object, something for show rather than use.\(^{15}\)

As was the case in Sydney some seventy five years later, many women were still identified by their husband’s names rather than their own. However, some embroiderers chose to use their own names; among them May Morris, Mary Buckle (who collaborated with Lewis F Day on *Art in needlework: A book about embroidery*), Phoebe Traquair and Mary Newill.\(^{16}\)

For embroidery and embroiderers the exhibitions of the Society had some important consequences. They placed the work of individual embroiderers firmly in the public sphere and helped to establish the reputations of at least some women as professional practitioners. According to Parry, by the turn of the century ‘the embroidery section was dominated by professional women who, with the confidence that past successes had given, began to show work which they had designed as well as embroidered.’\(^{17}\) The other significant consequence was that embroiderers had staked a claim for embroidery to be regarded as art, in the terms of the philosophies of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

The next significant development was the introduction of embroidery as a subject in British art schools. One of the first institutions to include embroidery as part of its curriculum was the Glasgow School of Art, where an embroidery department was established when Jessie Newbery began teaching embroidery at the school in 1894. Liz Arthur explains that drawing was of fundamental importance in the program, as was the study of historical examples – not for the purposes of reproduction but so that students might ‘understand techniques and how they have been applied …[thus being equipped to] … create work appropriate to their own

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\(^{14}\) Parry, *Textiles of the Arts and Crafts Movement*, Chapter 3.


\(^{16}\) Parry, *Textiles of the Arts and Crafts Movement*, chapter 3.

\(^{17}\) Parry, *Textiles of the Arts and Crafts Movement*, p.76
time and which allowed for self expression." Work from the embroidery students at Glasgow was reproduced in The Studio magazine and exhibited in Britain and Europe, gaining for the school a reputation as a centre for advanced work in embroidery that persisted well into the twentieth century. The contribution of the program devised by Jessie Newbery and her successors to the development of modern embroidery was summarized by Barbara Morris in 1962 in the following way: ‘an entirely new approach to embroidery was evolved at the Glasgow School of Art, an approach that was to lay the foundation for the embroidery of our own time’. With the establishment of the Central School of Art in 1896, where May Morris taught from 1897, and the Royal School of Art in 1897 where Grace Christie taught from 1909 until 1921, embroidery in the art needlework style was also being taught in English art schools. The introduction of embroidery into art schools in Britain helped to reinforce the claim that embroidery could be art although, as Constance Howard has pointed out, at this time embroiderers ‘were a minority group within the art world, tending to be ignored by those who practised “fine art”’. Perhaps it was the need to promote their work more aggressively that led to embroiderers developing their own professional association and ultimately organizing exhibitions devoted exclusively to embroidery. Guilds are often seen as the last bastion of tradition; genteel organisations which steadfastly maintain traditions in a rapidly changing world. This is the view implied by Cochrane in her brief discussion of the establishment of Embroiderers’ Guilds in Australia and one which is often expressed by contemporary textile artists. No doubt this view can be traced back to the late nineteenth century, when a romanticised view of the life of the medieval craftsperson led the founders of the Arts and Crafts Movement to use the term ‘guild’ in the names of the organisations they established. However when the Embroiderers’ Guild began in England in 1906 as the Society of Certificated Embroiderers, established by former students of the Royal School of Needlework, they were looking forward, not back. Their Society was intended as a professional organisation. Membership was initially restricted to those with a two year certificate and teaching diploma from the

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20 Howard, *Twentieth century embroidery in Great Britain to 1939*, p. 39.
21 See, for example, J Montgarrett ‘Remembering the Memorable’ *Textile Fibre Forum* No 74, 2004, p.16.
22 The Society of Certificated Embroiderers changed its name to The Embroiderers’ Guild in 1920 and membership restrictions were eventually relaxed so that it was open to all interested embroiderers.
Royal School of Needlework certificate. In 1907, after advice was sought from a group of male designers including Walter Crane and Lewis F Day, membership was opened to others provided their work was of a suitable standard.  

23 Early members included women such as Louisa Chart and Louisa Pesel, who were very clearly professional practitioners. Louisa Chart taught at Wimbledon, Kingston-on-Thames and Edinburgh Schools of Art, and worked as a conservator as well as an embroiderer, while Louisa Pesel, who had studied with Lewis F Day, worked as a designer in Greece in the first decade of the twentieth century, taught embroidery in England, and was commissioned by the Victoria and Albert Museum to work stitch samplers which were later published by Lund Humphries.  

27 The Society of Certificated Embroiderers held its first public exhibition in 1911. Although little information about the exhibition seems to have survived, it can be assumed that the participants saw the public display of their work as a useful promotional tool and as a means of re-affirming the status of embroidery as a form of art. After the Society changed its name to the Embroiderers’ Guild in 1920 exhibitions were held intermittently – in 1923, 1927, 1930 and 1933 – but by the middle of the twentieth century exhibitions of embroidery were a regular occurrence in Britain.  

29 Australia, embroidery and the Arts and Crafts movement

By the beginning of the twentieth century the changing attitudes to the decorative arts that resulted from the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain were being introduced to Australia. The link between the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain and the craft movement in Australia has been extensively documented by Cochrane. As she explains it, the Arts and Crafts movement emerged in Australia considerably later than in Britain and without its political overtones. William Morris’ socialist ideals were of little relevance to Australians involved in the arts and crafts, most of who belonged to the middle and upper classes. Nevertheless, the ideologies of the Arts and Crafts movement had a significant influence in Australia. Australians drew on the models offered by the various arts and crafts societies

24 ‘Louisa Chart’, Embroidery, Volume 14, No 2, 1962, p.52  
26 Howard, Twentieth century embroidery in Great Britain to 1939, p. 67.  
established in Britain and developed Antipodean versions of these groups, designed to provide mutual support and encouragement and opportunities to exhibit and sell work. The Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales was established in 1906 and was soon followed by similar groups in other states.

The Arts and Crafts Society of NSW played a significant role in the development of interest in modern embroidery. As its name indicates, the Society encouraged all areas of the arts and crafts, not just ‘fine art’, and many of its members included embroidery among their pursuits. One of the founding members was Eirene Mort who, between 1897 and 1906, had lived in Britain and studied at the Royal College of Art and the Royal School of Needlework. Although Mort was never a member of the Embroiderers’ Guild in Sydney, her influence was considerable. She was a prominent member of the Sydney arts and crafts community in the early decades of the twentieth century. The *Australian dictionary of biography* indicates that, in addition her involvement with the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, she was a founding member of the Australian Painter-Etchers’ Society (established in 1921), a founder of the Australian Guild of Handicrafts, and a principal of the Women Painters’ Art School. Eirene Mort also taught in several girls schools in and around Sydney. As an independent woman who supported herself through a life in the arts she must have been a powerful role model to others with similar aspirations.

Another member who practised embroidery along with other crafts was Olive Nock, who had spent two years in Europe in the 1920s. While there she visited the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* in Paris. She also attended classes at the Royal School of Needlework in London where she encountered W.G. Paulson Townsend who, she later recalled, ‘took an interest in my work in the classes, spending time on several occasions to accompany me to the Victoria and Albert museum to instruct me on what designs to study’. On her return to Australia Olive Nock continued to work in various areas of design and craft, being proposed by Eirene Mort as a member of the Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales in 1929. Several examples of her work are held in the Powerhouse Museum and a printed fabric length and a hand painted tea set were used to illustrate an entry about her in a volume on the Museum’s decorative arts collection.

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32 The Australian Guild of Handicrafts is another organisation which is not mentioned in Cochrane.


number of women associated with the Society of Arts and Crafts who were either founding members of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW, or joined soon after its establishment.

The Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW maintained its own library, which provided access to monographs and the latest periodicals such as *The Studio*. These resources, together with regular meetings and a program of guest speakers, provided a means by which new ideas about art and craft were transmitted to Australia. Perhaps the most significant of its activities with respect to the introduction of English approaches to design and embroidery to NSW was its short lived Craft Training School at Double Bay. The idea of the school appears to have been first raised at a committee meeting in early 1945 by Miss Outlaw.\(^{35}\) Planning obviously proceeded at a rapid pace, since classes commenced later in the same year. The genesis of the Craft Training School, also sometimes referred to as the Double Bay Studio, is described in some detail in an untitled document in the Society’s records:

> Interest in Craftwork, and the urge to be constructive, have greatly increased; and many people have experienced the joy of creating something, but qualified teachers are needed to direct their efforts. Even if enough teachers of Technical College Standard were available, they would not be able to guide their enthusiasm into permanent channels, unless a greater number of cultured, as well as skilled, craftsmen came forward to set a standard.

For this purpose, in April 1945, the project of founding a Craft Training College was approved at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Arts and Crafts of N.S.W. The objective is to establish a three-year diploma course, and to raise the standard of all Craft-work though advanced instruction, with emphasis on a wide cultural background.\(^{36}\)

The teaching program for the school and a correspondence course in design were developed by Ann Gillmore Rees who was appointed as the first director and who, according to the regulations established to govern the school, was to have control over classes, exhibitions and the appointment of additional members of staff.\(^{37}\) The first class began in October 1945 with just eight students, but the following year the numbers had increased to 36. The Society’s records show that the classes were always well subscribed, with the number of

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\(^{36}\) Unlabelled paper, possibly a press release, attached to an account for screen printing ink (MLMSS 3645 3(9) MLK 02077, Mitchell Library).

\(^{37}\) Records of Ann Gillmore Rees’ appointment are found in the Society’s Minute book 1943-1948 (MLMSS 3645 5(9) MLK 02079); the responsibilities of the director are outlined in the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW Regulations for Craft Training School (MLMSS 3645 7(9) MLK 02081, Mitchell Library).
teachers and the range of classes increasing from year to year. At first Ann Gillmore Rees was the sole teacher at the Craft Training School, taking classes in colour and design and in embroidery, but by 1947 she was being assisted by Margaret Oppen who taught the colour and design classes, but not embroidery. However expansion of the school, and its ultimate survival, was hampered by a lack of funds. Although the school apparently made enough money to cover its operating costs, the Society was not blessed with large amounts of capital. The fate of the Craft Training School is revealed in the minute books of the Arts and Crafts Society of New South Wales and its imminent closure was also recorded in the Truth. From its inception the school had operated in borrowed premises. When this space was no longer available, the problem of finding another more permanent venue proved insurmountable and the school closed in 1951.

The Society of Arts and Crafts of New South also provided exhibition opportunities for its members, holding annual exhibitions that included work in a variety of media including embroidery. In 1987 Isabel Craig recalled an exhibition at the David Jones Gallery ‘during the war’ in which she exhibited an apron with a design based on Matisse. Perhaps this was the Society of Arts and Crafts exhibition in 1942 which was held that year in the David Jones’ Gallery because the usual venue, the Department of Education Gallery in Bridge Street, was unavailable. The Society also held an exhibition of work from the Double Bay design school in the David Jones’ Gallery at some point during Dora Sweetapple’s tenure as principal. An undated catalogue records the participants, but not the date.

The Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW brought together many of the women who were later to be involved with the Embroiderers’ Guild of New South Wales. The Craft Training

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38 The accounts books which record the payment of student fees throughout the life of the school provide evidence of the number of students attending classes (MLMSS 3645 3(9) MLK 02077, Mitchell Library).


40 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross, Mrs Isabel Craig and Mrs Chiquita Cullip, 9 March, 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.


42 Copies of the catalogue which comprises a single sheet of foolscap paper printed on both sides can be found in the National Gallery of Australia’s artists files on Margaret Oppen and Dora Sweetapple. On March 27, 1949 the colour supplement in The Sunday Sun contained a two page feature on the Double Bay school, perhaps as part of the promotion for the exhibition, which must have occurred some time between the end of 1947 when Ann Gillmore Rees resigned as Principal and the end of 1949 when Dora Sweetapple’s term came to an end.
School is particularly significant for the development of modern embroidery because it provided opportunities for interested women to receive education in embroidery from teachers who were familiar with trends in English embroidery. When Ann Gillmore Rees resigned from the school to return to England the teaching of embroidery was taken over, at least initially, by Muriel Medworth who had also studied art in England prior to her arrival in Sydney in 1939. Olive Nock, Margaret Oppen, Roma Field, Win Thorvaldson, Mary Mather and Diana Pockley were among those who had been involved in the Society as exhibiting members, or as teachers or students at the Craft Training School, and who later became members of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW. Others, like Ann Gillmore Rees, Marion Hall Best and Dora Sweetapple contributed to the Embroiderers’ Guild in other ways, by teaching for the Guild or by being recruited by Margaret Oppen as guest speakers.

Another group which reflected the ideology of the Arts and Crafts Movement and which brought embroiderers into contact with the Sydney art world was the Women’s Industrial Arts Society. According to Helen Topliss, it had as one of its aims to ‘break the distinction between the arts and crafts and to give women a positive and remunerative outlet for their art’44, while a newspaper report of the first exhibition held by the group notes that the object of the organisation was to bring ‘women’s art into closer relationship with commercial and industrial interests’.45 June Scott Stevenson, a founding member of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW and a graduate of Edinburgh School of Art, had been involved in the Women’s Industrial Arts Society from its inception46, perhaps more because of her interest in architecture than her involvement in embroidery. Whatever the motivation, her association with this group is further evidence that the women who went on to establish the Embroiderers’ Guild in 1957 were closely involved in the Sydney arts community, and were both aware and supportive of current trends in art and embroidery.

June Scott Stevenson also played a more direct role in promoting original design in embroidery. She had studied with Louisa Chart at Edinburgh School of Art, where students studied plant form, design and historical ornament and were encouraged to create their own designs and way of developing their work, all based on a sound technical understanding of

43 N McFarlane and J Mackinolty (eds) A history of the Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales 1906 – 1991, The Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW: Sydney, 1991, p.36. Muriel Medworth, Dora Sweetapple and Mrs John (Diana) Pockley, who was a student at the school, were shown displaying work produced at the school in an article in the Sunday Sun Supplement March 27, 1949.
46 The Record, No 26, October 1962, p.6.
stitches. Later she studied at the Royal School of Needlework. Her training, combined with the experiences of a childhood in Chile, made her an inspiring teacher of embroidery when she arrived in Sydney in the mid-1920s. Among her students were Margaret Oppen; Marion Hall Best; and Prue Socha, who attended classes as a child. In an unpublished autobiography Marion Hall Best discussed the impact of June Scott Stevenson’s teaching:

… the South American influence in both design and colour had been very strong and splendid. With her I concentrated on embroidery at which she was brilliant. Large scale motif type of design, non realistic and in brightly coloured coarse wools which vibrated like Gauguin’s paintings were a real inspiration and I took to it like a duck to water and really never gave it up completely. It was not fancy work style.

June Scott Stevenson also produced a book of stitches that was published by Sydney Ure Smith, wrote on embroidery for Woman, and much later designed and produced samplers for the Embroiderers’ Guild, modelled on examples produced by Louisa Pesel for the Victoria and Albert Museum. Her influence was widespread and because of her background she provided a link with early twentieth century English and Scottish approaches to embroidery.

When considering the development of embroidery in New South Wales another organisation that must be mentioned is the Country Women’s Association, since this group almost inevitably springs to mind when people think about embroidery. The Country Women’s Association did encourage craft work of all kinds, including embroidery. In 1935 it established a Handicrafts Committee; Roma Field, an expert traditional embroiderer and later a member of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW, was one of the original members of that committee. Displays of handicraft were mounted at the Royal Agricultural Society’s Easter show in Sydney from 1938 on and exhibitions were also held in the David Jones’

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47 *The Record*, No 26, October 1962, p.6. For detailed discussion of Margaret Oppen’s introduction to embroidery, see Chapter 3. Regardless of when Margaret Oppen’s classes with June Scott Stevenson took place, there is no doubt that Oppen had a long standing acquaintance with Stevenson and regarded her very highly as an embroiderer.

48 Conversation with Prue Socha on 28 April 2003.


50 One article titled ‘Embroidery is an art’ was published in *Woman*, 9 February 1948. Articles on embroidery appeared regularly in the pages of periodicals such as the *Woman’s Budget, Woman and the Australian Woman’s Mirror* during the 1930s and the 1940s. Because they were frequently unsigned it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of articles that June Scott Stevenson wrote.

Gallery in conjunction with the Association’s annual conference. However, for the most part the focus was on practical, useful crafts. The Handicrafts Committee was initially established to encourage the use of Australian wool in handicrafts and other popular crafts included glove making, basketry, rug making and millinery. While the Country Women’s Association encouraged high standards in all forms of craft, including embroidery, there is no evidence to suggest that they aspired to have their work seen as art. Handicrafts were exhibited in the David Jones’ Gallery, but it seems that this was a practical choice rather than a strategic one: the Association’s headquarters were located in David Jones’ premises in Sydney. While the Country Women’s Association provided opportunities for some forms of embroidery to be exhibited in the public domain, this occurred in quite a different context to that in which creative embroiderers operated – and it was this domestic context from which creative embroiderers in the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies wished to distance themselves.

The only other recorded exhibition of embroidery in a commercial gallery prior to the establishment of an Embroiderers’ Guild branch in Sydney appears to have been one that occurred in 1949. Margaret Oppen and her friend Ethleen Palmer, also a member of the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, held an exhibition at the Grosvenor Galleries in Sydney. The exhibition included eight of Mrs Oppen’s embroideries, printed scarves and fabric lengths, and prints on paper by Ethleen Palmer. The exhibition does not appear to have attracted the attention of the local press, apart from a brief mention in the women’s pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, but it must have been reasonably well attended. A copy of the catalogue, with annotation indicating which items were sold, is held in the Research Library at the Art Gallery of NSW. It shows that most of Ethleen Palmer’s prints were sold, as were some of Margaret Oppen’s scarves but that although most of the embroideries were for sale, at prices ranging from 4 guineas to 25 guineas, none of them attracted buyers.

The embroidery, worked in simple stitches and ‘designed direct on to material without sketch or pattern’, was applied to a variety of domestic items, including a bedspread, tablecloths and an inset for a cabinet door. These were original designs and therefore, in terms of the philosophy of the Arts and Crafts Movement which was such a part of Margaret Oppen’s background as an artist, eligible to be considered as art. However, despite Margaret Oppen’s emerging interest in embroidery as an art form, this early attempt to position it as

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52 Townsend specifically mentions that exhibitions were held in 1936, 1937 and 1952, while David Jones Ltd records indicate that an exhibition was also held in April 1941 (Correspondence from Barbara Horton, 2 March 2004). It seems likely that they may have been an annual event.

53 H Townsend, *Serving the country*, p.83-88

such cannot be counted a success. The time was not right for embroidery, especially embroidery that was apparently intended for domestic use, to be accepted as art. The Arts and Crafts Movement was long since past, the feminist movement with its interest in women’s domestic craft had not yet emerged, and professional craft organisations like the Craft Association were still many years in the future. There were no more significant attempts to mount embroidery exhibitions until the early 1960s and it was not until the middle of that decade that there was any extensive public discussion of embroidery as a form of art. Shortly after the Grosvenor Galleries exhibition Margaret Oppen moved to England to live, at which time she became acquainted with more recent developments in British embroidery.

**Embroidery in Britain in the fifties**

The nineteen fifties were an eventful period for British embroidery. The Embroiderers’ Guild magazine *Embroidery* began to be published in 1950\(^5\), providing a platform for discussion about contemporary embroidery, and by this time exhibitions of embroidery were held regularly. Kathleen Whyte began teaching at Glasgow School of Art in 1948, reinvigorating the embroidery program in that institution, and in 1953 a full-time program in embroidery was introduced at Goldsmith’s College of Art under the leadership of Constance Howard. Although English embroidery from this decade is more controlled in design and technique than work produced at Glasgow School of Art\(^6\), it is still possible to identify a more experimental attitude to the use of materials and a freer use of stitch than had previously been the case. Popular motifs included stylised figures, birds, animals and plants and some use of abstract patterns. Constance Howard summarized the changes in embroidery thus:

> It was noticeable during the mid fifties that a lively element was infiltrating into the craft, due to artists trained in other subjects exploiting fabrics and threads in order to express ideas. As they possessed slight or no knowledge of the behaviour of these and little or no technical skill, they were breaking away from the traditional methods. By using the medium

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\(^6\) See L Arthur, *Kathleen Whyte: Embroiderer*, Batsford, London, 1989, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 for examples of student work from Glasgow as well as work by Kathleen Whyte. For English work see Howard, *Twentieth century embroidery in Great Britain 1940 – 1963*. 82
unconventionally and entirely to express what they wished to say, in any ways they could
device, the results were varied and individual.\textsuperscript{57}
The images which accompany Howard’s text demonstrate this more lively approach to embroidery, especially the panels and wall hangings which became increasingly popular during this decade. However embroidery at this time, although original, was still largely driven by design and technique. In a recent article Eirian Short, who was one of the artists who began to work in embroidery at this time, summarised Constance Howard’s ‘rules’: ‘flat pattern, a self-contained motif; no hint or realism or perspective or shading or so on’.\textsuperscript{58}

According to Margaret Hall-Townley, the women working in the fifties were drawn to subject matter which was ‘decorative and light … There was no content in the way that we look at content today’. \textsuperscript{59} It has been suggested that the use of such subject matter was a response to the privations of the Second World War and the period of post-war austerity. \textsuperscript{60}

Hall-Townley believes that the introduction of ‘content’ into embroidery took place in British art schools in the nineteen sixties, where:

bright and intelligent [students] saw the [embroidery] course as a way of breaking away from the establishment. Many of them had something to say and began to look at what they could do within the confines of ‘embroidery’. Much of this work has not survived and most were not taken seriously but they for-ran (sic) the wave of art textiles that followed. \textsuperscript{61}

One of the criticisms often levelled at embroidery is that it is decorative, by which the critic generally means ‘lacking in meaning or content’ and thus not worthy of serious consideration. By comparison with more recent approaches to embroidery which have been informed by the conceptual art movement and, more recently, postmodernism, perhaps the embroidery of the nineteen fifties does appear to be conservative and lacking in ‘content’.

However, to use this judgment as a means of dismissing embroidery of the fifties and sixties is a form of anachronism. Embroidery of any period must be evaluated with reference to the context in which it was being created – and when this is done, Constance Howard’s assessment of embroidery of the nineteen fifties as lively and unconventional is understandable.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{57} C Howard, \textit{Twentieth century embroidery in Great Britain 1940 – 1963}, p.62
\item \textsuperscript{58} E Short. ‘A life in stitches’, \textit{Embroidery}, Volume 56, Sept/Oct 2005, p.16.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Email from Margaret Hall-Townley, 1 July, 2005.
\item \textsuperscript{60} A Walker, Introduction to \textit{Constance Howard. Christine Risley. Eirian Short}. University of London, Goldsmith’s College, Department of Textiles, 1985, p.5.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Email from Margaret Hall-Townley, 1 July, 2005
\end{itemize}
An Embroiderers’ Guild branch in Sydney

Between late 1949 and 1954 Margaret Oppen was living in England. She joined the Embroiderers’ Guild in London, and between 1952 and 1954 attended embroidery classes at the Royal School of Needlework. 62 A number of exhibitions of design and embroidery were held in London during Margaret Oppen’s residency. The Festival of Britain exhibition held in 1951 was the most prominent of these and included numerous examples of embroidery. Among them was a large fabric mural designed by Constance Howard and executed by member of the Women’s Institutes, and embroidered hangings for the Queen’s bedroom on the Royal Yacht Britannia, designed by Joan Nicholson and worked by the Royal School of Needlework. 63 There were also exhibitions arranged by the Needlework Development Scheme, exhibitions at the Embroiderers’ Guild, and exhibitions in commercial galleries. Given her character, it is almost certain that Margaret Oppen would have visited some of these exhibitions. As a member of the Embroiderers’ Guild she would also have received copies of Embroidery, which included articles on a wide range of embroidery related topics, including contemporary approaches. Through her classes at the Royal School of Needlework she would have further developed her practical skills in embroidery, while exposure to contemporary work must have expanded her thinking about the expressive possibilities of modern embroidery.

On her return to Australia in 1955, Margaret Oppen rented studio space in Redleaf Avenue in Wahroonga and began teaching classes in embroidery and painting. The classes, which were later conducted in a studio in her own home, continued into the nineteen sixties, well after the Embroiderers’ Guild headquarters moved to the city centre and the Guild had instituted its own program of classes in embroidery. There is not a great deal of information recorded about her early classes, about who attended them, or what they covered64, although in 1973 Diana Pockley referred to them when introducing a talk by Margaret Oppen at an Embroiderers’ Guild meeting:

62 Information about Margaret Oppen’s time in England in the fifties is taken from an annotated photograph album in the possession of the Oppen family. It includes a note by Margaret Oppen indicating that she studied at the Royal School of Needlework between 1952 and 1954.

63 Howard, Twentieth century embroidery in Great Britain 1940 – 1963, p.49.

64 More information is available about the groups and classes organized by Margaret Oppen in the nineteen sixties. Some of these groups were involved in the production of embroideries for branches of the Anglican church on the North Shore and also produced other work to Margaret Oppen’s designs. Pat Olney, who attended classes at Margaret Oppen’s home studio in the late nineteen sixties, produced items for her own use, learning a variety of stitches and strategies for adapting existing designs for embroidery. Conversation with Pat Olney, December 2006.
When she opened her studio at Wahroonga, at first she had painters and embroiderers both using it at different days, and having lessons. However the one just could not abide the other, and in the end embroidery won the day and painting was out. The students were all housewives, and the studio became known as The Housewives’ Escape … So far away from the rest of the world, it was not easy to be “modern” but they really tried hard…  

One wonders what Margaret Oppen thought about the nickname for the studio and whether she charged for lessons or not. Whatever her own aspirations, Margaret Oppen was clearly committed to the teaching of embroidery and, as suggested by Diana Pockley’s comment, to modern embroidery in particular. It was at this time that Margaret Oppen determined to start a local branch of the Embroiderers’ Guild. She was actively encouraged in this venture by Lady Hamilton Fairley, then chairman of the London Guild, who visited Australia frequently with her Australian husband. Margaret Oppen, together with Dorothea Allnutt and Diana Pockley, who were also members of the London Guild, made plans and the first meetings were held in mid-1957. Other early members included June Scott Stevenson, Roma Field and Isabel Craig, all of whom were involved in the Sydney arts and crafts scene.  

The Sydney branch of the Embroiderers’ Guild expanded rapidly, with 50 members at the end of their first year and just over 200 by August 1959. During these early years tuition was provided by Margaret Oppen, Roma Field (whose interest lay with traditional embroidery), Dorothea Allnutt, and by Ann Gillmore Rees who taught a series of classes in 1959. Memory of Ann Gillmore Rees’ classes may have been lost, but for an article published in the *Woman’s Day* in the same year which indicated the content of the class and reproduced photographs of several works produced by students. The style and technique of work is reminiscent of that being produced in England in the 1930s and 1940s, but in comparison with work being produced in British art schools by the late 50s it appears a little old fashioned. A panel by Kathleen Mann, illustrated in her book *Embroidery Design and Stitches* is similar to the work illustrated in the *Woman’s Day*. In the Mann example a cup and saucer are depicted in outline and arranged decoratively, with notations indicating the

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66 An account of Lady Hamilton Fairley’s connections with the Embroiderers’ Guild branch in NSW was prepared by Dr Ann Ross, who also interviewed various members of the Guild leading up to the 30th anniversary of the organisation. A hand-written copy is held in the Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
68 ‘Pictures made from your sewing scraps’ *Woman’s Day*, October 12, 1959, p.53. The only other accurate record of these classes is a brief mention by Margaret Oppen in *The Record*, No 105, September 1970. See Chapter Two for comments on an inaccurate recollection of the classes.
application of surface stitches, while the embroideries illustrated in the Woman’s Day are based on still life items from the kitchen – bottles, glasses, leaves and fishes – and are worked in appliqué with added hand stitchery.\textsuperscript{70} Although the designs are unsophisticated and the stitching appears to be rather crude the work demonstrates the desire of embroiderers to work in a more modern fashion. Margaret Oppen identified these classes as the Embroiderers’ Guild’s first efforts in the direction of contemporary embroidery and a venture that highlighted the need for more classes of this nature.\textsuperscript{71} By the end of the nineteen fifties the Embroiderers’ Guild had grown large enough that there was a demand for more classes; at the same time classes were a way of disseminating information about modern approaches to a wider audience.

\section*{Conclusion}

Many of the women involved in the establishment of the branch of Embroiderers’ Guild in New South Wales, which served as a focus from developments in modern or creative embroidery during the nineteen sixties, knew one another through their participation in the Sydney arts and crafts scene, most particularly the Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales. As the number of women interested in contemporary approaches to embroidery increased, they began to work cooperatively to establish support networks based around this new way of working, and the result was the emergence of a new community of embroiderers – or an ‘embroidery world’. From this perspective, the development of a community of embroiderers in New South Wales could be regarded an example of the Becker’s ‘evolutionary’ model, where a new art world develops as an offshoot of a pre-existing art world when like minded practitioners develop new ways of working.

Becker also explains that the emergence of a new art world can also come about in the form of an ideological and organisational attack on the standard practices of an existing art world.\textsuperscript{72} Most of those involved in creative embroidery in New South Wales were relatively conservative, middle aged and middle class women, who would almost certainly not have considered themselves radicals or revolutionaries. Furthermore, as my research clearly demonstrates, their activities had little impact upon the practices of the existing art world. Thus it would be stretching the bounds of credulity to label the establishment of an embroidery world in New South Wales as a revolutionary development according to the

\textsuperscript{70} Another of Mann’s books Appliqué design and method, A and C Black, London, 1937 includes photographs of work using the same combination of appliqué and stitchery used in the Australian examples.

\textsuperscript{71} The Record, No 105, September 1970, p.6.

\textsuperscript{72} Becker, Art worlds, p.304.
model proposed by Becker. Nevertheless the fact remains that the development of modern or creative embroidery in Sydney was to a large extent the result of the very deliberate actions of Margaret Oppen. Under her influence, embroiderers consciously adopted the conventions of creative embroidery from Britain, they established their own support structures when they found this new way of working was not accommodated by existing art world systems in Sydney, and they engaged in an active campaign to promote the idea that embroidery could be art.

Writing in 1970, Margaret Oppen described the history of the Embroiderers’ Guild in New South Wales as a series of chapters. The first chapter was the establishment phase, in which the membership of the group gradually increased, permanent premises were found, and some initial classes were held. The arrival of Pat Langford in Sydney in 1960 heralded a new chapter or phase in the development of the organisation and, more particularly, in the development of creative embroidery in New South Wales. Pat Langford was the first of many conduits through which knowledge of contemporary British approaches to embroidery were transmitted to embroiderers in New South Wales. In the following chapter I outline the different ways in which local embroiderers acquired this knowledge, explaining how British practices were first adopted and then adapted to suit local needs and conditions, in order to develop a set of shared conventions that underpinned the practice of creative embroidery.

Chapter 5

‘A complete lack of inhibitions, and the discarding of all previous ideas on what is “right” and “wrong” … helps enormously.’

Jill Hall

One characteristic common to all art worlds is that they each comprise a body of practitioners who share a rationale or, as Becker puts it, a ‘philosophical justification’ according to which their art-making activity makes sense and is worth doing. As the previous chapter explains, the idea that embroidery could be ‘art’ emerged with the British Arts and Crafts Movement in the late nineteenth century and developed further in the twentieth century. By the late 1950s, when Margaret Oppen was endeavouring to establish a community of modern embroiderers in Sydney, this rationale was well established in Britain. This was in part due to the legacy of the Arts and Crafts Movement and its message of equality among the arts. It was also due to the presence of embroidery within art schools in Britain, which resulted in a critical mass of trained embroiderers with skills in design and an interest in modern approaches to embroidery who took it for granted that embroidery was a worthwhile pursuit. The emergence in the middle of the twentieth century of a group of women who had originally trained in other forms of visual art, including painting and sculpture and who subsequently took up embroidery was also important. For these women the rationale for making art remained constant, it was simply the medium that differed. Among the group were women such as Constance Howard, Christine Risley and Eirian Short, all of whom taught at Goldsmith’s College of Art where they passed on their belief that embroidery was a valid medium for making art.

Along with a shared rationale, art worlds also operate according to a set of shared conventions which govern matters such as the materials artists use, the abstractions used to convey particular ideas or experiences, the ways in which materials and abstractions are combined, the forms that art works take, and the ways that artists interact with an audience. In chapter three I discussed what embroiderers of the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies meant by ‘creative embroidery’, highlighting some of the key characteristics that made creative embroidery different to more traditional work. These characteristics are, in essence, the conventions of creative embroidery: ideas about what constitutes appropriate materials, ways of using embroidery stitches and techniques, approaches to designing, suitable subject matter, and appropriate end products. To this list can be added ideas about

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1 H Becker, *Art worlds*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982, p.4
2 Becker, *Art worlds*, p.28.
suitable ways to engage with an audience and ways of responding to, or ‘reading’, creative embroidery.

While there is some evidence of embroiderers looking directly to continental Europe for information about traditional forms of embroidery, until recent decades embroidery in Australia has largely been mediated through British influences. The publications of the Needlework Development Scheme and the pattern booklets produced by the Scottish company J and P Coats Ltd were some of the ways by which some European styles of embroidery were introduced to both British and Australian embroiderers. Clearly these publications had a considerable impact since, as Constance Howard records, by the mid-fifties some writers were questioning whether there was too much reliance on Scandinavian work as a source of design. Nevertheless it was European design as interpreted by British embroiderers. British influences continue: even today a number of the teachers of textiles in Australian higher education are British trained.

As I explained in Chapter 4, the emergence of a community of embroiderers in New South Wales in the mid-twentieth century followed developments in British embroidery that originated in the late nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth century. The establishment of a branch of the Embroiderers’ Guild in Sydney in 1957 institutionalised the connection. Therefore it is not surprising that when embroiderers in New South Wales became interested in more contemporary approaches to embroidery they continued to look to Britain for information. As a consequence, the philosophy and conventions that influenced the development of Australian creative embroidery during the nineteen sixties were based upon British models. Australian embroiderers absorbed embroidery conventions that had been developed in Britain, gradually adapting them to suit local conditions until, by the end of the decade, Australian embroidery had developed its own distinct character and local embroiderers were not only teaching within Australia, but some were teaching overseas as well.

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5 For example: David Green, Professor of Visual Art at Charles Sturt University, trained at Medway College of Art and the Royal College of Art; Valerie Kirk, Head of the textiles workshop at ANU, trained at Edinburgh College of Art; Emma Robertson, senior lecturer in textiles at COFA, studied at Glasgow School of Art and Manchester Metropolitan University.
Adopting shared conventions

Learning from other embroiderers

Australian embroiderers acquired their knowledge of British embroidery in a number of different ways. A small number of women aspired to and achieved the goal of studying in Britain, but for most the experience was less direct. The majority gained their knowledge from British embroiderers who migrated to this country during the nineteen sixties and went on to exhibit and teach embroidery in Sydney; from British teachers who came to Australia on teaching tours from the early 1960s on; and from studying books and magazines as well as examples of work sent from Britain to Australia for exhibition.

In the early years of the Embroiderers’ Guild in New South Wales, the parent body in London provided considerable and quite direct support to its new branch. Lady Hamilton Fairley, who was at the time Chairman of the Embroiderers’ Guild in London, travelled regularly to Australia for family reasons and took the opportunity to meet with local embroiderers, bringing with her slides and examples of embroideries. When she visited in 1963 she discussed changes to the Royal School of Needlework, talked about the formation of the 62 group, and showed colour slides of a variety of work. On at least two occasions she left embroideries behind on her return to England. On her visit in 1963 the donations included a folder of experiments which used the passionflower as a design source, an evening bag of coloured embroidery on silk, pulled work and a tray cloth embroidered by Jennifer Gray. In 1969 Lady Hamilton Fairley donated a further three works, possibly a personal donation rather than one from the UK Guild. These were a panel in hand and machine embroidery by Joy Clucas, a machine embroidery by Moira McNeil and a modern sampler by Jean Carter. The Embroiderer’s Guild headquarters in London made available folders of samples and assisted in processing subscriptions to *Embroidery*. The library of the NSW Guild holds complete runs of *Embroidery* dating from 1957 while individual members also subscribed to the magazine. In 1962 arrangements were also made to have individual copies of the magazine supplied so that those who did not subscribe could purchase individual issues.

Since a proportion of the membership fees were sent back to England, Australian members who were visiting London were entitled to use the facilities provided there. Although international travel was not as common as it was later to become, some embroiderers did travel to the United Kingdom, taking advantage of their link with the parent body to incorporate a variety of embroidery related activities into their trips. Margaret Oppen made several visits, bringing back books and embroideries which were subsequently donated to the Embroiderers’ Guild branch in Sydney. Others who made the journey included Diana
Pockley who attended the annual general meeting of the London Guild in 1962; Dorothea Allnutt who made one visit to the UK in 1963 and a subsequent trip, funded by an Australia Council grant, in 1974; and Joan Bath who attended Guild classes on unconventional canvaswork and non-traditional counted thread in England in 1964. In 1965 Mrs Browne, librarian at the New South Wales Guild, applied for a Churchill Fellowship to study embroidery in England. Although unsuccessful, she nevertheless travelled to England and attended classes there in 1966. In 1972 Dorothy Gandevia and Frances Paykel had work selected in the Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute in London and travelled to England for the occasion. Like Dorothea Allnutt, Dorothy Gandevia returned to Britain in 1974 to study goldwork embroidery, her trip also funded by an Australia Council grant.

For the most part these visits provided personal enrichment for the individuals concerned. Most of them were not teachers and so their experiences were not passed on through formal educational activities. In her Australian Council grant application Dorothy Gandevia indicated that she intended to teach on her return but although there are records of some proposed classes it seems that, apart from one class for the Creative Embroidery Association, she did very little teaching. Dorothea Allnutt, on the other hand, did teach for the Embroiderers’ Guild, but was also employed as a craft teacher at Abbotsleigh School at Wahroonga. At the time of her first trip to England she was fully occupied in teaching at the school and in coordinating various group embroidery projects, rather than in extensive teaching for the Guild. The greatest effect of the overseas experience was seen in her own work and in her work at Abbotsleigh, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Six. However like many other members who travelled overseas, Dorothea Allnutt presented a talk to the Embroiderers’ Guild about the work she had seen and a summary of the talk was printed in The Record. These summaries meant that Guild members who were unable to attend members meetings in the city obtained some information about current developments. In some instances the talks were quite detailed and were accompanied by slides of work the embroiderer had seen, although a report of Joan Bath’s talk after her trip in 1964 suggests that the information that was passed on was not always highly sophisticated: ‘Mrs Bath confessed that although her instructor was pleased with her work, she herself was not at all sure she understood what she was doing’.

More substantive information was undoubtedly provided by British embroiderers who travelled to Australia during the nineteen sixties. Some made temporary visits; others came to stay. Pat Langford was one of the most influential of those who settled permanently. She

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6 The Record, No 44, August 1964, p.5.
was acquainted with Constance Howard, having attended embroidery classes at Goldsmith’s College in London, and had completed both stages of the City and Guilds examinations in embroidery, thus providing a very direct link with developments that occurred in British embroidery during the nineteen fifties. As she had exhibited her work, mainly paintings, in exhibitions in Britain, she approached embroidery from the perspective of an artist, albeit one with a taste for the decorative. Within days of arriving in Australia, Pat Langford had established contact with Margaret Oppen, and despite a difference in age of nearly thirty years the two women were to become firm friends.

Pat Langford played a key role in the development of creative embroidery in New South Wales. She was an important source of information about British embroidery, especially in the years immediately after her arrival, promoting experimentation and original design in her workshops and classes. Most importantly, she was an example of the embroiderer as artist, holding a solo exhibition at The Chatterton Gallery in 1961, less than a year after arriving in Sydney. Among embroiderers this exhibition helped to reinforce the idea that embroidery could be art. Unfortunately for the Embroiderer’s Guild it also brought Pat Langford to the attention of John Dabron, art inspector for the New South Wales Department of Education, who recruited her as a high school art teacher, with the brief of introducing modern embroidery into schools. As a consequence she was only available to teach for the Guild on weekends and during school holidays.

Pat Langford’s classes played an important role in spreading modern approaches to embroidery. However, as the most suitable times for many potential students of embroidery to attend classes were weekdays, her limited availability presented a problem. After her visit in 1963 Lady Hamilton Fairley observed that there was a need for teachers in Australia. At the annual general meeting of London Guild in 1963 both she and Lady Binney, who had also visited Australia that year, expressed the hope that a teacher could be sent from England in the near future.7 The visit in 1964 by Winifred Clayton, a teacher at the Chaucer Institute in London8, appears to have been an outcome of this discussion. According to Winifred Clayton her visit to Australia was the consequence of her meeting Ethel Oates, co-founder with Morna Sturrock and Lady Geraldine Amies of the Melbourne branch of the Embroiderers’ Guild, in Denmark9; although she also recalls meeting Joan Bath in London10.

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7 Minutes of the (London) Embroiderers’ Guild AGM, 18 June 1963
8 The Chaucer Institute was an institute for adult education in Southwerk.
9 Letter from Winifred Clayton, 10 October 2002. According to Morna Sturrock, Ethel Oates and Winifred Clayton met in Sweden, not Denmark – another instance of individuals remembering the detail, if not the substance, of an event in different ways.
10 Letter from Winifred Clayton, 10 November 2003.
presumably when Mrs Bath was there in 1964. Initially she was only to visit Melbourne, but her itinerary was eventually expanded to include Sydney, Canberra and Adelaide. As her proposed visit was mentioned in the minutes of the Embroiderers’ Guild Council meeting in London on 24 March 1964, it seems very likely that the London Guild had some involvement in negotiations to that end.

Winifred Clayton offered a series of structured courses, but apparently the Sydney embroiderers were not interested in this approach, preferring instead to work on embroidery of various types. In the end she conducted two series of three classes in Sydney; one on collage and one which was advertised as ‘open/free choice’. An article about the classes was published in a Sydney newspaper. The approach to embroidery being taught was described thus: ‘The contemporary “look” is created by using a combination of different textured materials superimposed on one another to form a collage.’ Winifred Clayton’s approach seems to have been ‘creative’ mainly from the point of view of technique, insofar as she was using materials in a way that was unfamiliar to Australian embroiderers of the time. In her report for The Record, Jill Hall commented that the ‘oddments’ used by Winifred Clayton included buttons, braid, sequin and raffia, noting that ‘A complete lack of inhibitions, and the discarding of all previous ideas on what is “right” and “wrong” … helps enormously.’

In 1987 Joan Jeremy recalled that Winifred Clayton ‘was the beginning of the creative people … she put dog’s hairs in something I remember…but, she also taught us hems and edges’.

It is difficult to assess the extent of Winifred Clayton’s influence in Sydney. Jill Hall’s report was positive, but the only embroidery that can be identified as having a direct connection with her visit is an embroidered picture of a lyrebird by June Scott Stevenson which is now in the Embroiderers’ Guild collection. The work is labeled on the back with a note indicating that it was inspired by a visit from Miss Clayton in October 1964, although in technique and execution the panel is not especially innovative. The Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition in 1966 was the first one after Winifred Clayton’s visit for which records exist. This exhibition included a small collection of embroidered and panels and hangings, most of them the work of Pat Langford, who did not attend Winifred Clayton’s classes. The majority of the exhibits were still relatively traditional and it was not until later in the decade that less conventional materials were in regular use. It seems therefore that Winifred Clayton’s

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11 Ibid.
12 Unlabelled and undated newspaper clipping, Box A, History File, Embroiderers’ Guild archive
13 The Record, No 46, October 1964, p.7.
14 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Joan Jeremy, 2 February 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
classes did not have an immediate impact in Sydney. She returned several times to Melbourne, describing the embroiderers there as ‘creative, productive, really seeking skills and ways to enable them to achieve their own personal designs and ideas’; but she never returned to Sydney.

By contrast when Cynthia Sparks arrived in Sydney in 1967, she had a significant and almost immediate influence on local practices. She had attended classes with many of the famous names of British embroidery – Constance Howard, Margaret Nicholson, Beryl Dean, Barbara Dawson, and a young Jan Beaney – and had also been chair of the committee responsible for the development of the London Guild’s portfolios of embroidery techniques. Thus she had a sound knowledge of contemporary practices in embroidery. She recalls that she had no intention of teaching embroidery in Australia, but had brought with her examples of her work in order to decorate a home. However, she came to the attention of Margaret Oppen and, in another demonstration of Mrs Oppen’s capacity to marshal assistance, within a very short space of time had been recruited to teach for the Embroiderers’ Guild. Her first recorded contribution was a slide talk at the July meeting in 1967, at which she showed slides of work from the 1966 Commonwealth exhibition of embroidery. Shortly after, she began teaching classes and from this beginning went on to teach in many different locations for embroiderers’ guilds, as well as for the Craft Association of NSW and later the Crafts Council. When the Guild decided to enter candidates for the London City and Guilds examinations, she assisted them.

Between 1967 and 1970 Cynthia Sparks wrote numerous articles for the Guild Record, which extended and reinforced Margaret Oppen’s rhetoric about modern approaches to embroidery. The earliest of these was titled ‘What is contemporary embroidery?’ in which she explained that in contemporary embroidery the emphasis was shifting from decoration to personal expression. The article discussed how embroiderers were able to introduce texture to their work, unlike the contemporary hard-edged painting seen in ‘the recent British and American exhibitions in Sydney’, and drew attention to the creative possibilities of using a variety of materials and techniques, although it also cautioned against the indiscriminate use of found objects. Among Cynthia Sparks’ other contributions to The Record were reviews of exhibitions and, occasionally, critiques of work. There were summaries of the content of

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15 Letter from Winifred Clayton, 10 November 2003.
16 Conversation with Cynthia Sparks, 9 January 2003.
17 The Record No 74, August 1967, p.9.
18 The Record, No 77, November 1967, p.7.
19 Presumably a reference to the exhibitions Aspects of new British art and Two decades of American painting, both of which were seen in Sydney in 1967.
some of her classes, discussions about appropriate ways to finish and display work and, in 1969, extensive technical instructions for metal thread embroidery.

When Nadine Turner was interviewed by Dr Ann Ross in 1987 she commented that:

We all got a lot of very good ideas from Cynthia. She certainly knew about the Sixty-Two group and she’d seen a lot of their work. She certainly opened some eyes and she had different methods and we all enjoyed that.  

At the same time Anne Baker suggested that Cynthia Sparks’ contribution to the development of creative embroidery in New South Wales had not received the recognition it should have, a sentiment echoed by Pat Langford in my conversations with her. Looking back at the catalogues of exhibitions from the years in which Cynthia Sparks was teaching in Sydney, it is apparent just how extensive her influence was. Her classes covered a broad range of techniques including box making, gold work and modern approaches to canvasswork and it is no coincidence that these techniques flourished in the wake of her teaching. In 1983 Constance Howard wrote that in her opinion ‘embroidery in the sixties developed more rapidly than at any time since the Second World War’.  

Howard was talking about embroidery at all levels: that being produced in British art schools at the time, but also the developments fostered by adult education classes and classes run by the Embroiderers’ Guild. Having been extensively involved with the London Guild, Cynthia Sparks was an important conduit through which contemporary approaches to embroidery design and technique were transmitted to Australia.

Another visitor to have a substantial impact was Hannah Frew. In late 1969 Margaret Oppen had made a sum of money available to the NSW Guild to fund ‘an expert English embroidery teacher to visit Australia to give lectures and guidance in both traditional and contemporary embroidery’.  

Margaret Nicholson, an English embroiderer who taught at the London College of Fashion, was originally invited, but she was unable to come and Hannah Frew, who was teaching full time at the Glasgow School of Art, was asked instead.  

She brought with her a different approach to embroidery from that which local

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20 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Nadine Turner, 30 March 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
21 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Anne Baker, 18 March 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
23 Letter from Margaret Oppen to Joan Bath, President of The Embroiderers’ Guild N.S.W., 1 October, 1969, appended to the minutes of the Embroiderers’ Guild meeting of the same date.
24 Minutes of the Committee Meeting of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW, 3 December 1969.
embroiderers had previously encountered. Cynthia Sparks was interested in original design and experimenting with technique, but her approach was that of a serious amateur: someone for whom embroidery was a stimulating and creative pursuit, but not necessarily to be regarded as a profession. As a teacher Cynthia Sparks encouraged women to develop their own designs and experiment with technique because she believed that they would find this approach personally fulfilling. By contrast, Hannah Frew’s formal training at Glasgow and Birmingham Schools of Art had led to a philosophy of embroidery which valued conceptual development highly, rather than one which emphasized experimentation for its own sake. At Glasgow, because embroidery was seen as a medium for making art, ideas and intention were of primary importance: ‘the impression of spontaneity in a relative slow process such as embroidery will result from … a clear intention throughout.’

Hannah Frew spent three months in Australia in 1970, leaving Glasgow at the end of one academic year and returning in time for the beginning of the next. She taught in Sydney, Newcastle, Berrima and Orange and gave talks in Melbourne and Adelaide. The techniques covered in her workshops included pulled work, canvas work, gold work and surface stitchery, with a particular emphasis on design which reflected a distinctively Scottish approach. According to Hannah Frew, at the time:

there was a distinct difference between Scottish and English work. Scottish work was much more controlled, much more designed at that time. English work was much more spontaneous…. Not so much going through the channels of designing as going spontaneously into embroidery, whereas in Scotland we tended to do quite a bit of that middle stage of designing before going into the final stage of embroidery. And it gave a different look to the work that was being done.

She generally started the classes with slides and a discussion of design, since that was what Australian students seemed to need most: ‘Everybody knew how to do things but they didn’t know what to do with it.’

The timing of Hannah Frew’s visit was fortuitous, occurring as Cynthia Sparks’ time in Sydney was drawing to a close. It is certain that Cynthia Sparks’ influence would have helped to ensure that Hannah Frew had a receptive audience. It was also undoubtedly

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26 Conversation with Hannah Frew Paterson, 15 September 2002.
27 Conversation with Hannah Frew Paterson.
28 According to The Record, No 101, May 1970, Cynthia Sparks was to have returned to England by the time that issue was printed, while Hannah Frew arrived in mid-July. However, in conversation with Cynthia Sparks (9 January 2003), she indicated that she not only met Hannah at the airport when she arrived, but that she had attended at least one of Hannah’s classes.
significant that, although a recent art school graduate, Hannah Frew was in her late thirties and therefore able to relate easily to the women who attended her classes. Her visit proved to have a considerable impact. First of all, she brought with her the Scottish approach which emphasized the importance of the preliminary design process. Although she found many students initially resisted this approach, in most cases she was able to overcome their diffidence, perhaps because as a mature aged student at Glasgow she had worked through a similar lack of confidence. Of even greater significance were her ideas and attitudes about embroidery as art: the idea that technique was important, but what was more important was what you were going to do with the technique. The *Australian Women’s Weekly* reported Hannah Frew as saying that embroidery was being recognized overseas as an art form and that she:

> urged women to free themselves from the rules they have learned about embroidery; to create their own abstract designs and interpret them freely. … “Don’t copy. You can find inspiration in the things around you – landscapes, shells, even stones. Develop your ability to see things design-wise.”

Hannah Frew’s visit influenced local embroiderers in a variety of ways. Her classes in experimental pulled work led to an ongoing interest in this technique and interest in the technique of goldwork continued to flourish, while her approach to the teaching of stitches was later adopted by Heather Joynes and Prue Socha. Her emphasis on concept development and preliminary design seems to have had a significant impact on many embroiderers. For example, Prue Socha’s three dimensional canvaswork forms, such as *Golden Glow* (see Figure 3.3, Chapter 3) is a much more resolved design than the untitled wall panel (Figure 5.1) completed just prior to Hannah Frew’s visit. Prue Socha, along with Heather Joynes, served as an assistant in several of Hannah Frew’s classes and thus had ample opportunity to learn by observation. It seems that Pat Langford was also influenced by exposure to Hannah Frew’s ideas Although Pat Langford did not attend any of Hannah Frew’s workshops, the Scottish embroiderer stayed at the Langford home for part of her time in Sydney. By this time it was over twenty years since Pat Langford had left art school and ten years since her arrival in Australia. The opportunity to discuss recent developments in embroidery with an embroiderer with a similar background must have been very welcome. It is unlikely to be coincidence that in the early nineteen seventies Pat Langford was producing larger and more

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ambitious works than she had previously done; some of which were very overtly concept based: *Burnt Sun*, for example, was a comment on environmental issues.31

Hannah Frew also modelled for local embroiderers the possibility that one could approach the craft of embroidery as a professional, someone for whom embroidery was a vocation rather than a pastime. This idea must have had a significant impact on Australian embroiderers like Prue Socha and Heather Joynes, who had just completed work for the London City and Guilds examinations in embroidery. In the early nineteen seventies they began to establish themselves as professional practitioners, teaching and exhibiting on a regular basis. They subsequently went on to establish the Creative Embroidery Association as a support group for aspiring professionals.

**Learning from books and slides**

The experience of direct contact with British embroidery, whether the result of local embroiderers visiting Britain or British embroiderers travelling to Australia, played an important role in transmitting the conventions of creative embroidery to local practitioners. However, such contact was intermittent and not available to all. The most common way for embroiderers in New South Wales to learn about contemporary trends was through publications and slides. At the end of the nineteen fifties a relatively small number of books

31 This period was something of an exception in Pat Langford’s career. She commented to me in conversation that these works about environmental issues created some problems for her on teaching trips in rural areas. See Chapter 7 for further discussion of the role of concepts and ideas in Pat Langford’s work.
on embroidery were available. Of these, in 1962 the Guild library held copies of *Embroidery from traditional English sources* by Constance Howard (1956), *Ecclesiastical embroidery* by Beryl Dean (1958) and *Fabric pictures* by Eugenie Alexander (1959). As the sixties progressed, more and more books on embroidery were published and the Embroiderers’ Guild acquired many of them for its library. For instance, although there were few people practicing the technique at this early date, by 1965 the library included in its collection three books on machine embroidery: Christine Risley’s *Machine embroidery* (1961), Enid Mason’s *Ideas for machine embroidery* (1961) and *Machine embroidery* (1963) by Jennifer Gray. According to Heather Joynes, who joined the NSW Guild in the mid-60s: ‘If there was anything special that came out, like Constance Howard’s *Inspiration for embroidery* there was one in the library shortly, and probably Margaret [Oppen] who bought it’. This view is supported by a note in the Record indicating that on her final trip to England Margaret Oppen purchased four books from the Victoria and Albert Museum for addition to the Guild library.

The English magazine *Embroidery* was also available in Australia. The chief advantage that the magazine offered was immediacy; embroideries appeared in the magazine far earlier than they were seen in books. For example, a number of the works illustrated in Kathleen Whyte’s *Design in embroidery*, published in 1969, were first published five years earlier in the Winter 1964 issue of *Embroidery*. It is clear that the magazines were closely scrutinized. In 1962 Kath du Toit of the New Zealand branch of the Embroiderers’ Guild stopped in Sydney on her way back from a European trip, showing slides of recent British embroidery. In *The Record* the following month it was pointed out which of the images she showed had been previously seen in *Embroidery*. Similar comments were made when the Record reported on Cynthia Sparks’ first talk to the local branch in 1967.

In some cases embroiderers borrowed quite directly from the journal. Although not strictly speaking ‘creative embroidery’, several examples of work by Dorothea Allnutt are based very closely on work illustrated in *Embroidery*. For example, aspects of the design of an altar frontal by Sister Kathleen, which was illustrated in the Autumn 1961 issue and also shown during a slide lecture given to the Sydney Guild Mrs Kath du Toit in 1962, can be

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32 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Heather Joynes, 28 May 1987, Embroiderers Guild archives.
33 *The Record*, No 131, May 1973, p.4.
34 *The Record*, No 21, May 1962, p.7-10.
36 *The Record*, No 21, May 1962, p.7
seen in embroideries produced under Dorothea’s guidance for the chapel at Abbotsleigh. The original features a cross, overlaid with a crown of thorns and with three nails arranged at the base of the cross. In the Abbotsleigh variation, there is no cross. Instead the three nails are superimposed on the crown of thorns.

Another instance where Dorothea Allnutt appears to have borrowed very heavily is a christening gown which appears to have been adapted from designs published in the magazine in 1964. The original design features a central panel of angel motifs executed in machine embroidery on a sheer white fabric. In the version by Dorothea Allnutt, the motifs are very similar in shape to the original but read as abstract patterns rather than angels, and in the original the motifs touch one another whereas in Dorothea’s interpretation they are separate. The design sketch for the original shows an embroidered quotation running around the hem of the gown; an alternative design sketch shows names incorporated into the embroidery. The gown worked by Dorothea Allnutt has a scalloped rather than a straight hemline and the names of her two grandchildren have been embroidered at the base of the panel motifs. As the magazine photo is in black and white, it is not possible to identify the colour of the embroidery in the *Embroidery* version, but it appears to be a single tone of light coloured thread. In Dorothea’s version, the design is worked in hand stitches, rather than machine work, in blue and white thread. An illusion of several tones is created by the use of shadow work to fill some shapes.

In today’s terms such use of a published design would at the very least be regarded as an undesirable lack of originality, and is more likely to be considered a form of plagiarism. However, in both instances Dorothea Allnutt adapted the original design rather than simply copying it. In the case of the christening gown, the illustrations in the article were suggestions rather than precise patterns for tracing, and permission to use the design was implied by the text, which suggested that the designs could be interpreted in either hand or machine embroidery. In the case of the ecclesiastical work, a variation much closer to Sister Kathleen’s original design was illustrated in the Spring 1964 issue of *Embroidery*, indicating that the adaptation of an existing design was not considered problematic by the Embroiderers’ Guild hierarchy. Similar use was made of the text of articles published in *Embroidery*. There are numerous instances where summaries of articles previously

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37 P Scrase, ‘God shall give His angels charge over thee’, *Embroidery*, Volume 15, No 2, Summer 1964, pp. 48-49.
appearing in Embroidery were printed in the Record\textsuperscript{38}, either to reinforce ideas expressed by Margaret Oppen or to promote discussion on an issue of local concern.

A significant disadvantage of acquiring knowledge from books and magazines was that during the nineteen sixties these were illustrated mainly in black and white. They communicated information about techniques quite adequately and introduced the ‘look’ of British embroidery to their readers, but some of the subtleties of the use of colour and materials were missed. This became very clear when I was able to view work by Kathleen Whyte at Glasgow School of Art, which holds a number of the samples reproduced in her 1969 book \textit{Design in embroidery}. For instance, one might expect that a sampler of sheaf stitch variations worked in black and white would translate quite well to black and white photography. However, the contrasting texture of the threads, some of which are matt and some of which are shiny, is not evident in the photograph in the book.\textsuperscript{39} The photograph of another stitch sampler is captioned as being worked in reds and pinks; the work itself contains a much broader range of colour than this suggests, including oranges, hot pink, egg yellow and maroon. Where thread in one colour is crossed by a thread in a different colour, optical mixing of colour lends added vibrancy to the work. In many instances the tonal balance of the photograph is considerably different to that of the work itself, the tendency of lustrous threads to reflect light making them appear lighter than they really are, while areas embroidered in threads of different colour but similar tones often read as a single mass in a black and white photographic reproduction. Finally, in several of the actual embroideries it is evident that Kathleen Whyte mixed threads of different thicknesses, textural qualities or colours in the needle. This strategy, which adds a lively quality to much of the work, is not at all apparent in the book illustrations. By contrast although by the late nineteen sixties embroiderers in New South Wales were using a wider variety of threads, these were rarely used in combination and although bright colours were in common use, they tended to be used in solid blocks, as can be seen in Pat Langford’s \textit{Garden Plot} (c.1968) (Figure 5.2).

\textsuperscript{38} For example \textit{The Record}, No 52, June 1965 contains an article by Margaret Oppen which summarises the contents of \textit{Embroidery} Vol 16, No 1, Spring 1965; \textit{The Record} No 71, May 1967 reproduced an article called “Keep your needles, please” from \textit{Embroidery} Volume 17, No 4, Winter 1966.

\textsuperscript{39} See figure 129b, K Whyte, \textit{Design in embroidery}, Batsford, 1969, p.158.
The lack of colour in embroidery publications was compensated for to some extent by access to colour slides, which were another important means by which Australian embroiderers came to know about British embroidery. The viewing of slides was a regular feature of Guild meetings throughout the period, a time when taking photographs at exhibitions was much more accepted than it is today. On almost all occasions when an overseas visitor spoke the talks were accompanied by slides, and many Australians who had travelled overseas returned with slides showing embroideries they had seen. Slides were also obtained from other sources. When local embroiderers were preparing for the City and Guilds examinations in 1969 help was sought from Nancy Kimmins in London, who responded by sending slides of work produced by her students, while in 1970 slides of a recent 62 Group exhibition were shown at a members meeting. As well as being shown at members’ meetings, sets of slides were made available for borrowing by individual members, lists of what was available being printed at intervals in The Record. That local embroiderers appreciated the value of being able to see embroideries in full colour, is indicated by the following comment in The Record in 1967:

...[Cynthia Sparks] made her audience realize that here, we really are a very long way behind in thinking about embroidery. Many of the slides she showed were of the same embroideries as have been photographed in black and white in the English magazine “Embroidery”, and it

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40 For example, in December 1962 Win Thorvaldson presented talk illustrated by slides on the topic ‘Embroideries Seen Abroad’.
is like having the light turned on for the first time in a beautifully decorated room, to see them greatly enlarged and in colour.\textsuperscript{41}

**Access to embroideries**

The other way that local embroiderers were able to experience the full impact of contemporary embroideries was when the works themselves were available for viewing, something that occurred more frequently than one might expect. The local branch of the Embroiderers’ Guild established a study collection of embroideries relatively early in its existence and the collection grew steadily as a result of donations and purchases. Early acquisitions included embroideries donated by the London Guild in 1962, some of which came from the Needlework Development Scheme when it was disbanded in 1961 and which were representative of a 1950s approach to embroidery. In 1963 Lady Hamilton Fairley left several items in Sydney, including a folder of experiments using a passionflower as a design source, an evening bag of coloured embroidery on silk, and a traycloth by Jennifer Gray, which featured a combination of screenprinting and machine embroidery. As the decade progressed more contemporary examples were added, including *Mary and the Dove* by Audrey Tucker which was acquired in 1966, and a panel in hand and machine embroidery by Joy Clucas and *Snow Flake* by Jean Carter which were donated by Lady Hamilton Fairley in 1969. In 1970 Margaret Oppen purchased and donated to the Embroiderers’ Guild *Gold and Silver*, a small piece of three-dimensional goldwork by Hannah Frew and in 1973 she donated three pieces of goldwork by Flora Walton, acquired on her last trip to England. When Dorothy Gandevia and Frances Paykel travelled to London in 1972 they returned with *Grand Canyon* by Renee Leake for the Guild collection.

British embroideries were also brought to New South Wales for exhibition at various times, some by the Embroiderers’ Guild and some by other groups. In 1965 a small collection of traditional and contemporary pieces was brought from the Arbroath Group of the Embroiderers’ Guild by Mrs Kirkaldy, the mother of Helen Whelan who was a member of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW, and shown in the Guild rooms. Work from the 62 Group was brought to Australia in 1966, displayed in the Guild rooms during October and then included in the Guild exhibition held in Education Department Gallery in November. The individual items included a goldwork sunflower by Mary Arnold, machine embroidery by Joy Clucas, and *Autumn Feather* and *Mary and the Dove* by Audrey Tucker. *Autumn Feather* was possibly the embroidery illustrated in an article written by Audrey Tucker and published in *Embroidery* that year.\textsuperscript{42} *Mary and the Dove*, as noted earlier, was subsequently

\textsuperscript{41} The Record, No 74, August 1967, p.9.

acquired for the Guild collection. In 1968 work from the 62 Group was again included in the Guild exhibition, along with other embroideries from the United Kingdom that had been previously exhibited in Melbourne. This exhibition included Audrey Walker’s *Solway Coast* which had been purchased by Joan Bath and, interestingly, a piece by Winifred Clayton who had maintained a connection with the Melbourne Branch of the Guild.

In 1970 British embroideries were again brought to New South Wales for exhibition by the Embroiderers’ Guild, quite possibly also the work of the 62 group, while two other exhibitions in the early 1970s presented British embroideries in venues outside of the Embroiderers’ Guild. In May 1970 an exhibition of ecclesiastical embroidery held in the Farmers Gallery in George Street, included work by Constance Howard, Beryl Dean and Kathleen Whyte, some of the most notable British embroiderers of the time. In 1971 an exhibition of embroideries by Ann Butler and Janet Graham, both teachers in English art schools, was shown at the Dennis Croneen Galleries in North Sydney. This appears to have been the last significant exhibition of British embroidery to appear in Sydney for a considerable time, possibly due to the difficulties associated with importing such work, or perhaps because local embroiderers felt more confident in developing their own work.

**Developing Australian ways of working**

The ideology of creative embroidery was one of the most significant things adapted from British models, although it is clear from a close reading of *The Record* that this was a contested issue. There are many instances where reference is made to the divide between traditional and contemporary embroiderers. It seems that there was considerable resistance from traditional embroiderers who needed convincing that even if they did not wish to pursue creative embroidery it was still a valid pursuit for others. As late as 1969 Lady Hamilton Fairley spoke in Sydney about the development of embroidery, commenting that in her opinion ‘abstract designs work out to a greater advantage in embroidery than any other medium’[^43] and also that contemporary embroiderers must continue to experiment remarking that ‘We would be much poorer if our forebears had not experimented and we must carry on where they left off’.[^44] It is apparent that Lady Hamilton Fairley was aware of the misgivings of some local embroiderers about contemporary work, for she concluded by saying:

> I hope that those of you who have doubts about modern work will think again before passing it by and dismissing it. If you look closely you will see that the worker is using her knowledge of tradition (sic) techniques in the idiom of today.[^45]

[^44]: *The Record*, No 92, June 1969, p.11.
[^45]: Ibid.
The argument that embroidery should be of original design and contemporary in nature was promoted heavily in New South Wales, both within the Embroiderers’ Guild and, whenever possible, in the popular press. Information from British sources was reproduced or reinterpreted for a local audience and reinforced by articles written by well-known locals who were sympathetic to the cause. The end result was a community of embroiderers who were interested in contemporary work and willing to experiment. As Australian embroiderers became familiar with the conventions of contemporary British embroidery they began to modify their own approaches to embroidery in line with these conventions.

**Australian design styles**

The earliest and most straightforward response was to copy the style of British embroidery. During the 1950s much British embroidery featured pictorial designs worked in surface stitchery or a combination of appliqué and surface or machine stitchery – approaches that extended on the ideas developed in earlier decades. Stitches were worked in a controlled fashion, being employed for their decorative qualities and used to outline or fill a shape. At this stage the selection of fabric and threads was relatively traditional; according to Constance Howard it was not until the end of the decade that the use of variety of materials became widespread.\(^46\) The work that was produced in Australia in the second half of the nineteen fifties displayed similar qualities, both in terms of the materials used and the techniques used. The embroideries produced in Ann Gillmore Rees’ workshop in 1959 were reminiscent of the work illustrated by Kathleen Mann in her books originally published in the late thirties. The designs developed in the workshop were based on a still life grouping of fish, lemons, bottle and glass and the combination of lines and shapes in the final works has a similar quality to the examples illustrated in Mann’s *Embroidery design and stitches*.\(^47\)

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\(^{47}\) K Mann, *Embroidery design and stitches*, A and C Black, London, 1937. See page 35 which reproduced a series designs based on everyday objects, including one featuring a stylized cup and saucer.
Embroideries by Dorothea Allnutt’s students reflect slightly later trends. Frances Brownscombe (née Allman), a student at Abbotsleigh in the mid-fifties submitted embroidery for her final works in art at both Intermediate and Leaving Certificate levels. The work she produced for the Intermediate Certificate in 1956 was a table runner (Figure 5.3), which featured an abstract design worked in surface stitchery. According to Frances Brownscombe, the design was produced under the tutelage of Janna Bruce, who was the art mistress at the school and completed with the assistance of Dorothea Allnutt, whom she described as the embroidery teacher.  

In its use of repetition as well as the selection of stitches, the design has a similar feel to embroideries produced by Winsome Douglas and Lilian Willey for the Needlework Development Scheme in the mid fifties. An embroidered picture, *Still Life Panel* (1960)(Figure 5.4), worked by Dorothea Allnutt in cotton threads on linen fabric is also reminiscent of British embroidery of the forties and fifties, both in the way that the stitches are used and in its stylized representation of objects in the Allnutt family home.

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48 Conversation with Frances Brownscombe, 23 February 2003..
49 See, for example, figures 76 and 77 in C Howard, *Twentieth century embroidery in Great Britain 1940-1963* or the designs in MW Campbell, *Embroidery stitches*, Needlework Development Series, Book No 2, Needlework Development Scheme, Glasgow, nd.
Australian embroiderers were influenced by British trends with respect to approaches to design. Although there is evidence that embroiderers, like Dorothea Allnutt, modified existing designs at times, for the most part, the philosophy of ‘creative embroidery’ assumed that embroiderers would develop their own designs. In the strategies used to approach the task of designing, and in their choice of subject matter and Australian embroiderers also followed British precedents. Throughout the 1960s Australian embroidery, like English embroidery, became increasingly abstract. In 1966 Constance Howard commented on this phenomenon and suggested that abstract designs could be developed in one of two ways: direct observation of natural or man-made forms, or by working directly with abstract shapes.  

Creative embroiderers in New South Wales enthusiastically embraced abstract design, perhaps because of a perception that creating abstract embroidery did not require highly developed drawing skills. For many aspiring designers the matter of drawing proved to be a significant stumbling block and many of the approaches to design adopted in Australia were intended to circumvent the need to draw. One of the earliest design methods to be promoted was the use of the paper cut which was a popular way of designing in England. The use of paper cuts as a strategy for designing appears to have been introduced by Pat Langford, who taught it at the summer school held in January 1962 and demonstrated the technique on ABC television later the same year. By 1963 Pat Langford and Margaret Oppen were collaborating on a small book, published by Ure Smith, on the use of paper cuts as a design strategy. The target audience for the book was needlework teachers in NSW

51 See the editors note at the beginning of A Prada, ‘Slovak paper cuts’, *Embroidery*, Volume 12, No 1, Spring 1961, p.16.
schools but as 660 copies of the book had been sold by June 30th 1964\textsuperscript{53}, it appears to have attracted broader interest. Fay Bottrell used paper cuts as a design strategy for the summer school she taught in 1966. Cynthia Sparks used them when teaching a workshop in 1967, having learnt the technique from Margaret Nicholson in England, and the strategy was still in use in 1968 when Margaret Oppen again taught at the summer school. It is generally not possible to identify embroideries designed in this way. However two samplers worked by Nadine Turner in Cynthia Sparks’ class, and now held in the Embroiderers’ Guild collection, show how the technique was used to develop and arrange abstract shapes which were then filled with surface stitchery.

British influences also affected the choice of subject matter, although the choice of motifs was one of the earliest ways that local embroiderers made adaptations to suit their own circumstances. During the nineteen sixties nature was a popular source for design. The use of fruit and vegetable shapes as a design source was promoted in Constance Howard’s \textit{Inspiration for embroidery} and also in articles in \textit{Embroidery}.\textsuperscript{54} This interest was taken up by embroiderers in New South Wales. In the first half of 1967 	extit{The Record} published a series of lessons on designing using a pineapple as inspiration, resulting in four wall hangings on this theme being included in the NSW Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition that year. One of Heather Joynes’ successful works from the early seventies, now held in the Powerhouse Museum collection, depicted onions. Later, the correspondence course devised by Pat Langford was to include lessons on the use of fruit and vegetable cross sections as a design source.

Flowers and plants have always been used as a basis for embroidery designs; in Australian this interest translated into the use of indigenous motifs. In 1963, Dorothea Allnutt returned from overseas ready to promote the use of local motifs:

\begin{quote}
She feels that in Australia we have no need to copy overseas work, but should use our own particular colours and materials, and this make our own type of embroidery from the things around us.\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

This was not, of course, a new idea. In the late nineteenth century Lucien Henry and R T Baker had championed the use of Australian motifs in design, and local imagery had been extensively used by members of the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW much earlier in the twentieth century. In 1928 Liberty’s of London used Olive Nock’s design featuring

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{The Record}, No 46, October 1964, p.13.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{The Record}, Issue 37, November 1963, p. 9.
eucalyptus flowers and foliage for printed silk manufactured for sale in its famous store, while throughout the thirties and forties Margaret Preston had encouraged artists and designers to look to Aboriginal art as the basis of a distinctly Australian style. Whatever the origin of Dorothea Allnutt’s idea, she put this conviction into practice when designing her daughter’s wedding dress and, later, a wedding veil for a niece, both of which feature designs based on Australian flora. Australian plants proved a popular design source for many embroiderers, lending themselves to interpretation in a variety of techniques. For example, in 1963 May Burgh exhibited machine embroideries featuring flannel flowers and waratahs, while at different points in time banksias featured in work by Margaret Oppen, Cynthia Sparks and others. Sometimes designs were rendered in a naturalistic way, as in the panel by Margaret Oppen depicting wattle and flannel flowers (see Figure 3.1) where, to quote a Sun-Herald reporter, ‘the stitches looked like paint strokes’; sometimes they were interpreted in a much more abstract style, as in Margaret Oppen’s Banksia Fantasy (Figure 5.5), Prue Socha’s Grass Trees, or Dryandra, executed by Ruth Arthur in blackwork patterns. Australian wildlife was not quite as popular, perhaps because there is less room for error in drawing, although in 1961 a folder of embroideries of Australian fauna designed by Margaret Oppen and Pat Langford, and executed by members of the Wahroonga group, was sent to England for exhibition and Jean Vere also made extensive use of Australian animals and birds as a design source.

Figure 5.5. Margaret Oppen, Banksia Fantasy, c. 1968, collection of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW.

Under the influence of Cynthia Sparks, who used photographic slides as an aid to designing with students, other natural phenomenon such as rock formations, tree bark, seed pods were added to the repertoire. Microscopic and scientific imagery also proved popular. There had been an article on the use of microscopic imagery as a design source in Embroidery in Autumn 1964, and in 1969 the guest speaker at the Embroiderers’ Guild November meeting was a woman called Sally Doust, art editor of Vogue International, who had trained at Goldsmith’s College. Among other things she talked about machine embroidery and about the use of nature, including microscopic images of cell structure, as a source of inspiration. Examples of such imagery in Australian work include Shell Shape (1967) by Vivien Hadgkiss, Cynthia Sparks’ panel Wind Tunnel (1968), developed from a scientific diagram reproduced in Life, Ruth Arthur’s Porpita (1975) which was based on the structure of a jellyfish, and a 1973 panel by Heather Joynes depicting crystal patterns.

Materials and techniques

After a visit to Australia in 1961 Lady Hamilton Fairley reported to the London Guild that there was widespread interest and enthusiasm but that people were ‘handicapped by the lack of good threads and materials’. 57 The work of women like Roma Field, Elsie Wright and Mary Dwyer demonstrates that some Australian embroiderers managed to acquire the fabrics and threads they required, while Dorothea Allnutt’s work, and that of her students at Abottsleigh in the mid-fifties indicates that at least a basic range of fabric and thread was available. However, an early article on Carrickmacross lace in the Australian Women’s Mirror does suggest that specialist requirements were not always easy to obtain 58, and the fact that Lady Hamilton Fairley singled out this issue for comment in her report is an indication that the limited availability of materials was a handicap for local embroiderers. According to Cynthia Sparks, when she arrived in 1967 Coats Anchor thread was available, along with thread from the Australian company Semco, although in her opinion ‘the colours weren’t very good’. She also recalls that although DMC thread was imported to Australia, it was not widely available: “if you knew where to go, you got the thread”. 59 In 1960, when encouraging a more experimental approach, Dorothea Allnutt suggested that embroiderers

58 The author writes ‘A net having Limerick lace mesh … is the best … But you will find that kind very hard to obtain in Australia’ and ‘there is a very fine lace filling thread specially made for this … I doubt if it is procurable in Australia’ The Australian Women’s Mirror, March 14, 1939, p.27, reproduced in S Sheridan, Who was that woman? The Australian Woman’s Weekly in the post-war years, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2002.
59 Conversation with Cynthia Sparks, 9 January 2003.
could use six strands of cotton instead of two – not an especially adventurous step. However, as the decade passed, a growing awareness of the experimental use of materials by British embroiderers and the gradual availability of a wider variety of fabrics and threads saw embroiderers in NSW using an increasing variety of materials in their work.

When in England in 1963 Dorothea Allnutt saw ‘the Glasgow exhibition’ at the Guild in London and commented particularly on Kathleen Whyte’s transparent ‘Poppiest embroidery. A photograph of this work was used to illustrate a review of the exhibition in Embroidery in 1963 but, as it is constructed of sheer fabrics in vibrant colours and was designed to be viewed as a transparency, the black and white photograph fails to convey its full impact. The work clearly influenced Dorothea Allnutt who subsequently made use of sheer fabrics in several embroideries, including a silk organza jacket embroidered with pink floral motifs, a tulle shawl embroidered in an abstract circular design, and a wedding veil featuring self coloured embroidery.

In 1965 The Record reported that Mrs Green was machine embroidering onto a special type of plastic to produce waterproof articles, which suggests that among some embroiderers there was a willingness to experiment. However, it was not until the late sixties that experimentation really began to flourish. Pam Polglase’s Scheherazade (1968) used commercially printed fabric as a base and Vivien Hadgkiss’ Façade (c.1969) also incorporated printed fabric into the design. By the end of the sixties, embroiderers were using a much wider variety of threads, including knitting yarns and locally hand spun and dyed wool yarns. Embroiderers also began to incorporate objects of all varieties into their work. At the Armidale Summer School in 1970, when the technique being used was goldwork, the students reportedly used polished stones and watch parts in their panels. In working her three-dimension piece Porpita (1975) (Figure 5.6), worked in experimental needleweaving, Ruth Arthur used skewers and paperclips to provide structural support and angora knitting yarns along with more conventional embroidery threads.

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60 You needn’t be such a lazy daisy’, Sydney Morning Herald Women’s Section, August 11, 1960.
61 The Record, Issue 37, November 1963.
63 The Record, No 57, Nov 1965, p.2.
The range of techniques used expanded as those interested in contemporary work were exposed to British trends. A study of extant embroideries and slides of work from the period suggests that along with a freer approach to surface stitchery, among the most popular ‘new’ techniques were goldwork (or metal thread embroidery), canvas work, pulled work and needleweaving. By the early nineteen seventies machine embroidery had also been included in many embroiderers’ repertoires. The way in which the techniques of goldwork and machine embroidery were gradually adopted by local embroiderers shows how input from overseas combined with local interest to bring about changes in the kind of work being produced. Goldwork had been used for ecclesiastical embroidery in Anglican churches on the North Shore from early in the sixties. Some classes in the technique had been taught by local tutors in the mid-sixties, mainly associated with particular group projects. However, it was Cynthia Sparks, who had studied goldwork with Beryl Dean and Barbara Dawson, two of the most well known British exponents of the technique, who played a major role in developing interest in the technique in the broader embroidery community. Many more embroiderers began to experiment with the technique, using it for a wide range of secular applications, including wall hangings, panels and boxes.

Cynthia Sparks’ classes and the articles she wrote on the technique for *The Record* played a vital role in its increasing popularity, but another important and very practical way in which she encouraged the technique to flourish was by ordering threads in bulk by mail order and making them available to local embroiderers. Access to metal threads in New South Wales was limited until very recently. A significant component of Dorothy Gandevia’s 1973 application for an Australia Council grant to study goldwork in Britain related to research into suppliers of metal threads. Some threads, in particular jap gold and jap substitute, were available from ecclesiastical suppliers in Sydney, but even in the nineteen eighties other threads were only available in limited quantities and at high prices from a small number of
specialist embroidery shops. It is unlikely that the technique would have spread so rapidly if not for Cynthia Spark’s efforts in procuring suitable threads. In 1970, she and Pat Langford taught goldwork at a summer school at the University of New England so that when Hannah Frew visited later that year local embroiderers were able to benefit considerably from her expertise. By the early nineteen seventies local embroiderers were producing quite large and ambitious goldwork embroideries in both abstract and figurative designs. Perhaps one of the reasons for the popularity of the technique, despite the difficulty of acquiring supplies, was its perceived prestige, a consequence not only of the expensive materials but also its history as a professional form of embroidery and the uses to which the technique was traditionally put.

While the response to goldwork was enthusiastic, it took much longer for machine embroidery to be embraced by embroiderers in New South Wales. The technique was introduced relatively early. *The Record* reported on a demonstration of machine embroidery in May 1961 and in 1962 Kath du Toit’s slide lecture included images of a hanging in hand and machine embroidery by Joy Clucas (née Dobbs). Shortly afterwards Margaret Keggin, a British embroiderer who was working as an art teacher at St George Girls High School, gave a demonstration and talk on the machine embroidery to the Embroiderers’ Guild. A synopsis of the talk was printed in the August 1962 issue of *The Record* and the Guild acquired an example of her work for its collection.\(^{65}\) The first Australian embroiderer to experiment with the technique to any extent appears to have been May Burgh, who taught herself using books on the technique written by Christine Risley and Enid Mason. She was reported as believing that ‘the future of embroidery lies in the combination of hand and machine work’.\(^{66}\) In June 1963 she demonstrated machine embroidery on the women’s hour on ABC television and exhibited three items using the technique in the North Shore Arts Festival in August 1963. Pat Langford’s entries in the same exhibition included *Mannequin* in machine work and beading – the combination of hand and machine stitching was to remain a characteristic feature of her embroidery practice and something that was encouraged in her students. Later that year Dorothea Allnutt reported on the trend in Britain of combining hand and machine embroidery, indicating that a variety of textural materials were employed to provide a contrast with the ‘airy-fairy effect of machine stitching’.\(^{67}\) In 1967 the Guild exhibition in the Education Gallery included a group of works in machine embroidery,

\(^{65}\) Letter from Margaret Keggin, 20 November 2003.

\(^{66}\) *The Record*, No 32, June 1963, p.5.

\(^{67}\) *The Record*, No 37, November 1963, p.8.
including examples worked by Mrs Rastall of the Bernina company and works by Pat Langford, May Burgh and Margaret Keggin. 68

Despite the prevalence of articles on machine embroidery in Embroidery and the acquisition of several pieces for the Embroiderers’ Guild collection, it was not until the early nineteen seventies that embroiderers in New South Wales practised machine embroidery to any significant degree. In 1967 Ness Wansey, then editor of the Record, wrote that:

So far nobody in the Guild here has produced a really fine piece of machine embroidery. I believe that this is because we simply do not have the necessary instruction for the techniques, and anybody who thinks they are easy and discreditable because they are not the product of fingers and needle, should look again, and think it over. 69

Perhaps the primary reason was that, despite May Burgh’s experience, machine embroidery is not something easily learnt from books, or even from watching a demonstration, and it was not until hands-on tuition became available that the technique became popular.

Heather Joynes was one of those who did embrace ultimately machine embroidery. Although she does not remember exactly how she was introduced to the technique it is quite likely that it was through Caroline Woodrow (now Caroline Wheeler). 70 Caroline Woodrow had trained at art school in Britain, studying with Jennifer Gray, a leading exponent of machine embroidery, and had been a member of the 62 group prior to travelling overseas and thus was well versed in contemporary approaches to embroidery. By late 1970 she was working for Bernina in Australia and in September 1971 taught machine embroidery classes at the Embroiderers’ Guild. When embroidery was introduced at the summer schools offered at the University of New England, Caroline Woodrow was sent by Bernina as a technical assistant. Although machine embroidery was not the primary focus at these events, students were encouraged to use the sewing machine as an adjunct to hand work and Caroline remembers teaching Heather Joynes some free machining techniques when Heather was one of the tutors at Armidale. 71

Heather Joynes was later to teach machine embroidery herself, introducing many embroiderers to the technique. Perhaps the most significant person she introduced to the potential of the domestic sewing machine was Heather Dorrough. In the nineteen sixties, Heather Dorrough had used the sewing machine to construct large abstract wall hangings,

68 Since Margaret Keggin had by this time returned to Britain, presumably the latter was the piece held in the Embroiderers’ Guild collection.
69 The Record, No 74, August 1967, p.10-11.
70 Phone conversation with Heather Joynes, 19 September 2003.
71 Conversation with Caroline Wheeler (nee Woodrow), 29 June 2004.
but recalls that it was Heather Joynes who opened her eyes to the possibility of using the
machine needle as a drawing tool. In 1976 Heather Dorrough held a successful exhibition
of ‘Wearable Works’, machine embroidered garments and accessories that could be hung on
the wall when not being worn, followed by her Wollombi series based on the environment
around a family property in the Hunter Valley, and then a substantial commission to create
panels to be hung in State Parliament House. All of these works made extensive use of free
machine embroidery for graphic purposes, so it seems that there was a significant flow on
effect from Caroline Woodrow’s tuition.

An Australian flavour

While distance and isolation had its disadvantages, there were some apparent benefits. At
various times visiting embroiderers commented that Australian embroiderers were
developing a distinctive style of their own. As early as 1963 Lady Hamilton Fairley
remarked that:

Being divorced from Europe has its advantages as well as disadvantages. Your approach to
work has a freshness, and your designs are not influenced so much by contemporary workers
in the arts.

Since on her return to London after this trip Lady Hamilton Fairley had commented on the
difficulty of obtaining embroidery materials and on the lack of teachers, it is possible that
she was simply being encouraging. However, the following year Winifred Clayton made
similar comments in the local press:

Some of their work is quite ingenious, and I think it is because you are short of museums and
materials – a fact which stirs people’s creative powers.

In England we have a surfeit of both materials and museums, and people tend to take too
much for granted, instead of using their intuition.

It would appear that both women identified a quality in Australian embroidery that was the
result of limited exposure to other people’s work. Interestingly, this doesn’t appear to have
been erased by the increased interaction discussed in this chapter. When Lorraine Merrony
attended a course at Goldsmiths College in 1973 she reported that Constance Howard:

72 Conversation with Heather Dorrough, 1 July 2002.
73 The Record, No 32, June 1963.
74 Minutes of the Embroiderers’ Guild Annual General Meeting, London, 18 June 1963
75 ‘Now they embroider collages’, undated newspaper clipping, Guild Archive, Box A, History File,
Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
maintains that there does seem to be a distinctive style of embroidery in Australia. She feels that it is not only the colours, textures and subject matter that differ, but that Australian embroidery appears to have a special fluidity and quality of space! It is also worth noting that although many local embroiderers were aware of the tyranny of distance, they were not always awestruck by British work. In 1970, slides of a 62 Group travelling exhibition were shown at an Embroiderers’ Guild meeting. As was the usual practice, a report of this meeting was subsequently printed in The Record. Jill Hall wrote:

…the standard of the work was so uneven. One or two pieces appeared to be excellent, but in general they were not very attractive. One must of course make allowances for the fact that much of the effect is lost even on a good colour slide, but these pieces appeared to be experimental to the point of being ‘gimmicky’, all sorts of effects being tried, not always successfully. These slides were received some time ago, and since then another exhibition of the 62 group has been featured in Embroidery. A comparison of the two is very interesting, since the last exhibition is much less avant garde, and far more attractive. It is noteworthy that in the slides shown, there was little or no stitchery as such, effects being produced by quite different means.

When Frances Paykel and Dorothy Gandevia visited the Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute in London two years later, they used the experience to compare British and Australian embroidery. In an article for The Record, they reported the following:

…we are far behind in ecclesiastical work & the traditional work from London paid greater attention to originality than is often the case here. However, our contemporary work is perhaps better and more experimental, our colours brighter, threads more interesting, and the large hangings done in Heather Dorrough’s summer school are outstanding by any standards and there was nothing to compare with these in London.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the means by which embroiderers in New South Wales acquired their knowledge of developments in contemporary British embroidery and discussed the ways in which they were influenced by this knowledge. The fact that embroiderers in New South Wales obtained most of their information about contemporary embroidery second hand was in many respects a disadvantage. One obvious issue was that information was almost always a little out of date by the time it arrived in Australia. There were also significant consequences of viewing embroideries in reproduction. Most importantly, the lack of specialist art training meant that many embroiderers had a limited

77 The Record, No 100, April 1970, p.2-3.
78 The Record, No 124, August 1972, p.7.
understanding of current thinking in the broader art world at a time when ideas were undergoing significant change. They were familiar with the appearance of contemporary art but did not always understand the thinking behind it. As a consequence, they themselves produced embroideries that had some qualities in common with contemporary art – abstract design, an interest in the material qualities of their chosen medium, and the production of artefacts whose chief purpose was to be looked at and thought about – but which did not engage in the philosophical ideas being explored by ‘fine art’ at that time, something that is reflected in Hannah Frew’s comment that although embroiderers in Sydney had good technical skills, they didn’t really know what to do with them.

Nevertheless by the early nineteen seventies local embroiderers had developed greater confidence and were beginning to produce work which was seen as being distinctly Australian. Two major events, the celebration of the Captain Cook Bicentenary in 1970 and the opening of the Sydney Opera House in 1973, had generated increased interest in Australian subject matter. With the establishment of professional craft associations and the appearance of a number of galleries willing to exhibit craft, there were more opportunities available for embroiderers to exhibit and sell their work. This, together with the inclusion of local work in overseas exhibitions, led to increasing confidence among creative embroiderers and a certain degree of independence from British influences. At the same time that this evolution was taking place, embroiderers were also engaged in a variety of activities intended to spread knowledge of the conventions and practices of creative embroidery to the broader community. The promotion of creative embroidery in order to increase the number of people involved in the craft and to gain an audience for the work they produced is the subject of the following chapter.
Chapter 6

‘Creative embroidery is possible for everyone brave enough to start.’
Margaret Oppen

At the same time that embroiderers in New South Wales were adopting and adapting the conventions of creative embroidery from British precedents, they were engaged in activities to promulgate these conventions within the broader community. On a very simple level the aim of introducing people to creative embroidery can be read as a form of proselytising – the desire on the part of embroiderers for others to share in what they found to be a very satisfying artistic pursuit. In 1962 Margaret Oppen was quoted in the Guild Record as saying ‘creative embroidery is possible for everyone brave enough to start’. ¹ The practice of art and embroidery was an important part of Margaret Oppen’s life and it is quite apparent that she wanted as many people as possible to share in the activity. However another reason to spread knowledge of creative embroidery and to increase the number of people involved was economy of scale. The more people actively engaged in any field of endeavor, the more sustainable are the structures related to that pursuit.

The central thesis of Howard Becker’s theory of art worlds is that the creation of art is a collective activity and that the sphere of activity extends to include those who supply the raw materials of art, those who distribute art, and the audiences who consume art. Becker explains that amateur practitioners make a significant contribution to the development and continued existence of art worlds, by providing significant input to their economies.² The creative embroidery world that developed in New South Wales during the nineteen sixties encompassed a broad range of participants, from aspiring professionals to enthusiastic amateurs. As with other art worlds, the number of amateur participants far exceeded the professionals and while the majority of them remain anonymous, their involvement helped to create a sustainable environment in which the better known embroiderers could flourish. The participation of amateurs in classes and workshops provided valuable teaching opportunities for those who perceived themselves as professional practitioners. It increased the demand for books and supplies with the result that specialist suppliers slowly began to be established and the range of materials available to all embroiderers was expanded. An example of this principle in operation was the establishment of Merle Glover’s shop The Embroiderer, which was run out of the back of her family’s ship’s chandlery business and was a valuable source of supplies for both traditional and creative embroiderers.

¹ The Record, No 27, November 1962, p.7.
Amateur practitioners also formed a significant proportion of the audience for creative embroidery. As Becker explains, an educated audience responds to work aesthetically in a more sophisticated way:

…this inner circle of the audience knows the technical problems of the craft … Having been on the other side of the line that separates performers and creators from consumers … they can respond to the work with a fuller understanding of what has been attempted… They are the most understanding and forgiving audience, on whom the riskiest experiences may be attempted.3

The existence of an informed audience for creative embroidery was especially important as it was not always the case that those interested in traditional work understood or accepted modern approaches. Many of the embroiderers I spoke with commented that there was considerable opposition to innovation from some within the Embroiderers’ Guild. The Record provides evidence that supports their recollections. In May 1964, an extract from a letter was reproduced in which a Mrs John, teacher of embroidery design to the Victorian Guild, had commented on ‘… machine work and collage …a sort of painting with fabrics. It must not be confused with embroidery’.4 In 1967 an article titled ‘Keep Your Needles, Please’ which had originally been printed in the English magazine Embroidery was reproduced.5 The editor indicated that she thought the article would be ‘thought provoking’. The following month a letter from a JM Wilson from Oberon was printed in which she announced her intention of discontinuing her subscription to Embroidery. One of her complaints was that it contained ‘Odd- looking things done by machine displaying … no skill, no design, no beauty. In other words a waste of good machine cotton and material.’6

Given this kind of resistance, it was important for the growth of creative embroidery that an audience that did understand and appreciate contemporary approaches was cultivated. When Margaret Oppen set out to establish a branch of the Embroiderers’ Guild in New South Wales with, in her mind at least, the intention of promoting embroidery as a form of visual art, she began by encouraging her friends and acquaintances to become involved. However this was a limited pool of potential participants. While ‘fancywork’, the embroidering of traced linen items for use in the home, was carried out by many Australian women, at the beginning of the nineteen sixties it was not common practice for women to design their own embroideries or to see embroidery in the same way that Margaret Oppen had come to think

3 Becker, Art worlds, p. 54.
4 The Record, No 41, May 1964, p.3.
6 The Record, No 72, June 1967, p.5.
of it, something that was observed by Margaret Keggin, a British embroiderer who lived in Sydney between 1960 and 1963. In order to establish a sustainable ‘embroidery world’ with the idea of modern or creative embroidery as its focus, it was necessary to spread the conventions of creative embroidery more widely in the hope of encouraging more people to become involved.

**Raising the profile of embroidery**

One of the key ways that creative embroidery was promoted as a particular genre of embroidery practice was through the mounting of exhibitions. Exhibitions helped to raise the profile of embroidery, drawing public attention to something that was traditionally a private, domestic activity and encouraging people to take up the craft. They were one of the ways that the community expanded. The first exhibition of embroidery organized by the Embroiderers’ Guild in Sydney took place in 1961. In terms of its purpose and its audience, this exhibition is atypical. Despite Margaret Oppen’s personal interest in contemporary embroidery, she recognized the need to appeal to a broad audience and it seems that she was shrewd enough not to move too fast, too soon. Many of the early members of the Embroiderers’ Guild were middle class women from Sydney’s eastern suburbs and north shore, and therefore a relatively conservative constituency. This first exhibition was held in the David Jones Gallery in the city and was organized in conjunction with the Women’s Auxiliary of Dr Barnardo’s Homes as a fundraising activity. The exhibition, which comprised over 600 pieces of embroidery, both antique and modern, was opened by Dame Patty Menzies, wife of the Prime Minister of the time. It was publicized in the *Woman’s Day* on the ‘Social spotlight’ pages. This article was accompanied by numerous photographs and focused mainly on the historical exhibits, in particular a piece of embroidery by Mary Queen of Scots and ‘the late Queen Mary’s quilt, lent by Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother’. Those photographed included Lady Morshead, Lady Davidson, and Mrs. A. R. Bruce, wife of the British Trade Commissioner. The *Sydney Morning Herald* also ran an article on the exhibition in its women’s pages.

In her book *A history of the wife*, Marilyn Yalom discusses some of the social changes that took place in the aftermath of World War Two. During WWII women entered the workforce in increasing numbers, filling positions vacated by men who went off to war. After the war there was an expectation that women would return to the domestic sphere. However,

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7 Letter from Margaret Keggin, 27 July 2004.


9 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 October, 1961, p.25.
although many women did leave the workforce, they did not necessarily retreat into domesticity. As Yalom explains:

middle- and upper-class wives had various time honored ways of getting out. … volunteer work provided a sense of purpose and a social community outside the house. At the same time, membership in a bridge, garden or book club offered an outlet for one’s cultural and intellectual interests.\(^\text{10}\)

Although Yalom’s discussion focuses primarily on the US, it is reasonable to assume that for many of its members, the Embroiderers’ Guild in Sydney in the early 1960s offered just such an outlet – a community with common goals built around a particular cultural pursuit. In a similar vein Emma Grahame, in her unpublished thesis on quilters in NSW, explains how women have used fundraising exhibitions as an ‘alibi’ or justification for pursuing their own interests.\(^\text{11}\) The publicity surrounding the first exhibition of the Embroiderers’ Guild suggests a similar modus operandi.

The founding members of the Embroiderers’ Guild in NSW were upper middle class women, most of whom did not work in paid employment. Those who had already ventured into the public sphere, such as Margaret Oppen, who had exhibited her work and taught for payment, and Dorothea Allnutt, who was employed as an art and craft teacher at Abbotsleigh, were the exception rather than the rule. It is noticeable that in early issues of \textit{The Record} almost all of the members were referred to in the formal way, by their husband’s first name rather than their own. It was only those women who had a view of themselves as professional artists, such as Margaret Oppen, June Scott Stevenson and Pat Langford, who were regularly referred to by their own name. In interviews conducted by Dr Ann Ross in 1987 some women made comments reflecting on the social constraints that operated during the early years for the Embroiderers’ Guild. Audrey McMahon commented on class issues, expressing the view that ‘Most of them [the Guild members] were English. They knew one another in their social set. They didn’t seem to want to talk to the lower eschalons (sic)’.\(^\text{12}\) Heather Joynes, herself English, was more amused, commenting on how members in the early days came to meetings in hats and gloves:

\begin{quote}
I can remember the first Annual General Meeting I went to and Joan Bath presided at that. I can remember thinking how hysterically funny it was, because they were all in \textbf{hats} (emphasis in original). And Joan had a very plummy voice. She was the dearest thing but
\end{quote}


\(^{12}\) Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Audrey McMahon, 23 February 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
she had a very plummy voice and Miss Field was at the back and kept popping up and seconding things. Just like an English film.  

A venture such as the Dr Barnardo’s exhibition would have enabled those Embroiderers’ Guild members who were constrained by the social conventions of the time to expose their work to public view in a manner commensurate with their social position. The publicity for this exhibition, with its emphasis on the links with the upper classes and with British royalty, presents a very traditional view of embroidery – an activity carried out by well-to-do women and used mainly to decorate domestic and personal items. However, this was not the kind of embroidery that Margaret Oppen was most interested in promoting and later exhibitions were intended to reach a much broader audience.

As the sixties progressed the Embroiderers’ Guild continued to hold smaller exhibitions and, whenever the opportunity arose, to participate in exhibitions organized by other groups. In 1962 and again in 1963 the Guild participated in the North Shore Arts Festival Exhibition of Arts and Crafts. The catalogue for the 1963 exhibition indicates that a wide variety of work was displayed; among the more contemporary inclusions were four pictures by Pat Langford, three pieces by Win Thorvaldson, and Isabel Craig’s *Minoan Snake Goddess*. The latter appeared regularly in exhibitions during the nineteen sixties, suggesting that in the early years there was a limited pool of contemporary work to choose from. In October 1964 there was an exhibition at Frensham School at Mittagong, while in 1965 the St Ives group organised an exhibition in association with the North Shore Festival of Arts and an exhibition was held in Killara as part of a fundraising activity for the Family Welfare Bureau. The fact that these were mentioned only in passing in *The Record* and do not appear to have attracted significant press coverage suggests that they were not conceived as major projects, but were a matter of taking advantage of opportunities when they arose.

In February 1966 the Embroiderers’ Guild organized a slightly more ambitious exhibition, perhaps in an effort to reach a different audience. The exhibition was held in the Roselands Shopping Centre, which had opened the previous year and which was located in the south western suburbs. This part of Sydney had grown rapidly in the post-war years and was largely occupied by lower middle class and working class families – a different demographic to that of the North Shore and eastern suburbs where many of the Embroiderers’ Guild’s members lived. According to a report on the exhibition in *The Record*[^14], the exhibits included four flower panels worked at the summer school, which in 1966 had been taught by

[^13]: Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Heather Joynes, 28th May 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.

[^14]: *The Record*, No 60, April 1966.
Mrs Endean\textsuperscript{15}, who offered tuition in design rather than stitchery. There is no catalogue recording the exhibits in this exhibition and therefore no way to trace these particular works. However on the basis of Fay Bottrell’s comment that she encouraged students to ‘construct their own designs; … it didn’t have to represent anything. It could be abstract\textsuperscript{16}, it is evident that the work produced was modern in nature and that the exhibition was intended to attract the attention of those interested in a more creative approach to stitchery. Heather Joynes, who was to become a significant figure in creative embroidery circles, was one of those whose involvement with the Embroiderers’ Guild can be linked to that exhibition. Although she didn’t actually attend the exhibition at Roselands, she saw an article about it in the local press and contacted the Embroiderers’ Guild as a consequence.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1966 the Embroiderers’ Guild held the first of a series of major exhibitions. Most of these exhibitions were hung in the Education Department Gallery in central Sydney, by all accounts an unattractive venue, but one which was available and which had the advantage of being identified as ‘a gallery’. These large exhibitions were held regularly between 1966 and 1975, some of them timed to coincide with significant events in the Sydney community. In 1967 and 1968 the exhibitions were held in November in the Education Department Gallery. There was no exhibition in 1969, the event being postponed until early 1970, to coincide with the Captain Cook Bicentenary celebrations. In 1971 the Guild limited itself to an ‘open house’ in the Guild rooms. In 1972 there were two exhibitions, one in July in the Grace Bros Gallery at Broadway and another in November, back in Education Department gallery. In 1973 an exhibition titled ‘Embroideries in Australia’, which included work from interstate and well as local embroiderers, was held to commemorate the opening of the Sydney Opera House. It seems that there was no exhibition in 1974 although another ‘open house’ was held in July and in 1975 a selected exhibition was held in the Arts Council Gallery in Sydney.

These major Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions weren’t promoted as embroidery exhibitions, at least not in the beginning. Instead the first was titled an ‘Exhibition of Colour and Design in Textile Crafts’ – and this time there was no attempt to justify the exhibition by linking it with a charitable cause. Judging by exhibits listed in the printed catalogue of the first

\textsuperscript{15} Mrs Endean was better known as Fay Bottrell, who is referred to in documentary sources in several ways. \textit{The Record} refers to her as Mrs Endean, her married name at the time. In other sources, including her own book \textit{Aspects of sensibility} (Pollard, Crows Nest, 1972), she is referred to as Fay Bottrell, but she later changed the spelling of her name from Fay to Fahy. In the body of the thesis I have referred to her as Fay Bottrell, the professional name she was using in the 1960s and 1970s.

\textsuperscript{16} Phone conversation with Fahy Bottrell, 23 February 2004.

\textsuperscript{17} Conversation with Heather Joynes, 27 November 2002.
exhibition, considerable effort was expended in assembling embroideries and other work which showed the scope and variety of textile craft. While these major exhibitions always included work intended to appeal to those interested in more traditional approaches, they also included a significant number of more contemporary works. In December 1966 Margaret Oppen explained that the primary aim of that year’s exhibition was the ‘establishment of embroidery as one of the creative crafts’ and that the exhibits were selected with a view to overcoming the habit of ‘depending on someone else for the choice of material, thread and design’. By 1968 Ness Wansey was reporting that ‘the main gallery was given over almost entirely to wall hangings’ and that ‘there can be no fear for the future of creative work in this country now’. Her prediction may have been hyperbole, but the increasing number of exhibitors as well as in embroidery workshops and classes is an indication that the exhibitions contributed to the growth of the embroidery community itself, while the level of media interest in embroidery from the late sixties onwards suggests that they were successful in raising the profile of modern or creative embroidery in the broader community.

**Using the media**

While press coverage is evidence of increasing interest in embroidery, it was also one of the ways that that interest was promoted. From the time that the Embroiderers’ Guild was established, Margaret Oppen made use of the print media to promote the organisation and throughout the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies articles about embroidery appeared at intervals in women’s magazines and in women’s pages of Sydney newspapers. According to Pat Langford, Margaret Oppen used her social contacts and local knowledge to arrange the publicity when Pat Langford held her first exhibition in Sydney. A comment printed in *The Record* in April 1964 following the death of Constance Robertson supports this view that Margaret Oppen had contacts with in the print media. Constance Robertson had been the editor of the *Women’s Budget* in the early nineteen thirties and later was editor of the women’s pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Sun-Herald*, continuing to

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20 According to the Oppen family, press coverage actually predated the establishment of the Embroiderers’ Guild branch in Sydney, an article being printed in either the *Sydney Morning Herald* or the *Australian Women’s Weekly* about Margaret Oppen’s visit to the Queen to gain permission for the venture. Unfortunately no copy of the article is found in Margaret Oppen’s scrapbook or in the archival records of the Embroiderers’ Guild itself and to date I have not been able to trace it.
contribute a column to the newspaper after her retirement in 1962. According to Margaret Oppen, she would ‘give space in her column to anything she thought worthy’. The Embroiderers’ Guild and its activities must have been considered worthy and of interest to the paper’s target audience, since in the early sixties articles covering a range of embroidery related topics were printed in the both papers on numerous occasions. For instance in 1960 an article in March reported on a recent lecture by Dorothea Allnutt and summarized recent activities of the Guild, another in August discussed modern approaches to embroidery, and in March 1961 there was an article on Pat Langford who had recently completed a commission for the Sydney Opera House Appeal. In between these more substantial articles there were other, briefer reports of embroidery related activities.

Presumably Margaret Oppen had contacts with other publications; if she didn’t, she was obviously prepared to lobby on behalf of embroidery for page space in newspapers and magazines. As well as reports in the major dailies and in suburban papers such as the North Shore Times, articles are found throughout the sixties and early seventies in The Australian Women’ Weekly, Woman’s Day, New Idea, Australian Home Journal and Australian Vogue. The breadth of media coverage meant that information about embroidery reached a very broad audience. While the old adage that all publicity is good publicity meant that these articles made a useful contribution to the promotion of embroidery, Margaret Oppen was not averse to taking the press to task if she was unhappy with their reporting. When Daniel Thomas wrote an unflattering review of the 1968 exhibition for the Sunday Telegraph she responded with a spirited defence in a letter to the editor, the text of which was subsequently printed in The Record, and in 1971 when, after interviewing her, the Sun-Herald published an article that she considered to be full of ‘garbled nonsense’, she countered by printing her own version of the interview in The Record.

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23 The Record, No 40, April 1964.
24 ‘Operation teacosy For embroiderers’, Sydney Morning Herald, March 10 1960, Women’s Section, p.10.
25 ‘You needn’t be such a lazy daisy’, Sydney Morning Herald, August 11 1960, Women’s Section, p.5.
26 ‘It’s embroiderered! The Opera House in felt’. Sydney Morning Herald, March 9 1961, Women’s Section, p.3.
The language of the articles varies considerably and, as Margaret Oppen’s experience with the *Sun-Herald* indicates, it was not always possible to control the way that embroidery was presented. Articles on embroidery were generally found in the women’s pages of the daily papers rather than in the main editorial sections and the headlines generally stressed the novelty aspect of embroidery. While the early *Herald* articles were undoubtedly welcome, headlines such as ‘Operation Tea Cosy’ and ‘You Needn’t Be Such a Lazy Daisy’, with their references to domestic embroidery were unlikely to have presented the desired image, even though within the articles there was some discussion of modern embroidery. However, by the late sixties there was a much greater emphasis on contemporary approaches. In 1968 the *Sydney Morning Herald* headlined an article ‘Students break away from the traditional’; in 1970 the *Australian Women’s Weekly* was reporting that ‘Embroidery Goes Abstract’; and in 1971 both the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sun Herald* were reporting that ‘embroidery has gone mod’. These and other articles did emphasise contemporary work, and in the case of magazine articles they were generally illustrated in full colour, presenting a very different picture of embroidery from the one seen at the start of the nineteen sixties. In the case of the newspapers, reports on embroidery were still situated in the women’s sections, and the headlines still presented the subject in a less than serious fashion. For example, an article in which Janet Hawley discussed Heather Dorrough’s selection in an international exhibition in Germany was printed under the headline ‘A piece of hessian looks like bringing fame to a woman proud of her husband’. The following year when Mrs Askin, wife of the then Premier of NSW, opened the Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition, the headline on one newspaper article read ‘And it was her first hanging’. But despite these pitfalls, and despite the fact that male art critics like Daniel Thomas, whose review of an Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, did not always know what to make of embroidery, articles in the local press played an important part in promoting creative embroidery to a broader audience.

One innovative approach intended to expose embroidery to the public, or the public to embroidery, involved the newly emerging medium of television. In the early 1960s...

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28 ‘Students break away from the traditional’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 September 1968, p.X
30 ‘A stitch in time – past and present’, *Daily Telegraph*, February 18, 1971. (Clipping from Margaret Oppen scrapbook, no pagination.) The *Sun Herald* article was headlined ‘An Ancient craft Goes Mod’.
32 ‘And it was her first hanging’, unlabelled clipping from Margaret Oppen scrapbook.
members of the Embroiderers’ Guild appeared on the ‘Women’s Hour’ on ABC television, in a series of segments on embroidery. In her monthly letter published in *The Record*, Margaret Oppen wrote that ‘Our chief aim [for the programs] is the establishment of embroidery as a creative art’ (emphasis in original). In 1961 there were four programs. The first two, on stitches and colour schemes, were presented by Margaret Oppen; the second two, on the use of paper cuts for designs and on completing a design, were presented by Pat Langford. In 1962 further programs were presented by Dorothea Allnutt, Pat Langford and Joan Jeremy. In 1963 another three programs went to air, one on machine embroidery presented by May Burgh, and two others on lace and patchwork. The presenters of the latter segments are not noted in *The Record*. At that time lacemaking and patchwork were practised within the Guild, although for the most part in a traditional rather than a contemporary form. It is possible that the presenters were members of the Embroiderers’ Guild, but given Margaret Oppen’s stated aim for the television programs, and her outspoken comments about the need for embroidery to move with the times, it is just as likely that they were not. It is hard to imagine her seeing these more traditional forms of textile craft as appropriate means by which to promote her vision of embroidery. It would be interesting to know exactly what was presented in these television programs on embroidery but it seems that the only record of them are the brief mentions in *The Record*. It also seems that, apart from an appearance by Jean Vere on ‘Beauty and the Beast’ in 1967 used in part to promote an Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition, these early programs were the Guild’s only foray into television.

**Attracting embroiderers through education**

The use of the media helped to raise interest in contemporary approaches to embroidery, but it was not sufficient on its own to ensure that the embroidery world continued to grow. Education also played a key role in increasing the number of people actively participating in creative embroidery and the establishment of educational opportunities in embroidery was a major focus of attention for embroiderers in New South Wales during the nineteen sixties and into the nineteen seventies.

**Workshops and classes**

Much of the activity centred on the Embroiderers’ Guild, which organised regular classes and one-off workshops in embroidery, the majority of them focused on modern or creative

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33 *The Record*, No 19, March 1962, p.4.
35 *The Record*, No 32, June 1963, p. 3.
embroidery. In the early years the number and range of classes was limited by the availability of suitable teachers. The first person to teach contemporary embroidery for the Embroiderers’ Guild was Ann Gillmore Rees but as she was living at Moulamein in the far south west of the state, she was not available on a regular basis. Margaret Oppen also taught classes; mostly, it seems, on design and colour, the same topics she had taught at the Double Bay studio ten years earlier. Margaret Oppen had a loyal group of followers who attended informal classes at her home and who sometimes worked embroideries to her designs, although, according to some reports Margaret Oppen was not a naturally gifted teacher.

Heather Joynes, who had attended a summer school taught jointly by Margaret Oppen and Roma Field in 1968, commented:

Margaret wasn’t a marvellous teacher, really … I don’t know what it was, I enjoyed the Summer School tremendously. She was very keen on design but she didn’t have the capability to explain things very well.  

Dorothea Allnutt, one of the founding members of the Guild, also taught classes. There is little evidence in the Guild Record about her classes for the Embroiderers’ Guild, although an account of the early years written at the time of Margaret Oppen’s 80th birthday commented that Dorothea had given every spare minute to teaching for the Guild. Both her curriculum vitae and the letters written in support of her application for an Australia Council grant make reference to the wide range of teaching she undertook. Although Dorothea’s own work was relatively conservative, perhaps because much of it was intended for family and friends, it seems that she adopted an adventurous and experimental approach in her teaching. In 1987 Joan Jeremy recalled:

I went to Dorothea Allnutt’s classes and I had a lot of fun with her. I knew her work well. I went to a lot of her classes, but I just gave up one day, when she said ‘now take a cigarette, or

36 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Heather Joynes, 28th May, 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
37 Information about Dorothea Allnutt’s background has come from a range of sources. Several versions were published in The Record, including a profile in No 29 and another in No 153. Dorothea’s daughter, Jenny Blackman, also provided information. Perhaps the most reliable account is the curriculum vitae included in her application for an Australia Council Grant in 1973, as this was written by Dorothea herself. Where there have been discrepancies in information, this is the source that I have used.
39 Australia Council file No 73/369. Her curriculum vitae (p. 14) simply states that she was a part time tutor for the Embroiderers’ Guild, while Jean Vere, then chairman of the Embroiderers’ Guild, described her association with the Guild as ‘of the greatest significance’ (p. 8).
a match or something and burn a hole…’ and I said ‘Dorothy, I’m sorry …I’m not coming back…’ That’s beyond me, I said.\textsuperscript{40}

Today the idea of taking a match to textile work is not so surprising; in the 1960s it must have seemed outrageous.

One series of classes taught by Dorothea Allnutt that is identified in \textit{The Record} focused on ecclesiastical embroidery.\textsuperscript{41} The classes in 1972 culminated in the production of a large embroidery titled \textit{The Curtain of the Saints}.\textsuperscript{42} The embroidery depicted early women saints and may have been seen as a companion piece to a series of panels made for the Kings School in Parramatta in the mid-sixties. The King’s School panels, which also depicted Christian saints – most of them male – were designed by Eric Tabour, the art master at the school, and were worked by a group of parents and teacher’s wives under the guidance of Dorothea Allnutt.\textsuperscript{43} \textit{The Curtain of the Saints} was apparently entered in the Blake Prize and was subsequently acquired by Abbotsleigh School.\textsuperscript{44} For some time it was hanging in the school assembly hall, but despite an exhaustive search by the school archivist its present whereabouts is unknown.

The other contemporary embroiderer available in the early years was Pat Langford, who became involved in teaching for the Embroiderers’ Guild very soon after her arrival in Australia. However, like Dorothea Allnutt, her availability was limited by the fact that she was employed as a high school teacher. In its early years many Guild members were women who were not employed outside the home and for whom regular mid-week classes held during the day were most convenient. Pat Langford, on the other hand, was only available on weekends and during school holidays. During the nineteen sixties her teaching for the Guild was confined mainly to summer schools and the occasional weekend class, such as a series on design in 1965. It wasn’t until later in the 1960s when she was teaching at Ravenswood that it was possible for her to organise her school teaching commitments to allow for mid-week embroidery classes in the city. Although Pat Langford’s classes were popular, her focus on original design meant that they appealed to a particular kind of audience: teachers seeking additional knowledge to take back to their own students and those embroiderers with more serious aspirations.

\textsuperscript{40} Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Mrs Joan Jeremy, 2 February 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{The Record}, No 122, June 1972, p.13.
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{The Record}, No 153, July 1975, p.8.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{The Record}, No 153, July 1975, p.8.
When Cynthia Sparks arrived in Australia in 1967 the Guild was able to expand its offering of classes in contemporary embroidery and to appeal to a broader audience. This was partly due to the fact that she was available to teach during the week, and partly due to her approach to teaching. By late 1967 Cynthia Sparks was offering a series of lessons on creative embroidery at the Embroiderers’ Guild headquarters in Sydney. Like Margaret Oppen, she believed that everyone was capable of producing original work, and it seems that she had a range of strategies, acquired during her own education in embroidery, that made designing accessible to those with no previous experience. She describes her philosophy of teaching embroidery thus:

I always took the attitude that everyone is creative in some way even if they are sure they are not artistic. I was thrown out of the art class in school because I could not draw the two sides of a Grecian urn to match so I have every sympathy for them.  

Cynthia Sparks’s husband was an accomplished photographer and she used his slides of rocks, bark and other natural phenomena to stimulate the imaginations of her students. Students manipulated the images captured in the slides to produce their own designs and then selected suitable techniques. For her, a large part of the interest in embroidery was in experimenting with techniques:

I always want to know something new. So a new technique, how can I expand that technique, and then how can I persuade somebody else to do something like it but not copy it…  

Cynthia Sparks’ classes played an important role in the growth of creative embroidery in New South Wales. While some of her students went on to establish themselves as successful creative embroiderers, her classes appealed to a broad audience, providing support for people who did not wish to work independently. Regular classes create a context in which people can work, with the expectation that students will have something to show fellow students at each session providing subtle pressure to continue working. In 1987 Anne Baker recalled of Cynthia’s approach to embroidery:

It was absolutely different to anything else that anybody in the Guild was doing and whatever is said, she really gave the impetus for the modern way of looking at things.  

Summer schools in embroidery

Another important educational venture was the introduction of annual summer schools in embroidery. To begin with the summer schools were an ‘in-house’ venture, taught by tutors

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45 Letter from Cynthia Sparks, 3 October 2002.
46 Conversation with Cynthia Sparks, 9 January 2003.
47 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Anne Baker, 18 March 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
within the Embroiderers’ Guild. The first, taught by Pat Langford in January 1962, covered a range of topics including designing with paper cuts, the use of colour and the history of embroidery. At this time the Embroiderers’ Guild did not have its own premises and so the classes were held in the NSW Teachers Federation building in the city. Pat Langford recalled that it was an L-shaped room and so she had to assist one half of the students and then go around the corner to work with the other half. Despite the difficulties the summer school proved a success and it became an annual event in the Embroiderers’ Guild calendar. While the summer school program sometimes catered for those interested in traditional embroidery, the focus was more often on original design and creative work. Pat Langford was a regular tutor for the Embroiderers’ Guild summer schools during the nineteen sixties. In 1963 she was joined by Margaret Oppen, Roma Field and Mrs Jewkes in a program which ran over two weeks. The use of several tutors may have been a way of sharing the workload; it is also possible that it was intended to placate the conservative faction in the Guild, since a series of articles printed in The Record later in the year suggests that there was already some friction between those interested in modern approaches and those who championed traditional styles. Roma Field and Mrs Jewkes worked in traditional styles of embroidery. In 1964 Pat Langford and Roma Field were tutors for the summer school; in 1965 Pat Langford worked alone.

In 1968, for the first time, two separate classes were offered during the summer school; one Cynthia Sparks and Pat Langford’s which focused on ‘Modern Embroidery and Design’; the other, taught by Margaret Oppen and Roma Field, advertised as ‘traditional stitchery with modern application’. The latter was the summer school referred to by Heather Joynes when commenting on Margaret Oppen’s teaching ability. Although it was intended to be a single workshop, jointly taught, a report in The Record indicates that some students worked with Margaret Oppen developing their own designs from paper cuts and executing them in a variety of less conventional threads, while another group worked exclusively with Roma Field in the traditional techniques of drawn fabric and blackwork. Cynthia Sparks and Pat Langford collaborated more closely. Cynthia Sparks discussed their approach in the following way:

In the Modern Group the first day was taken up with studying, and then drawing one of a varied collection of objects, animal, plant and mechanical. Everyone was encouraged to look at and draw the chosen object from many different angles - to get to know the object before

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49 The Record, No 78, December 1967, p.5.
50 See page XX.
51 The Record, No 79, March 1968, p.7.
the actual embroidery. They finally chose a pleasant simple outline, drew it and marked out important areas and then this motif was worked out in four different ways - free stitchery with applique (sic) and couching, transparent work, counted thread, and metal work techniques. We did not have time for the complexities of actual gold work. They were encouraged to get away from normal threads, stitches and materials and experiment as much as possible.52

Outside tutors were also used as teachers in the Guild summer schools, evidence of Margaret Oppen’s desire for embroidery to continue to move forward and to introduce ideas and approaches from the wider art and craft community. There was however another reason: from 1969 on Pat Langford and Cynthia Sparks were involved in teaching embroidery at the University of New England during January and thus were unavailable. Among the outside tutors who taught at Embroiderers’ Guild summer schools were Fay Bottrell, who was the tutor in 1966 and again in 1970; Meg Douglass from the South Australian School of Art who along with Betty Haughey presented the 1969 summer school; and Heather Dorrough in 1972.

Fay Bottrell doesn’t remember how she came to the attention of the Embroiderers’ Guild.53 However by 1966 she had exhibited tie-dyed panels at the University of New South Wales and was working for Mary White’s School of Design.54 As Margaret Oppen kept a sharp eye on what was happening in the art and design world, it seems likely that Bottrell’s work caught her attention and that Margaret Oppen used her acquaintance with Mary White to facilitate the connection. During the summer school Fay Bottrell attended the Guild in the mornings to teach design and Margaret Oppen, Joan Jeremy and Mrs Wilson were present in the afternoon to offer tuition on stitches. This unusual arrangement appears to have worked well, particularly since Fay Bottrell ‘happily admitted that she did not know one stitch from another’.55 Instead her aim in teaching the class was:

… freeing them up. … They were using embroidery as an embellishment or a motif. … I wanted them to think that their embroidery could be a statement and that their stitches were their repertoire. … When I saw how tight they were I just wanted to release them.56

This approach must have been appreciated, since she was invited back in 1970. According to Jill Hall there was also a strong emphasis on design in Fay Bottrell’s second summer school:

52 The Record, No 80, April 1968, p.6.
53 Phone conversation with Fahy Bottrell, 23 February 2004.
54 S McGrath, ‘Something that would last …Mary White, Founder of the Crafts Council of Australia’, Craft Australia, 1984/4, p.106.
56 Phone conversation with Fahy Bottrell, 23 February 2004.
Having previously inspected the work of the Creative Embroidery Class, she [Fay Bottrell] chose the exercise of working freely within the discipline of a preliminary design. She believes that there are many approaches to art, whether as a painter or embroiderer, but is convinced that one must have a solid basis of training. Here she fully agrees with Kathleen Whyte, who said in ‘Design in Embroidery’: ‘Even those who possess a good design sense now begin to realise that something more is necessary that this type of design which grows under the fingers. They feel an urgent need to know more about design itself, its origins, its principles and practices.’ Few who have had such a training, or who have keenly felt the lack of it, will disagree with this point of view.\(^{57}\)

The students created large designs using paper cuts before beginning to stitch. The paper cut technique was not new, having been used in classes by Ann Gillmore Rees and also by Pat Langford – but the scale was. Embroideries had been increasing in size as the decade progressed, from Dorothea Allnutt’s \textit{Still Life} from 1960, which measures 22cm x 27.5cm, to work such as Margaret Oppen’s \textit{Wattle and Flannel} Flowers, made in 1968, which measures 62cm x 87cm, but for at least some of the students it seems the scale was daunting, since Jill Hall observed that Fay Bottrell’s approach was ‘To the horror of some, and the pleasure of others’.\(^{58}\)

Large scale work was also encouraged by Heather Dorrough in 1972 when the theme of the summer school was creating wall hangings for interior spaces. It seems that by this time at least some embroiderers were becoming accustomed to working large since according to the Guild \textit{Record}, two of the embroideries completed in the workshop were sold and Jean Vere had been commissioned by a firm of architects to create another.\(^{59}\) In May 1972 an exhibition of embroidery was held in the AMP building at Circular Quay, where the works exhibited generated considerable interest. \textit{The Record} reported that at least three enquiries had been received about the use of embroideries to decorate office blocks.\(^{60}\) Apart from the scale of the work produced, the other difference between many of the teachers within the Guild and those like Fay Bottrell and Heather Dorrough who were brought in from outside was that the latter were less interested in technique and more interested in design and self-expression. Techniques were chosen to serve the design idea, rather than dictating it.

Heather Dorrough describes her approach:

\begin{quote}
I was trying to get people to look at the work they did as related to their life because I think everything any of us do is a reflection or a comment or an extension of the life we lead. If we’re a political sort of animal we’ll be involved in politics, if we’re a domestic person that’s
\end{quote}


\(^{58}\) Ibid.

\(^{59}\) \textit{The Record} No 121, May 1972, p.8.

\(^{60}\) \textit{The Record}. No 121, May 1972, p.7.
our main thing … So I was really honing in on that aspect of the work they did, that it should be personal.61

The Embroiderers’ Guild’s summer schools provided an opportunity for a brief period of intense study and exposed students to a range of different ideas and approaches. The first summer school focussed on the use of paper cuts as a strategy for designing. In hindsight it seems relatively unsophisticated, but at that time the idea of designing an original embroidery was not widespread in New South Wales, and the theme was chosen to introduce embroiderers to a simple means of creating their own designs. As the years passed the themes of the summer schools became increasingly complex, in keeping with the increased level of skill and confidence of those who attended. Of particular significance is the shift from an emphasis on design and technique in the classes offered by teachers from within the Embroiderers’ Guild to a consideration of ideas and concepts in the workshops offered by outside tutors. To some extent this reflects the background and interests of those tutoring at the summer schools. Heather Dorrough and Fay Bottrell, two of the more challenging teachers brought in from outside, saw themselves as artists who happened to work in textiles and both were interested in the use of textiles as a medium for expressing ideas. The fact that students in Heather Dorrough’s 1972 summer school were producing large scale finished embroideries of saleable quality is evidence of a significant change in approach in a period of just over ten years.

Despite the limited supply of formally trained teachers, particularly those with a more contemporary approach to embroidery, an issue on which Margaret Oppen commented at regular intervals, the Embroiderers’ Guild managed to offer a lively educational program at its headquarters in Sydney. Whenever the Guild received publicity in the Sydney press, the provision of classes was mentioned as a significant benefit to potential members. The number and variety of works included in the large Education Gallery exhibitions is evidence of the success of the classes in encouraging experimentation and a more original approach to design, and in raising interest in contemporary embroidery. However, while efforts had been made to provide for those who could not attend regular classes on weekdays, it could be argued that the educational activities outlined above reached a limited audience. Advertised through The Record and open only to members, they were attended by those already involved in embroidery. The extended schools held in school holidays proved convenient for teachers to attend, there were occasional weekend workshops for those who were busy during the week, and an evening group catered for those who worked during the day. Nevertheless, women whose home or work responsibilities occupied them during the week and those who lived at a distance from the Guild’s headquarters would have found it difficult

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61 Conversation with Heather Dorrough, 1 July 2002.
to attend these activities. In order to reach a broader audience it was necessary to take educational activities out into the broader community.

Reaching a broader audience

The Embroiderers’ Guild attempted to provide for embroiderers outside of the metropolitan area in a variety of ways. Early in the nineteen sixties stitch portfolios were assembled and these were made available to Guild members and other organisations in country areas. Committee members also visited rural areas on occasions. For instance, in August 1966 Mrs Wilson attended a meeting of the Antique Society in Wagga Wagga, in September 1967 Roma Field and Jean Vere traveled to Mudgee, and in June 1968 Roma Field had been to Orange where she selected work to include in a local exhibition of embroidery. By 1969 Cynthia Sparks had begun to travel to the country to teach workshops, and in 1970 the Embroiderers’ Guild was awarded a ‘cultural grant’ that was to be used to send tutors to country areas.\(^{62}\) However, the strategy of sending tutors to rural and remote areas had limited application. Even if there had been enough teachers available – and there wasn’t – the cost of transport was a significant problem, and not all those interested in attending classes lived close enough to major towns to take advantages of workshops when they were able to be held. An alternative strategy was needed.

The idea of correspondence lessons had first been raised in mid-1969, at a time when the monthly newsletter contained designs and suggestions for working them. A decision was made that country members could work these designs and send them to the Guild advisory group, which comprised a number of Guild teachers, for ‘criticism and guidance’.\(^{63}\) These ‘lessons’ received a mixed response. When Vera Makewell complained that the designs were rather outdated and asked for something ‘a little more modern and inspiring’, the editor of *The Record* replied defending the designs and writing that they ‘brought a number of letters of appreciation and requests for more like it’.\(^{64}\) When the patterns are compared with the creative embroideries being produced and exhibited by this time, Vera Makewell’s complaints seem quite valid. The designs and stitch suggestions were conservative, with little opportunity for innovation in their interpretation. They may have appealed to those who were taking their first tentative steps away from traditional embroidery, but they were unlikely to satisfy those wishing to develop a more adventurous approach. It is not known just how many people actually availed themselves of the opportunity to send work in for criticism as there are no records of this venture in the Embroiderers’ Guild archive.

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63 *The Record*, No 93, July 1969, p.3.
64 *The Record*, No 96, October 1969, p.4.
However, this experiment was the forerunner of a more ambitious plan to make education in creative embroidery available to those outside the metropolitan area.

In 1974 the Embroiderers’ Guild introduced a correspondence course in creative embroidery. The course, which was developed by Pat Langford, enabled those who could not attend classes in the city to undertake an organised program of study. Each month students were sent a pack containing instructions for an exercise in designing and stitching and a selection of fabric and thread. They carried out the exercise and returned the embroidery by post to Guild headquarters. One Wednesday a month a team of helpers processed the lessons under the supervision of Pat Langford, whose high school teaching commitments were organised in a way that made this possible. A group of more experienced embroiderers assessed the work that was sent in—each assessor was allocated a small group of students and followed their progress throughout the year—while another group assembled the fabric and threads for the next month’s lesson. Eventually the course extended over a period of four years with the exercises gaining in complexity as the students progressed. The correspondence course was an immediate success and within a very short time there were so many students that a second group of assessors was required.

The correspondence course attracted students from all over Australia as well as overseas. In the first year, 113 students were enrolled, of whom 94 lived outside of the metropolitan area. Advertisements in The Land newspaper attracted many rural students and the course was also popular with teachers in NSW high schools and technical colleges. Among those who completed some or all of the course are women who went on to careers in embroidery and related textile areas. Examples include Kath Short, a key figure in textiles in the Northern Territory; Alison Schwabe, a quiltmaker who exhibits in Australia and overseas; and Margaret Rolfe, also a well-known quiltmaker and quilt historian. It is almost impossible to gauge the full impact of this correspondence course, but it has been running for over thirty

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65 Conversation with Pat Langford, 25 November 2002
66 The Record, No 142, June 1974, p. 4.
67 The Embroiderers’ Guild archive contains ‘The Red Book’ which records the names and addresses of all participants and tracks the receipt and dispatch of completed and assessed work. In the case of teachers, some can be identified because their work was mailed to a school address; others I knew, or knew of, because of my past employment as a textiles teacher with the NSW Department of Education.
68 For an account of Kathleen Short’s involvement in textiles, including reference to the role played by the NSW Guild’s correspondence course, see Textile Fibre Forum, Vol 23, No 3, 2004, pp. 36-38.
years. Since many of the hundreds of people who have participated have themselves been educators, there has undoubtedly been a significant flow on effect.  

**Embroidery in New South Wales schools**

All of the educational activities discussed thus far relate to adult education. However, Margaret Oppen and the Embroiderers’ Guild did not restrict their attention to this source of potential embroiderers. They also set out to promote creative embroidery within the New South Wales school system. In most secondary schools in the state the teaching of embroidery took place in the needlework department, where the emphasis was on traditional embroidery and the acquisition of technical skills. Until the late 1960s needlework teachers training at Sydney and Newcastle Teachers Colleges for employment by the Department of Education received their practical training from the technical college system. Embroidery was a minor aspect of the course, with considerably more attention being paid to patternmaking and dressmaking skills. Although Ruby Riach, lecturer in needlework education at Sydney Teachers College, wrote in 1961 that ‘an appreciation of beauty in all its forms …[and] …a satisfaction from creative work’ were issues of significance in the teaching of needlework, the program she described had garment construction as its primary focus.

Given the training received by trainee teachers and the nature of the needlework syllabus, it is not surprising that embroidery teaching within needlework departments was limited in scope. In many of those schools where it was a significant part of the course, the emphasis was on domestic embroidery in traditional techniques. In 1967 the school exhibits in the

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69 Although I trained as a textiles and design teacher at Sydney Teachers’ College in the early nineteen seventies, the Embroiderers’ Guild correspondence course was my first significant introduction to the creative possibilities of fabric and thread and thus played a part in the genesis of this research project.

70 JI Peacock, *A history of home economics in New South Wales*. Home Economics Association of New South Wales: Sydney, 1982. Embroidery was taught by the section of the Technical College which been established as the Department of Women’s Handicraft in 1909. The section was re-named the School of Women’s Handicraft in 1957, and is referred to by that name in some copies of the Guild Record. In 1962 it became the School of Fashion. At some time in the late 1960s or early 1970s the teachers colleges took over responsibility for practical needlework training component of their courses. Peacock gives the date for this as 1974 on p.79 and 1968 on p.139. I attended Sydney Teachers College between 1973 and 1976 at which time practical textile classes had been held at the Teachers College itself for some time, so the earlier date is most likely the correct one.

Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition were dominated by traditional work, primarily table linen worked in techniques such as hardanger, blackwork and other forms of counted thread embroidery, the techniques most often found in the J and B Coats publications available at the time. There were, however, some schools where embroidery was taught within the art department. The NSW art syllabus which had been introduced in 1947 allowed for students to submit for their final work in third year (the Intermediate Certificate) and in fifth year (the Leaving Certificate) ‘one finely conceived and executed piece of Art-Craft work’. Among the choice of techniques was included ‘Needlecraft generally and embroidery, appliqué, cross stitch and crewelwork…’. It was in this context that students in some schools were introduced to the possibilities of stitching as a form of creative expression. One of the schools where this happened was Abbotsleigh Girls School where, from 1953, Dorothea Allnutt was employed as the Craft Mistress and where embroidery was taught within the art department at both Intermediate and Leaving Certificate levels.

Dorothea Allnutt’s approach to teaching embroidery at Abbotsleigh was outlined in an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1960 in which she promoted the use of original designs, a variety of fabric and threads and a range of simple stitches. Some of the work illustrated in this article is similar in approach to that done in the workshop with Ann Gillmore Rees, a combination of applied shapes and surface stitchery, while some is comprised entirely of stitchery. After her trip to England in 1963 Dorothea Allnutt’s teaching of embroidery was reinvigorated. Robyn Oswald-Jacobs, who attended Abbotsleigh during the 1960s and went on to study textiles and embroidery at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, recalls that:

> she was much freer in the way she looked at things so we did a lot of painting on to fabric and embroidery over the top … which really brought together the areas of the art department … she was a lot more experimental.

The change in approach can be seen by comparing the embroideries produced by Frances Brownscombe in the mid-fifties (see Figure 5.3) with ‘Tropical Light’ (Figure 6.1) an embroidery worked by Robyn Oswald-Jacobs at Abbotsleigh in the 1960s. Frances Brownscombe’s work, although an original design, used relatively traditional fabrics and

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73 ‘You needn’t be such a lazy daisy’, *Sydney Morning Herald Women’s Section*, 11 August 1960, p.5.

74 Conversation with Robyn Oswald Jacobs, 8 January 2003.
threads and is worked exclusively in stitchery.\textsuperscript{75} By contrast, Robyn Oswald-Jacobs’ design, an abstracted image of two giraffes, was built up first with crayon and fabric paint before layers of frayed fabric and net and relatively simple stitchery were added. According to Robyn Oswald-Jacobs ‘all those interrelationships were what Dorothea brought back from overseas’.\textsuperscript{76}

Abbotsleigh students were also involved in a variety of collaborative projects. In 1957 students worked on a wall hanging based on the creation story and in the early 1960s students worked two embroidered altar frontals for St Paul’s College at Sydney University.\textsuperscript{77} Dorothea Allnutt also worked with students to create costumes and settings for school

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{75} According to Frances Brownscombe she was required to submit the paper designs along with her three embroideries. (Conversation with Frances Brownscombe, 23 February 2003.)
\item \textsuperscript{76} Phone conversation with Robyn Oswald Jacobs, 12 February 2004.
\item \textsuperscript{77} The Pauline, No 59, 1963, p.13. One frontal was designed by Janna Bruce (identified in The Pauline by her married name, Mrs Sowerby-Drake) and completed in 1961. It was worked in silver and purple threads on an unbleached linen background and for its time the design was surprisingly modern. The other was worked in greens and blues using surface stitchery and silk thread on a green silk background, with the design featuring sheep, grain, musical instruments and other symbolic imagery. It is not clear who designed the second frontal, but as the design is sophisticated it seems likely that it was also the work of a professional artist such as Janna Bruce. The frontals are no longer in use at St Paul’s College: according to the College Warden, they do not reflect current taste.
\end{itemize}
productions. These included large stitched backdrops for the play ‘The Lady’s Not for Burning’ and banners for a production of ‘Noah and the Flood’, a joint production with Barker College. Both Frances Brownscome and Robyn Oswald-Jacobs remember Dorothea as an encouraging, supportive teacher. Frances Brownscome recalls that ‘she made us feel special (and) she encouraged us to be creative’ while Robyn Oswald-Jacobs identifies Dorothea as a significant mentor and notes that hers was a ‘career that was all started by Dorothea’, who not only encouraged her whilst she was at school but also encouraged her to study design once she had left school.

Another early innovator within NSW schools was Pat Langford. Although she had done some school teaching whilst at art school in Plymouth, Pat Langford did not set out to be a teacher when she arrived in Australia. However in 1962 when John Dabron, who was an inspector of art for the NSW Education Department between 1959 and 1973, opened Pat Langford’s exhibition at Chatterton’s Gallery he was so taken with her work that he asked her to work for the NSW Department of Education. Pat recalls him asking her ‘do you think you could do this in a school?’ She worked as an art teacher at Asquith Girls High School, teaching embroidery within the art department, for three years before moving to Ravenswood School, a private school at Gordon. Like the students at Abbotsleigh, Pat’s students, first at Asquith and then at Ravenswood, submitted embroideries as their major works for Leaving Certificate art.

One the strategies intended to promote contemporary embroidery in schools was the introduction of a ‘schools competition’ run by the Embroiderers’ Guild. The competition, which offered an award to the most successful school as well as a prize to the most successful individual work, was promoted through the NSW Department of Education’s Needlework Bulletin, an annual publication that provided professional support for teachers. The embroidery was to be judged on design and colour, originality, technical execution and presentation. While the guidelines were quite broad, meaning that it was possible for original work in a traditional style to be successful, the awards mostly went to more contemporary work. This did not please everyone. In 1965 Margaret Oppen wrote:

> We have been asked by several people why we cannot arrange two sections to the Schools Competition, one for Contemporary work which is considered a Craft subject and other for ‘real’ (or conventional) embroidery which is a needlework subject.

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78 Conversation with Frances Brownscome, 23 February 2003.
79 Conversation with Robyn Oswald-Jacobs, 8 January 2003.
80 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Pat Langford, 15 April 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
81 *The Record*, No 58, December 1965, p.7.
She responded by arguing that serious embroidery ‘has always moved with the times’ and that the competition was intended to promote a ‘strong original attitude to colour and form’, explaining that in previous years special awards had been given to original work in a conventional style.\footnote{Ibid.} Regardless of whether they were working in art classes or in needlework classes, it seems that most of the students who entered the schools competition and participated in the Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions came from schools where teachers had some links with the Embroiderers’ Guild and can be therefore be assumed to have had a particular interest in embroidery. The students of Pat Langford or Dorothea Allnutt featured regularly among the prize winners. However, Margaret Oppen wished for modern embroidery to be taught much more widely in schools.

In order to expand the number of teachers interested in contemporary approaches, a range of strategies were used. The small book, \textit{Paper cuts : Designers and Embroiderers}\footnote{Patricia Langford and Margaret Oppen. \textit{Paper cuts : designers and embroiderers} Sydney : Ure Smith on behalf of the Embroiderers’ Guild, N.S.W., 1964.}, written by Margaret Oppen and Pat Langford, had needlework teachers as its intended audience. According to Margaret Oppen, one of its aims was to reduce the reliance on printed transfers\footnote{The Record, No 47, November 1964, p.4.}, which were supplied to schools by the Government Stores Office. The summer schools in embroidery, discussed earlier in this chapter, also played a role. The timing of these schools, in the long summer vacation, made it possible for teachers from high schools and technical colleges to attend. In 1962 eighteen of the twenty-one students who attended the summer school were Department of Education teachers\footnote{The Record, No 19, March 1962, p.4.}, while in 1964 five teachers participated\footnote{The Record, No 39, March 1964, p.3.}, and in 1967 that there were ‘many teachers’ in attendance.\footnote{The Record, No 69, March 1967, p.6.} Their enthusiasm indicates a level of interest within the school system in contemporary embroidery and is evidence of an unmet need for training in the field.

Margaret Oppen also lobbied people within the Department of Education who had some capacity to influence policy directions. People often commented on the way that she capitalised on her connections with people to further the cause of embroidery.\footnote{See, for example, Jean Vere’s comments on p.11 of \textit{The Record}, No 201, May 1980. Pat Langford made similar comments in the conversation I had with her on 25 November 2002} In the case of embroidery in schools, one of the acquaintances who proved useful was John Dabron, who had a longstanding interest in textiles. He had been a member of the Arts and Crafts
Society of NSW and had exhibited hand weaving in a Society exhibition as far back as 1940; presumably this was the origin of his acquaintance with Margaret Oppen. By the early 1960s he was the Inspector of Art for the NSW Department of Education. In 1964, Margaret Oppen commented that one of the difficulties faced in promoting embroidery was that ‘Needlework teachers do not really have the time for teaching original design, and craft teachers who teach design very seldom include embroidery’, but that John Dabron had ‘offered to include a letter for us in the monthly circular to teachers, encouraging the teaching of embroidery as a craft’; that is, to encourage the teaching of embroidery in art classes. In 1966 Dabron gave the opening speech at the Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition, held in the Department of Education gallery in Sydney. In the speech he talked about the importance of creativity and of a creative education and about valuing people who broke the rules:

There are bound to be people who deny all rules of embroiderers (sic) or art techniques. We must value these people. The person who breaks away from accepted rules is someone who can make a valuable contribution …

At the conclusion of the speech he indicated that he ‘was going to ask schools to come and see the Exhibition; to see what embroidery means.’ Apparently John Dabron could see the potential of embroidery as a means of expression and was willing to participate in its promotion, presumably as a part of the art curriculum in schools.

However most embroidery was done within needlework departments in schools rather than in the art department and so another priority was to introduce needlework teachers to more innovative approaches to embroidery. This was done in a number of ways. Firstly the Embroiderers’ Guild, or, more accurately, Margaret Oppen, established relationships with people in positions of some influence. Ruby Riach recalls being contacted by Margaret Oppen some time in the late 1950s or early 1960s and being invited to speak to the Embroiderers’ Guild about embroidery in schools. A ‘schools committee’ had been

89 List of exhibition entries, MLMSS 3645 3(9) MLK 02077, Mitchell Library.
90 The Record, No 46, October 1964, p.13.
91 The Record, No 69, March 1967, p. 9.
92 The Record, No 69, March 1967, p.11. On p.2 of the same issue The Record reported that a thousand school children saw the exhibition, although it provides no details as to where the students came from. There is, however, a brief but intriguing mention in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1967 (23 November 1967, Women’s section, p.12) of twenty four students from Finley visiting the Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition. In the late sixties the journey from Finley to Sydney was a lengthy one so the teacher who organized the excursion must have been an enthusiast.
established within the Embroiderers’ Guild and in 1963 it was noted in The Record that the retiring 1961-1962 committee had established good links with Miss McLaren and Mrs Bruce, Inspectors of Needlework within the NSW Department of Education. This contact presumably helped in the promotion of the schools competition which, in addition to the previous promotion in the Needlework Bulletin, was advertised in three issues of the Education Gazette in 1963. In the early sixties the Embroiderers’ Guild provided several articles for the Needlework Bulletin. These included an article about the Guild itself, one on the history of embroidery, and an article about designing for embroidery. In late 1964 Mrs Bruce was the speaker at a Guild meeting, describing the way in which needlework was being taught in primary and secondary schools in the state.

The Guild was also called upon to present specialist in-service training courses for teachers. In 1965 Margaret Oppen and Pat Langford were involved in a summer school at Newcastle Teachers College, where they presented lectures needlework teachers on ‘Design for Needlework’, and in 1967 a school for embroidery teachers was held in the May school holidays. In 1974 Guild tutors were still performing such tasks: Heather Joynes, Audrey Dixon and Noela Taylor presented a school for the Needlework Teachers Association in the August/September school holidays. It is difficult to assess the exact impact that these activities had on the teaching of embroidery in schools. Department of Education staff records are sealed, effectively cutting off that avenue of investigation for some time to come, while the tendency for women to change their family names creates another obstacle. Margaret Oppen herself was optimistic about the success of these efforts. In writing of the school for teachers in 1967 she commented:

94 The Record, No 34, August 1963, p. 15. According to Peacock, (p.129) Alison McLaren was appointed in 1962 but only served for a short time, while Mrs Margaret Bruce, who was appointed as Assistant Supervisor of Needlework in the same year, served a much longer term, being appointed as Inspector of Schools Primary Needlework in 1971. Peacock notes that Mrs Bruce edited the Needlework Bulletin, but does not indicate exactly when or for how long.

95 The Record, No 34, August 1963, p. 15


98 Pat Langford, ‘Designing for Embroidery’, Needlework Bulletin, No 12, 1962, pp. 12-13. Although this article also appears with Mrs Gilbert’s signature, notes in the Guild archive and a reference to the article in Issue 13 of the Needlework Bulletin make it clear that the article was actually prepared by Pat Langford.

99 The Record, No 47, November 1964, pp.4-6.
Many of our old friends from previous schools were back and this is the best proof possible that these classes are of real value to school teachers. It should eventually become apparent if the Guild continues to hold educational exhibitions, through the work of school girls, that the teaching of the Guild is spreading where it will be most appreciated by the rising generation.\textsuperscript{100}

Given the rapid increase in interest in all forms of stitched textiles in New South Wales during the nineteen seventies and nineteen eighties it is not unreasonable to conclude that to some extent she was correct.

**Conclusion**

During the nineteen sixties almost all of the activities intended to promote embroidery as a creative pursuit originated within the Embroiderers’ Guild of New South Wales, and by far the majority were at the instigation of Margaret Oppen. These activities served several purposes. As I suggested at the start of this chapter, they can certainly be seen as a form of proselytizing. Margaret Oppen was keen to encourage as many people as possible to take up embroidery, but she was not alone in this goal. Many of the women who were teachers during this time also wanted others to experience the pleasures of creating original work in embroidery, from Cynthia Sparks who believed that ‘everyone is creative in some way’ to Fay Bottrell who was trying to ‘loosen them up’. But these activities also served a structural purpose, helping to consolidate the fledgling embroidery world that had emerged in the late nineteen fifties by educating more people in the conventions of modern embroidery and encouraging them to become active participants in the embroidery community. In this way, the embroidery world grew in size: at the Annual General Meeting of the Embroiderers’ Guild branch in Sydney in 1958, the Guild had 40 members; in 1966 there were 400 members; by the early 1970s there were over 900.\textsuperscript{101}

As a result of this ongoing educational and exhibition program those involved in creative embroidery became increasingly confident about their work. As Howard Becker explains, in any art world the participants’:

> mutual appreciation of the conventions they share, and the support they mutually afford one another, convince them that what they are doing is worth doing. If they act under the definition of ‘art’, their interaction convinces them that what they produce are valid works of art.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{100} *The Record*, No 73, July 1967, p.5.

\textsuperscript{101} *The Record*, No 201, May 1980, pp.10-12.

\textsuperscript{102} Becker, *Art worlds*, p.39.
An inevitable consequence of an increasing conviction among the members of an art world of the value and status of the work they produce is the desire for wider recognition, and those involved in creative embroidery were no exception. Throughout the nineteen sixties, creative embroiderers strove to have their work accepted as ‘art’: the strategies they employed are the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter 7

‘We would like to see embroidery accepted as an art form’
Ruth Arthur

For several centuries embroidery was mostly produced in a domestic context, rather than for public display, and most embroiderers did not seek or expect public recognition of their work. Similarly, there are well known cases of individual artists in many other media who have worked in isolation and without an audience, receiving recognition late in life or even posthumously. However, engagement with an audience is a necessary aspect of most forms of art practice. As the number of people involved in creative embroidery in New South Wales increased, it was no longer enough for the members of the fledgling embroidery world to believe themselves that their work was of value. They wanted validation from the broader community that what they were making was ‘art’ and, ideally, recognition from other parts of the art and craft community. In 1972 Ruth Arthur was quite explicit: ‘We would like to see embroidery accepted as an art form’.¹ The exhibition of embroidery in public was one of the characteristics that marked the development of ‘art embroidery’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Exhibitions played a significant role in the establishment of reputations – both for individual practitioners and for the medium as a whole. Following this lead, during the nineteen sixties creative embroiderers in New South Wales also looked to actively promote their work as art. The way in which exhibitions contributed to the careers of individual embroiderers will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 9; in this chapter the focus is on the way that creative embroiderers used exhibitions and other strategies in a corporate effort to raise the status of creative embroidery as a form of artistic expression.

Distributing art works

The means by which art works are introduced to a public audience vary according to the art form – theatres for drama, publishing companies for literature, recording companies for music, exhibitions for the fine arts – and so on. By bringing art works and audiences together such structures, which Becker calls ‘distribution systems’, serve important functions in an art world. They:

give people with the taste to appreciate [work] access to it and simultaneously will repay the investment of time, money and materials in the work so that more time, materials and cooperative activity will be available with which to make more works.²

That is, they expose art works to an audience which understands the work, will respond to it and, in the case of art objects, may be prepared to pay for the privilege of owning individual artefacts. In a fully developed art world, engagement with an audience provides a measure of economic support as well as aesthetic validation, both of which provide encouragement for artists to continue making work.

In the embroidery community in the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies, the proceeds from the sale of work were never large. In the early 1970s Pat Langford received a cheque for $316.67 for the sale of five works from an exhibition at the Divola Galleries, an amount slightly less than the average weekly earnings at that time. Even a prolific embroiderer like Pat Langford could not have produced this number of works in the space of a week, and the market for creative embroidery in Australia was certainly not large enough that sales of this magnitude would be repeated on a weekly basis, even if such a level of production could be sustained. No doubt the sales were welcome, but in financial terms they were only ever a supplement to an income from elsewhere. Most embroiderers fall into the category Becker identifies as self supporting artists: those artists like Margaret Oppen who had independent incomes, those like Cynthia Sparks who had supporting spouses, or those like Pat Langford who worked in another, perhaps related, job.

Engagement with an audience, or ‘distribution’ of their work, may have provided minimal financial rewards for embroiderers, but it was important for other reasons. As Becker explains, ‘what is not distributed is not known and thus cannot be well thought of or have historical importance’. This comment highlights two separate but related issues. First there is the importance of ‘publication’ in ensuring that work becomes part of the historical record. Many of the creative embroideries produced in the nineteen sixties and nineteen seventies are now known only through photographic records, many of which were taken when the work was being exhibited in public, while the purchase by members of the embroidery community of work from exhibitions also played a part in ensuring the preservation of work from the period. Second, there is the role played by exhibitions in the public perception of

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3 Undated letter from the Divola Galleries in Pat Langford scrapbook. Pat Langford exhibited at the Divola Galleries in 1973 and 1974; it is not clear to which year the letter refers.
4 *ACCI Review*, Number 97, March 2003, p. 2.
5 The question of selling work will be discussed more fully in Chapter 9, which looks at the issue of amateur and professional practice in embroidery.
7 Becker, *Art worlds*, p.95.
8 See Chapter 2 for discussion of these points.
work. Work must be presented as art before it is valued as such by the general public and, more importantly, by the tastemakers who make aesthetic judgements within a society.

**What embroiderers meant by embroidery as art.**

Any attempt to discuss the status of creative embroidery as art is complicated by the fact that ideas about what art is – or what art should be – are in a state of constant change. Between 1960 and the current day, views about what art is have been modified by a succession of art movements ranging from conceptual and feminist art to postmodernism. Arguably one of the reasons the contribution of creative embroiderers of the sixties and early seventies to the development of textile art in New South Wales has been overlooked is that later practitioners have judged them in terms of their own more contemporary views about art and found them wanting. The view that an art work has as its primary purpose the giving of visual pleasure is not widespread in today’s art worlds. Instead, practitioners, curators and collectors expect art to have a strong conceptual or theoretical underpinning and when evaluating art works place considerable emphasis on their content. However, as for British embroiderers in the nineteen fifties and early nineteen sixties, an emphasis on content was not something that concerned local creative embroiderers in the sixties and early seventies. Embroiderers at this time were more interested in producing work that was beautiful to look at than work which carried a political or social message. It was not until the mid nineteen seventies, with the introduction of textiles into art schools in New South Wales and the emerging feminist art movement, that a significant quantity of embroidery or stitched textiles which engaged consciously with political or philosophical ideas was produced. If more recent ideas about art are applied, the work produced by creative embroiderers appears unsophisticated, even naïve, in terms of its conceptual underpinnings. Therefore, when examining the strategies used by creative embroiderers to make a case that their work was a form of art, it is necessary instead to do so in the light of what they themselves meant when they talked about ‘embroidery as art’.

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9 While there aren’t many published comments to this effect, it is my belief that this view accounts, in part, for the limited coverage of embroidery in Cochrane’s *The crafts movement in Australia: A history*. The view has been expressed by David Green, who has stated in conversations with me that when he came to Australia in 1976 that there was nothing here, and also by Julie Montgarrett. See J Montgarrett, ‘Remembering the memorable – David Green’, *Textile Fibre Forum*, Vol 23, No 4, 2004, p.16; Julie Montgarrett and I have debated at length our differing interpretations of the quote I provided for use in that article.

10 This issue is discussed more fully in Chapter 4.

11 Ecclesiastical embroidery is an exception in this regard.
Since Margaret Oppen was the person who was setting this particular agenda and who, at least until late in the nineteen sixties, had the most influence among the creative embroiderers associated with the Embroiderers’ Guild, her ideas on the issue are of particular significance. From 1960 until shortly before her death in 1975, Margaret Oppen wrote regularly about embroidery for *The Record*. She was also interviewed at various times by the Sydney media. By comparison with most embroiderers, she left a significant record of her thoughts on various topics, but despite the volume of text, this record is not unambiguous. Much of what Margaret Oppen wrote and said within the context of the Embroiderers’ Guild itself was tempered by the need to reconcile the traditional and creative factions within the organisation. At times she appeared to argue that all embroidery should have greater recognition in terms of the commonplace definition of art – that which is done skilfully. Such a view was intended to appeal to all embroiderers, including those committed to very traditional forms of practice. However, on other occasions she talked about embroidery as art in terms of her own background and understanding of art making, a perspective that had its roots in the ideology of the Arts and Crafts Movement and was further developed by her exposure to trends in British embroidery during the fifties and sixties.

Margaret Oppen’s art education had occurred in the wake of the Arts and Crafts Movement. From her training in art and in embroidery, as well as the people she mixed with and the organisations to which she belonged, she would have developed the view that it was possible to use embroidery to make art, in the same way that people use painting and printmaking to this end. Her exhibition at the Grosvenor Galleries in 1949 is evidence of this. It consisted of original embroidery on domestic items, printed textiles and prints on paper – all exhibited together. Prints on paper and prints on fabric were priced at a similar level, while the embroideries were more expensive, presumably a reflection of the greater effort involved in producing them. This suggests that work in the different mediums was seen by Margaret Oppen as being of equal status.

Additional evidence of what Margaret Oppen meant by ‘art’ is provided in three articles written by her in 1963. In each instance she is reporting on conversations with other women artists, so the articles may represent transcription, paraphrase, or interpretation of the original conversations. Nevertheless the points that she chose to emphasis are telling. Reporting on a conversation with Janna Bruce, a watercolour painter and the head of the art department at Abbotsleigh, Margaret Oppen commented that there were two aspects to embroidery: ‘the art, which is the design, and the craft, which is the technique’.12 The following month she

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spoke with Joy Ewart. This time the article stressed the importance of ‘originality, individuality, personality’, and equates personal expression with art. Finally, in September when her source was June Scott Stevenson, she wrote about ‘the mind expressing its own ideas’ and about the artist having ‘something really personal to say’. From this we can deduce that Margaret Oppen equated ‘art’ with an artefact of original design which expressed the interests of the individual who was formulating and executing the work.

Margaret Oppen frequently stressed the importance of ideas in the development of an art work. In 1968 she was reported as believing that embroidery ‘can express modern ideas as effectively as painting’. However it does seem that she had a relatively uncomplicated view of what constituted suitable ideas on which to base her work in embroidery. She was interested in ecclesiastical embroidery and produced work on biblical themes, including painted and stitched versions of The Two Marys and a large panel called The Moment of Temptation, now apparently lost. But the bulk of her embroideries seem to have been of more everyday subject matter, including several large panels on the theme of Australian flora. In 1967, speaking to a members meeting at the Embroiderers’ Guild she:

appealed to members … to apply more of the familiar objects of the later twentieth century as design in embroidery. ‘What could be more fascinating’, she said, than the huge modern machines, pylons, express ways and ships we see today.

On the basis of what she said and what she did in her own embroidery practice, we can conclude that for Margaret Oppen embroidery that aspired to the status of art also had to have a theme, but not necessarily a very complex theme.

The other embroiderer whose approach to embroidery helped to promote the view that embroidery could be art was Pat Langford, who served as a role model for aspiring creative embroiderers and stressed the importance of original design in her teaching. Pat Langford had trained initially as a painter and exhibited in that medium in England before being introduced to embroidery in the nineteen fifties. Like Constance Howard, with whom she

16 The two versions of The Two Marys are now in the collection of Conrad and Alice Oppen. *The Moment of Temptation*, which was shown at the Adelaide Festival in 1968, was designed by Margaret Oppen but in fact stitched by a group of women who attended classes at her home. It was shown in a photograph illustrating Ennis Honey’s article in the *Women’s Weekly* but neither the Oppen family nor the women who stitched it know what happened to the work.
17 *The Record*, No 74, August 1967, p. 9.
studied, and a number of other British women who made the same transition, Pat Langford adapted the approach she initially applied in painting to the medium of embroidery. Although she was sceptical about work where the concept appeared to be more important than its visual expression, she stated on more than one occasion that ‘if it’s good and it’s got an idea behind it, it’s the art game’.  

From Pat Langford’s point of view an idea was necessary but, like Margaret Oppen, most of her ideas originated from visual observation of the world around her. Despite having strong views about social and environmental issues, these rarely are overt in her work; a paradox that she was conscious of:

it’s that grouping of the shapes and pattern I think which always comes across first, it’s interesting this because … Graham [Oakley] was saying the other day, ‘why aren’t you a social commentator because you’re always so conscious of the social things’ – but I don’t think I see things that way.

In an article for Craft Australia in 1977 Pat Langford discussed her approach to design for embroidery, listing the subjects that interested her most: aspects of the landscape, people going about their everyday life, and the objects of everyday domestic life. She explained how her work began with an idea – that is, a visual response to something she had seen – which was translated into a sketch and then realised in appropriate embroidery techniques. This approach, which is also documented in Embroidery: From Sketch to Stitch (1996), can be traced back to Pat Langford’s initial training, where paintings were based on the raw material collected through the medium of drawing. As far as she was concerned, the approach to embroidery was the same; it was just that her ideas were worked out in fabric and thread rather than paint on canvas.

To summarise, for embroiderers in Australia in the nineteen sixties, embroidery had to satisfy several relatively uncomplicated conditions to have the status of ‘art’. Some kind of idea or theme was necessary. The work had to be original in design, should take its inspiration from contemporary life, and needed to be ‘modern’ in its approach. Furthermore, although the Arts and Crafts Movement ideology may have been that all forms of visual expression were equally valid, by this time embroiderers appear to have concluded that textiles needed to be hung on the wall and contemplated in order to be considered ‘art’.

Perhaps Margaret Oppen had learnt from her 1949 exhibition at the Grosvenor Galleries that

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18 Her views on the contemporary focus on the conceptual in art were expressed in the conversation I had with her on 25 November 2002.

19 Conversation with Pat Langford on 25 November 2002. Graham Oakley was the husband of a friend and former teaching colleague of Pat Langford.

art audiences didn’t consider embroidered domestic artefacts to be art. Although in the nineteen sixties there was some interest in embroidered cushions, and clothing and embroidered boxes were popular in the wake of Cynthia Sparks’ teaching, catalogues from embroidery exhibitions held in the sixties and seventies, as well as photographic records of work from the era, indicate that the bulk of the work produced by creative embroiderers was in the form of panels and wall hangings.

**Exhibitions in the art world**

The nineteen sixties saw a rapid increase in the number of art dealers and commercial galleries operating in Sydney. Although most of these galleries concentrated primarily on fine art in the form of painting, some included work in other media; and there were embroiderers who took advantage of opportunities to exhibit in such galleries. However, these opportunities for exhibiting work were limited in number and exploited by a relatively small proportion of the embroidery community. No doubt, for many embroiderers the competitive nature of selected exhibitions and the commercial gallery scene acted as a barrier to participation. Heather Joynes had a single solo exhibition, held in 1976 at the Von Bertouch Gallery in Newcastle, but ultimately decided that this aspect of professional practice was not for her:

> I enjoyed working for it but I decided that one person exhibitions weren’t going to be my thing. They were a lot of work for not much return.21

But willingness to participate according to the rules of the art world was not all that was required. Embroiderers also had to produce work that was acceptable to the art world in which they wished exhibit. In the words of Michal McCall:

> To be art, a thing must look like art; lend itself to being discussed as art; be presented as art by and to persons who will regard it as art; and be bought and sold in the way that art is, by persons who buy and sell art.22

When Pat Langford exhibited at the Chatterton Gallery in 1961 her work was described as ‘embroidered paintings’. Whether this label was Pat Langford’s choice is unclear, but it seems likely that it was chosen to associate the work with visual art rather than domestic craft. In Sydney in the late sixties and early seventies the stitched textiles shown in mainstream commercial art galleries were those that had affinities with trends in contemporary visual art. With their geometric shapes in solid colours, Heather Dorrough’s large appliquéd panels which were exhibited at the Darlinghurst Galleries in 1965 had much in common with contemporary colour field painting. Vivienne Pengilley’s large appliquéd


and embroidered wall hangings, exhibited at Gallery A from 1972 on, were similar in spirit to the Pop influenced work being produced at the Yellow House in the early seventies, a point that was noted by Daniel Thomas in a review in 1973.  

However most embroiderers were not part of the contemporary art scene in Sydney and, whatever their aspirations, their work did not fit comfortably within the commercial gallery system. Until the emergence of specialist craft galleries they needed to find alternative ways to exhibit their work. A range of options were explored. To begin with embroidery was exhibited in conjunction with other arts and crafts in exhibitions organised by groups such as the Arts and Crafts Society of New South Wales and the North Shore Art Society, groups which represented the conservative side of the Sydney art community. Later some embroiderers participated in exhibitions mounted by professional crafts organisations. But by far the most common exhibitions of embroidery were those organised by embroiderers themselves. Although some of these exhibitions were intended primarily to attract more participants in the craft of embroidery, others were organised and promoted in ways consciously intended to encourage audiences to see embroidery as a form of art.

Positioning embroidery as art through exhibitions

In 1961, the same year that the Embroiderers’ Guild organised its large and quite conservative exhibition as a fundraising activity for Dr Barnardo’s Homes, it also participated in an exhibition mounted by the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW. In writing about this exhibition in *The Record*, Margaret Oppen focused on art world links, drawing attention to specific painters whose work was to be included in the exhibition:

> A special feature of the exhibition is a display of paintings by five of Sydney’s outstanding painters, Thea Procter (sic), Jean Appleton, Enid Cambridge, Cossington-Smith and Joy Ewart.

These painters were all mature women: Thea Proctor, at eighty two, was the oldest; Joy Ewart, who was forty five, the youngest. By comparison with the painting being produced by younger Sydney artists their work was conservative, but it was the kind of work with which Embroiderers’ Guild members would be comfortable. By drawing attention to the fact that embroidery was to be exhibited alongside work of established painters, in much the same way that the Chatterton Gallery exhibition of the same year associated Pat Langford’s work with painting, Margaret Oppen was endeavouring to associate embroidery with ‘art’ for an audience who may not have thought of it in this way before. Although at this time she was writing for fellow embroiderers, the article foreshadows a technique that she used on a

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number of occasions to promote to the broader community the idea that embroidery could be ‘art’.

Later in the decade when large exhibitions of embroidery began to be held in the Education Department Galleries, similar strategies were employed. Margaret Oppen described the aims of the 1966 exhibition thus:

In preparing this exhibition our main thought has been the establishment of embroidery as one of the creative crafts. In other crafts the worker expects to design and make his product entirely himself, but in embroidery the habit has been formed of depending on someone else for the choice of material, thread and design with complete instructions for the making of every stitch.

Our choice of exhibits has been governed by the need of overcoming this habit, and with few exceptions each article shown is the work of the exhibitor from beginning to end.25

In this passage Margaret Oppen talks of embroidery as a creative craft rather than as a creative art. This possibly reflects a growing awareness of the crafts movement resulting from the establishment of the Craft Association of Australia (NSW Branch) in 1964 – although it was not until 1967 that the Embroiderers’ Guild became formally associated with the Craft Association. However on most occasions, whether she was addressing embroiderers or a more general audience, her term of choice was ‘art’.

So, if the primary goal of this exhibition, and the ones which followed, was to place embroidery in the public eye and to promote the idea of embroidery as a creative art (or a creative craft), what strategies were used to achieve that aim? One was to associate embroidery with work that was already accepted as art. One of the drawcards of the 1966 exhibition was *Joie de Vivre* by John Olsen, described by Margaret Oppen as a ‘remarkable piece of embroidery’, but in fact one of a limited edition of tapestries woven in Portugal after a painting by Olsen.26 Of all the textile techniques, tapestry is the one most associated with fine art, due largely to the practice of using well known artists to design for the medium. Its status in this regard can be traced back to the early sixteenth century when designs by Raphael were interpreted in tapestry to be hung in the Sistine Chapel. In the mid-twentieth century there was a revival of interest in the medium of tapestry, partly due to the influence of Jean Lurçat’s work at Aubusson in France, and there had been an exhibition of French tapestry in Sydney in 1956. It is therefore somewhat surprising that Margaret Oppen should


26 It is not clear who lent the tapestry for the Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition. Of the edition of six, one tapestry is held in the Art Gallery of New South Wales, while according to Deborah Hart, three copies went into private collections. (D Hart, *John Olsen*. 2nd edition, Craftsman House, North Ryde, 2000).
mistake the work for embroidery – perhaps she thought *Joie de Vivre* was canvaswork embroidery (sometimes called needlepoint tapestry) rather than a woven tapestry. But regardless of this mistake, she obviously believed that the medium of textiles added something to the work, commenting that when:

> the two [ie the tapestry and the painting on which it was based] were shown together at Terry Clune’s Gallery and the richness and depth imparted to the design by the stitchery was most noticeable.\(^{27}\)

The inclusion of a textile work by a successful young painter who at that time was ‘riding the crest of a wave of artistic acclaim’\(^{28}\) would have been a considerable coup from Margaret Oppen’s point of view, helping to establish a link between embroidery and ‘art’. It also enabled her when writing in *The Record* to reinforce her view that textiles offered a different aesthetic quality to that of paint on canvas. Like many other textile artists, including Pat Langford, who believed that thread had ‘more richness, much more soul’\(^{29}\), Margaret Oppen was of the opinion that the medium offered something that was not provided by paint.

In 1967 another high profile name served to make the link between textiles and art. This time it was a work listed in the catalogue as *Polynesia* by Matisse, lent by the Art Gallery of New South Wales. This work is also a tapestry, based on a detail of *Polynésie La Mer* 1946, a collage on paper by Matisse, which was woven in the Art Gallery of NSW by François Ruh of the French Gobelins factory, during the 1956 exhibition of French Tapestries and subsequently donated to the gallery by the French government.\(^{30}\) While this and the Olsen tapestry were high profile pieces, which by virtue of the reputation of their creators, were readily accepted as ‘art’, other works, not as well known in Australia as these examples but with some claim to the status of art, served the same purpose.

In 1966 and again in 1968 the Embroiderers’ Guild arranged for work from the British 62 Group to be sent to Australia. Comprising British art school graduates, the aim of the 62 Group was to ‘encourage embroidery designers and craftsmen to produce work of high quality in a twentieth century style’.\(^{31}\) The group itself wasn’t entirely certain that its work had wider acceptance as art:

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\(^{27}\) *The Record*, Number 68, December 1966, p.9

\(^{28}\) Hart, *John Olsen*, p.79.

\(^{29}\) Conversation with Pat Langford on 25 November 2002.

\(^{30}\) Email from Steven Miller, Art Gallery of NSW, 25 February 2004.

Creative embroidery today is in the extraordinary position of being outside any category. So far the art critics with one or two exceptions have not taken it seriously enough to find it worthy of the kind of discussion they have given to exhibitions and happenings only recently accepted in the field of creativity.\textsuperscript{32} But whatever members of the 62 Group thought about the response of art critics, they were well regarded by other embroiderers in Britain. Their exhibitions were reviewed regularly in \textit{Embroidery}, their work was often reproduced in the magazine, and many 62 group members were teachers in British art schools. From an Australian perspective, this would have represented a significant measure of success and evidence that embroidery could aspire to a high status. For embroiderers in Sydney the inclusion of work from the 62 group in the Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition would have added weight to the argument that embroidery was a form of art.

The Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions in the second half of the nineteen sixties were notable for the inclusion of work in a variety of textile media, including work by artists who were later to become widely known for their work. For instance in 1967 Jutta Feddersen, who subsequently represented Australia in international fibre and sculpture exhibitions, exhibited several woven works, while a group of items from the Mary White School of Design included work by Heather Dorrough and Fay Bottrell. At this time Feddersen, Dorrough and Bottrell were all establishing reputations as professionals: Heather Dorrough had a solo exhibition at the Darlinghurst Galleries in 1965; Fay Bottrell exhibited at the Dominion Art Galleries in 1966 and Jutta Feddersen exhibited at the Hungry Horse Gallery in 1965 and again in early 1967. None of these women were ever members of the Embroiderers’ Guild, but clearly they were willing to be associated with its exhibitions. Presumably it was a mutually advantageous arrangement. The Embroiderers’ Guild benefited by having significant pieces of work to add to the range on display, while the craftspeople had another opportunity to bring their work before the public, perhaps to a different audience than would have seen it in a commercial gallery.

The linking of exhibitions with major events was another means by which embroidery was associated with mainstream cultural activity. The celebration of the Bicentenary of Captain Cook’s landing in Australia in 1970 included a variety of events, ranging from literary competitions and exhibitions of visual art to historical re-enactments and carnivals. Rather than holding an exhibition in November 1969, following the pattern that had been established in the previous three years, the Embroiderers’ Guild delayed until April 1970 so that their exhibition coincided with the events associated with the visit of Queen Elizabeth II. The exhibition, which was opened by Mrs Askin, the wife of the State Premier, had a theme,\textsuperscript{32} The 62 group, ‘Embroidery today and tomorrow’, \textit{Embroidery} Vol 19, No 4, 1968, p.105.
Australiana, and an associated competition which was judged by Bronwyn Yeates. Bronwyn Yeates, who was described at the time as ‘a painter and an embroiderer’, was later to become the director of the Bonython Gallery in Sydney. The winning works were included in the ‘Women and the Arts’ section of a display of Australian work held in the Sydney Town Hall, which was visited by the Queen and Princess Anne.

In 1973 the Guild exhibition was once again carefully scheduled, this time to coincide with the opening of the Sydney Opera House, another event which involved a Royal Visit, although this time the exhibition was a less ambitious affair. Although it included work on loan from Embroiderers’ Guilds in other states and was accompanied by a printed catalogue, the exhibition was held in the Embroiderers’ Guild rooms in Elizabeth Street rather than in an outside venue, and it does not appear to have attracted the same amount of press interest as the earlier exhibitions had. By participating in the Captain Cook Bicentenary and Opera House celebrations embroiderers would have felt closely involved in the cultural life of their community, and perhaps also an accompanying sense of acceptance for their chosen medium. At the very least, the careful timing had a practical outcome, resulting in a useful amount of positive publicity – and in the case of the 1970 exhibition, a small government grant: an unidentified clipping in Margaret Oppen’s scrapbook reports that the Premier had been persuaded by Mrs Askin to provide $400 to ‘show recognition of the art’.

**Contact with the art world**

Another significant development for embroidery, again spearheaded by Margaret Oppen, was the inclusion of embroidery in the summer schools organised by the University of New England in Armidale. Although the embroidery summer schools involved Embroiderers’ Guild members as tutors and some members attended as students, they reached a much broader audience and were another way of associating embroidery with other forms of art. The Armidale summer school program involved a range of creative pursuits including music and visual art and a number of high profile artists were among the other tutors. According to Pat Langford, the Armidale venture came about as a result of Margaret Oppen’s acquaintance with the wife of the artist Stan Rapotec, who was a tutor at the summer schools: ‘[Margaret] knew Rapotec’s wife and in conversation she’d say “don’t you think it’s time embroidery got into one of these residential colleges?”’ Eventually the lobbying

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34 ‘And it was her first hanging’, unlabelled magazine clipping, Margaret Oppen scrapbook, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
35 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Pat Langford, 15 April 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
paid off. In 1968 Professor James from the University of New England visited the Guild, viewing an exhibition of Pat Langford’s work to determine whether it met the standards of the University.\(^{36}\) Clearly he was satisfied by what he saw: in January 1969 Pat Langford and Cynthia Sparks travelled to Armidale to teach the first embroidery summer school at the University of New England.\(^{37}\)

The schools continued on an annual basis until 1979, with Pat Langford, Cynthia Sparks and Heather Joynes all involved as tutors at various times. For several years they were assisted by Caroline Wheeler (née Woodrow), from the Bernina sewing machine company, who provided technical support. It was an intense experience for students. The school ran for two weeks, with a day off in the middle of the program. Classes were timetabled from 9am until 5pm each day with a short break for lunch, but students also worked outside the official hours. According to Cynthia Sparks ‘the first year Pat and I hardly got any sleep at all because people would come to us in the middle of the night…’\(^{38}\) Caroline Wheeler also recalls ‘in the evenings people would sit in each other’s rooms unpicking what they’d done during the day, because it was ‘wrong’, and re-do it … they stitched until all hours of the night.’\(^{39}\) As the school concluded with an exhibition of student work, there was always pressure to produce finished works. For instance, in 1969 the students produced a collage, four samplers and a finished wall hanging, all of which were displayed in the final exhibition.\(^{40}\) The following year students also produced a series of samplers as well as completed wall hangings.\(^{41}\) As the focus that year was on goldwork embroidery, which is a particularly time consuming technique, this was a significant achievement.

The outcomes of the Armidale summer schools were various. Among the students who attended the embroidery summer schools in Armidale were several who went on to play an important role in textiles in Australia. One of those who attended in 1969 was Anne Richards, who was later to teach at Burwood Teachers College in Melbourne and to serve as the national coordinator of the Parliament House Embroidery project. According to Anne Richards this summer school was personally invigorating:

\(^{36}\) *The Record*, No 86, October 1968, p.7.

\(^{37}\) In 1970 Professor James was sufficiently interested in the embroidery classes at Armidale to scour the local watchmakers for watch and clock parts for the embroiderers to use in their goldwork. (*The Record*, No 99, March 1970, p.6).

\(^{38}\) Conversation with Cynthia Sparks, 9 January 2003.

\(^{39}\) Conversation with Caroline Wheeler, 29 June 2004.

\(^{40}\) *The Record* No 90, April 1969, p. 6

…here was a breath of fresh air. Here I was encouraged to use stitch not for its own sake, but to create texture, not to copy nature but to explore its essence, shape and colours, to express my feelings about the subject and reveal how it affected me.\textsuperscript{42}

It also influenced her work as a high school teacher. She explains how she encouraged her students to work in a similar way:

They stitched large panels and murals on Hessian grounds, enjoying the experience with their textured yarns, appliqué and padding (voices ringing in my ear – develop and vary the stitch, enlarge it, move it).\textsuperscript{43}

Her students’ work attracted the attention of the Victorian Education Department and led to her employment at Burwood where, she says, ‘this creative approach to education through art was explored and ultimately filtered into the school system itself.’\textsuperscript{44}

Another notable textile artist who attended the Armidale summer schools was Lorraine Merrony (later Lorraine Hepburn) who attended in 1974. In 1973, and recently returned from a study trip to the United Kingdom where she had attended classes with Constance Howard and had visited Hannah Frew and Kathleen Whyte at the Glasgow School of Art, Lorraine Merrony was described as a ‘decorator with a passion for embroidery’\textsuperscript{45}. Later in her career, she achieved acclaim for her feminist works which used textile forms to comment on gender and reproductive issues. That she followed up her overseas trip with attendance at the Armidale Summer School suggests that the schools were very highly regarded. Liz Jeneid, who attended in 1975, had a successful career as a production weaver before going on to teach textiles in the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong. Meg Douglas, a lecturer at the South Australian School of Art, attended several times along with a contingent of members of the Embroiderers’ Guild in South Australia. She recalls the schools as ‘an enjoyable experience for both lecturers and students’.\textsuperscript{46} The schools served as a means of bringing like minded people together – many of the embroiderers who attended participated at Armidale later became members of the Creative Embroidery Association.\textsuperscript{47}

The Armidale summer schools also led to a higher profile for embroidery – at least temporarily. At the time of the first Armidale school, there had been few exhibitions of modern embroidery in Sydney, apart from the Guild exhibitions in the Education Department Gallery and Pat Langford’s exhibition at Chattertons at the beginning of the decade. The

\textsuperscript{42} Letter from Ann Richards, July 2004
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Letter from Meg Douglas, 12 August 2004.
\textsuperscript{47} The Creative Embroidery Association will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 9.
Education Gallery exhibitions had attracted a reasonable amount of publicity, but most of this was in women’s magazines and the women’s pages of the daily newspapers and although Heather Dorrough and Fay Bottrell had both had solo shows, their work at this time is more accurately described as textiles, not embroidery. In the late sixties, embroidery and embroiderers were not part of the mainstream art scene, despite Margaret Oppen’s wishes that this should be so. The Armidale summer schools placed embroidery for the first time alongside those working in mainstream art genres, with two results. It exposed embroiderers to current developments in fine art. For example, in 1970 evening lectures were given jointly to the painters and the embroiderers by the painter Guy Warren, at the time a lecturer at Sydney University, while George Baldessin spoke to the embroiderers on printmaking techniques.48 Caroline Wheeler also recalls John Olsen giving lectures at one of the schools she attended.49 But, perhaps more importantly, people from the fine arts were also exposed to creative embroidery and, it seems, some of them were surprised by what they saw. After the 1969 school Cynthia Sparks reported that:

in one or two cases the first visit was a duty one. But we had arranged our exhibition to hit them in the eye as they came in, and the work that was going on all around was so different from the preconceived idea of embroidery, that they not only came again but also brought and sent others to view us.50

The visitors included Mrs Zelman Cowan, wife of the then Vice-Chancellor of the University, Robin Day from the BBC Panorama programme, and:

We even got recognition from George Baldessin’s painting group, and he and his wife were so interested that they finally photographed a lot of our work …The main cry from all these visitors was that they had no idea that embroidery embraced this type of work and that it could be so exciting.51

**Critical responses to embroidery**

Although Cynthia Sparks’ comments present a very positive picture of the response to embroidery from other artists at Armidale, the truth was that efforts to promote embroidery to a broader audience and to position it as a form of art had mixed results. The exhibitions organised by the Embroiderers’ Guild were accompanied by a reasonable level of attention from the media, in the form of coverage of the exhibitions themselves or human interest stories that focused on particular embroiderers. The level of media interest suggests that

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50 *The Record*, Number 90, April 1969, p.6
51 *The Record*, No 90, April 1969, p.8
embroidery was developing an audience – the media covers stories it thinks will be of interest to its readers – and it also indicates that the embroiderers themselves were becoming increasingly adept as using the media to their own advantage. There were instances where embroiderers were able to make public their desire that embroidery be seen as a form of art. In 1969 The Newcastle Advertiser printed an article under the headline ‘New form of art’; an article in 1971, titled ‘An ancient craft goes mod’, reported that the Embroiderers’ Guild ‘… is well to the fore in the world revival of embroidery as an exciting art form relevant to the tempo and pattern of modern living’; and an article in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1972 was headlined ‘Embroidery shows up as a new art’.

However, embroiderers couldn’t always control what was written about embroidery. When the North Shore Times reported on the Embroiderers’ Guild’s 1967 exhibition it emphasised the ‘heritage’ aspect of embroidery, writing that ‘[The] Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW does a major job on keeping alive an art that might otherwise be lost’, whereas in other articles on the same exhibition Jean Vere emphasised the modern work, claiming that ‘We have to move with the times’ and that ‘True embroidery is not the monotonous repetition of a stamped design, but a creative art.’

Margaret Oppen, who believed that embroidery should be evaluated using different criteria from those applied to painting, was also aware that critics did not always know how to ‘read’ or respond to textile work. Her thoughts on this matter are most clearly articulated in her response to an article printed in the Sydney Morning Herald in 1971 which described Mrs Oppen as ‘a traditionalist as heart’ and said that she ‘apologised for many of the exhibits [displayed in the Embroiderers’ Guild rooms] which could easily be mistaken for paintings’.

Margaret Oppen explained what she really said in response to a question about the similarities between embroideries and paintings:

> It is only wall hangings which resemble paintings and even there the differences are much greater than the similarities. Both have the same colours to work with, the same rules of design and the same subjects to choose from. Our medium however, which is needle-and-thread instead of brush and paint, or pen and ink, is entirely different and much more

52 Newcastle Advertiser, 9 September 1969.
53 Newspaper clipping in Margaret Oppen scrapbook, hand labelled Sunday Herald, March 1971. Despite the label, this clipping does not appear to have come from the Sun-Herald.
56 Unlabelled newspaper clipping in Margaret Oppen scrapbook, Embroiderers’ Guild archive. Possibly 14 November 1967 (on basis of internal evidence).
57 The Sun Herald, 14 March 1971, p.192.
personal. We think from the stitch, the thread on the surface of many different materials, just as the painter things from the brushstroke on his canvas or the draughtsman from the penline on his paper. This means that though colour and shapes must be similar, lines and textures are entirely different. An embroidery which imitates a pen-drawing is, to my mind, a regrettable waste of time. We have so many more resources than our brother and sister artists: all kinds of threads, wools, silks and synthetics are our’s (sic) to experiment with and we have also many more surfaces at our disposal -- curtains, quilts, carpets, rugs, cushions, chairs, cloths and garments in addition to the flat surfaces of paper and canvas.58

As I noted in the previous chapter, for the most part, these articles about embroidery were found in the women’s pages of the daily newspapers and in women’s magazines. There are very few instances where embroidery or stitched textiles found its way into the art or general pages of the newspapers, a phenomenon which has changed little since 1975. On the few occasions when embroidery was reviewed in the general pages of a newspaper, the coverage was, at best, lukewarm. In 1968 Daniel Thomas, then an art critic for the Sunday Telegraph, reported that:

The Embroiderers’ Guild Exhibition was not too interesting. Too many ladies are making needlework pictures of 1950s abstractions. One, more up to date, had even copied an Yuraral optical construction from the Power Bequest exhibition. A group of pictorial stuff that did produce a pause of interest turned out to have come from England. On the whole one preferred the things that did not try to be like paintings, some huge quilts, both embroidered and patchwork. Perhaps needlework must have an organic, growing look, spreading twig by twig or cell by cell.59

Margaret Oppen responded with a letter, which does not seem to have been published in the newspaper but which was reproduced in The Record, in which she thanked Daniel Thomas for ‘the kind of criticism we have been needing and wanting, and for which we have scarcely dared hope’.60 Given Mrs Oppen’s apparent feistiness, her defence that ‘it has taken us eleven years to reach the standard of “the fifties”’ and that ‘We must still look to the painters for guidance sometimes; in matters of colour and form they are our natural leaders’ seems quite circumspect. Reading between the lines, it seems she considered a review in the art pages as a positive thing, even if the review itself wasn’t exactly favourable.

Scepticism about the status of embroidery is also evident in an article about an exhibition of work by Anne Butler and Janet Graham, held at the Denis Croneen gallery in June 1971. This exhibition created a lot of interest among embroiderers – virtually all of the

58 The Record, No 111, May 1971, p.9. It isn’t clear whether Margaret Oppen also wrote to the newspaper but given her personality, it is most likely that she did.

59 Reprinted in The Record No 89, March 1969, p.5.

60 The Record No 89, March 1969, p.6.
embroiderers I interviewed recalled seeing this exhibition. Apparently Dennis Croneen had seen work by the women in an exhibition in London and asked for a selection of work to be shown in Australia. According to a newspaper article, the exhibition was ‘part of a series arranged by Mr Croneen ‘to extend the public’s experience of textiles as a wall adornment’. However, Croneen himself wasn’t entirely sure that these works should be regarded as art. The newspaper reported that the gallery’s white walls:

provide an admirable foil for a totally different art form (this in parentheses because Mr Croneen isn’t really sure that it is one) (sic) … With his Oriental rugs, tapestries, and examples of weaving, Mr Croneen feels that he is totally justified in carrying the torch for their recognition as true art forms. … With embroidery he is not so sure of his ground. … ‘Of course, when you look at a work of embroidery, you base your judgement on criteria that are different from those you would use with, say, a painting,’ he says. ‘But personally, I don’t think embroidery has the same sculptural, dimensional qualities that you get in tapestry’. 

These comments highlight the ambiguous status of embroidery at this time: people weren’t really sure how to regard it. Anne Butler and Janet Graham were formally trained as artists. They conceived, designed and executed original works, just as artists in other media did, and they were able to clearly articulate the rationale underpinning their work. From the perspective of design and composition, their works displayed similar qualities to contemporary paintings and they were presented in frames, just as a painting would be. By contrast oriental rugs are, by and large, based on traditional models and, as in the case of tapestries, usually based on a design or painting made by someone other than the weaver. Yet although Denis Croneen was willing to accept a tapestry or a rug as art, he didn’t regard embroidery in the same way.

Conclusion

By the early nineteen seventies embroidery exhibitions were being held regularly. They attracted sizeable audiences as well as media attention, and the kind of work that was being promoted had changed significantly. Rather than quaint comments about lazy daisies and tea cosies, embroidery was presented in the media as something modern and innovative. However, although there were some positive responses from the fine art community, these were the exception rather than the rule. Embroidery was largely ignored by the art press and overlooked by the art critics working for the mainstream papers. On the few occasions when

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61 Email correspondence from Anne Morrell (Butler), 12 May 2002
62 Stitching a landscape’, unlabelled newspaper clipping in Margaret Oppen sketchbook, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
63 Ibid.
embroidery was reviewed as ‘art’, the response was not positive. As Daniel Thomas’ review in 1969 indicates, there was a significant disjunction between the embroiderers’ view of ‘art’ and contemporary art world thinking.

Most creative embroiderers didn’t have a very sophisticated view of the contemporary art world. Some, like Pat Langford, did understand its complexities, but were not in sympathy with the philosophies that underpinned much contemporary art. Pat Langford was ambivalent about conceptually driven art and very committed to the tactile qualities of her chosen medium and rather than changing her work to make it more acceptable in the fine art world, she wanted embroidery to be accepted as art on its own terms. Others, like Robin Jeffcoat, had studied locally at a time when the emphasis was on the development of practical skills rather than art history and theory; and some had no art training at all. Although creative embroiderers were interested enough to attend art exhibitions and were aware of what contemporary art looked like, most didn’t understand the thinking behind it. While their work often had visual qualities that were similar to contemporary art, it did not reflect a deeper understanding of the philosophies of contemporary art. Although the embroiderers themselves were confident that they were making art and the general public, with its own relatively conservative attitudes to art, appears to have been willing to accept that creative embroidery was a form of art, embroiderers did not really convince the fine art community.

But despite the lack of acceptance by the fine art world, individual embroiderers were not deterred from pursuing their own ambitions, nor did the embroidery community abandon their efforts to raise the status of embroidery. During the nineteen sixties the growing identification of craft as a discrete area of practice emergence provided another avenue through which to promote creative embroidery. By the end of the decade many creative embroiderers were involved with the Craft Association of Australia, a professional support organisation for the crafts which had been established earlier in the decade and which provided embroiderers with opportunities to exhibit and teach in a different context to that offered by the Embroiderers’ Guild. The interactions between the embroidery world and the broader craft world that developed around the Craft Association of Australia are the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter 8

‘We … congratulate her on breaking the Craft Association barrier.’
Cynthia Sparks

A fundamental aspect of Becker’s theory of art worlds is the premise that wherever groups of people work cooperatively to create artistic works an art world may develop. Becker’s theory raises the possibility that, rather than accepting the idea of a single monolithic art world, it is possible to identify many different art worlds. On this basis I have suggested that an ‘art world’ developed around the practice of creative embroidery in Sydney in the nineteen sixties, and that this embroidery world co-existed alongside the more established fine art world. In the previous chapter I discussed some of the ways in which creative embroiderers engaged with the fine art community through their attempts to have their work accepted as art. However creative embroiderers did not limit their interactions with other creative practitioners to the fine art community. They also established links with the community of crafts practitioners that developed around the Craft Association of Australia (NSW Branch); these interactions occurring both on an organisational level and on an individual level. In this chapter I discuss the ways in which embroiderers engaged with the crafts community, and also the ways in which crafts practitioners were involved with the creative embroidery world. Before I do so, it is necessary to consider what practitioners in the nineteen sixties meant when they talked about craft and to briefly explain the background history of the Craft Association of Australia.

What is craft?

In the mid nineteen sixties when Margaret Oppen was most actively promoting the view that embroidery could be art, the ‘art/craft debate’ had not yet gained momentum. There is little evidence that the issue was of great significance for most embroiderers at that time. Although the question of whether embroidery was art or craft – or both – was raised on some occasions\(^1\), and although Margaret Oppen occasionally talked about embroidery as a creative craft, there is no extended discussion of craft as such in *The Record*. Intensive discussion of where the boundary lies between art and craft did not develop in Australia until the late seventies when the focus of the quarterly journal *Craft Australia* shifted from straightforward reporting of crafts events to include a greater level of critical discussion. In fact Sue Rowley’s reading of the ‘art/craft debate’ in Australia suggests that it did not really

\(^1\) One instance being the article about Janna Bruce referred to in the previous chapter.
gain momentum until the nineteen eighties. Nevertheless the emergence of professional craft organisations in Australia in the nineteen sixties implies that those involved believed that there was a difference between the kind of work they were engaged in and that which is usually categorised as ‘art’. Much of the contemporaneous writing draws attention to the characteristics people most commonly associate with craft: that craft involves the use of certain kinds of traditional material – clay, metal, stone or fibre, for instance – and not others, like paint; and that it involves the production of useful, rather than use-less, objects. There are obvious flaws in these views of what constitutes craft. For example, sculptors use metal, stone and clay, but produce work which is commonly categorised as art rather than craft, and all art is functional to some degree, since, for example, being an object of contemplation is a function.

One definition of craft, which overcomes these objections and which is consistent with nineteen sixties thinking is offered by the writings of the American metalsmith Bruce Metcalf. Metcalf starts with two premises. The first is that art and craft are not the same thing. Metcalf accepts Arthur Danto’s definition of art as ‘embodied meaning’; something that is not inconsistent with the views of those embroiderers of the nineteen sixties who believed that art had to be based on an idea. In a post-Duchampian world anything potentially can be art, although in order for something to be art it must be accepted as such by an art world. But according to Metcalf, ‘not anything can be craft’. This leads to his second premise: that ‘craft’ requires a physical object. He then identifies four characteristics of craft. Craft is hand made, although that does not preclude the use of some mechanical equipment or power tools. Craft is medium specific, being identified with traditional craft materials and the technologies invented for use with that material. Craft is defined by function: ‘craft disciplines are traditional groupings of functions – jewellery, furniture,
clothing…with irregular boundaries and no direct correspondence to material’. Finally, craft makes reference to its history.

Metcalf goes on to explain that not all of these characteristics must be present in all examples of craft: you can weave with plastic, for example, or develop a new way of manipulating a traditional material. However he argues that you need at least one of these four characteristics to be identifiable in order for something to be categorised as craft. Although Metcalf’s views could be regarded as conservative, his definition is a useful one. The idea that craft must satisfy some, but not all, of his four conditions means that creative embroidery can be categorised as craft, even though the end product of this activity is, generally speaking, not functional. At the same time, Metcalf’s definition doesn’t preclude the view that craft can also ‘embody meaning’, and therefore makes it possible to argue that some objects, including some works of creative embroidery, are both craft and art.

Howard Becker also deals with the question of art and craft, although he indicates from the outset that his goal is to study art activity without engaging in aesthetic judgements. Becker points out that people in art worlds differentiate between the two categories and he uses the distinction art and craft in his analysis of the way in which art worlds change over time. His intention is to further illuminate the way that art worlds work, by drawing attention to flexibility of art worlds. In essence, he is dealing with the issues surrounding what has become known as the art/craft debate: what makes one thing ‘art’ and something else ‘craft’, focusing on the role played by the structures and conventions of the art and craft worlds in establishing and policing the boundaries between the two categories of objects.

This aspect of Becker’s theory could usefully be used as a tool to analyse changing attitudes to stitched textiles in recent years, for instance the changing character of the Tamworth Fibre Biennale as a consequence of its shift from an open to a curated exhibition, or why Narelle Jubelin’s work is accepted as ‘art’ when other forms of figurative canvaswork embroidery are not. However, as it focuses on structures rather than aesthetics Becker’s theory is especially relevant to a discussion of events in Sydney in the late sixties and the early seventies when the emerging professional crafts associations focussed more on obtaining

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7 Ibid.
8 In ‘Replacing the myth of modernism’ Metcalf suggested that craftspeople should either stop trying to make modernist art and return to making objects intended for the home rather than the gallery, or they should stop identifying themselves as craftsmen and become fully engaged in the art world. (p.47)
9 H Becker, *Art worlds*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1982, Chapter 10. Becker states that he is using the terms in an imprecise way; as a folk definition, rather than as if they were ‘scientific or critical concepts’ (p.273).
practical support for the crafts than on theoretical debates about categories. It is the more general theme he is exploring via this discussion that is of relevance to a study of creative embroidery: that rather than there being a single monolithic art world, there are in fact many art worlds and these art worlds do not have clearly defined boundaries. Indeed, according to Becker, art worlds and the boundaries between them are in a state of flux. New art worlds come into being, existing art worlds decline, separate art worlds sometimes merge, and art worlds can also splinter into smaller entities. This aspect of Becker’s theory, the flexible nature of art worlds, helps to explain the changes that occurred in the arts and crafts communities in Sydney in the decades after World War II.

The emergence of a craft world

In the first half of the twentieth century in Sydney many of those who were involved in the arts worked in a range of media and produced work for a variety of different markets and audiences. This can be attributed partly to the ethos of the Arts and Crafts Movement, encapsulated in the philosophies of organisations such as the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, and partly due to economic forces. The market for art in Australia was simply not large enough to enable artists to survive on the proceeds of sales of paintings. If this was the case for relatively well known male painters such as Lloyd Rees, it was even more so for many of the women who were involved in some way with embroidery. Women such as Lucy Dalgarno and Ann Gillmore Rees, as well as better known figures like Thea Proctor, found it necessary to adapt their practice to suit their circumstances at different points in their careers. However, the arts and crafts community began to fragment after the Second World War. According to Cochrane:

the contemporary crafts movement between 1940 and 1963 was not in fact a movement at all but a number of separate threads that were developed in different circumstances, by different sorts of people, with diverse backgrounds and experiences, and with different motivations and expectations.

As Sydney grew and more people became involved in arts and crafts activities, various organisations emerged to satisfy the specific needs of groups of practitioners. The Embroiderers’ Guild was one of these bodies; others included the Handweavers and Spinners Guild of New South Wales, which was formed in 1947, and the Potters Society of New

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10 See Chapter 4 for more on Lucy Dalgarno and Chapter 2 for an overview of Ann Gillmore Rees’ career. Thea Proctor’s career is detailed in A Sayers, The world of Thea Proctor, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra and Craftsman House, St Leonards, 2005.

South Wales, established in 1956. Each of these organisations could be considered to be a small independent art world which displayed the characteristics Becker ascribes to an art world. In many respects the establishment of such organisations was an advantage to their members, providing access to specialised resources, materials and educational opportunities, along with the affirmation of a shared rationale and commonly held set of conventions. However such benefits were accompanied by some disadvantages: the smaller the group, the lower its bargaining power when dealing with galleries and funding bodies.

While this was happening, ideas about craft were also evolving. In the United States, Aileen Osborn Webb set in train the activities that led to the First World Congress of Craftsmen in 1964. This event, which brought together craftspeople from around the world, resulted in the formation of the World Crafts Council. According to Cochrane, it was an invitation to send an Australian representative to the Congress that led, at least in part, to the establishment of an organisation intended to raise the profile of the crafts in Australia. The Craft Association of Australia (NSW Branch) was formed in 1964. Those involved included the potters Marea Gazzard, Col Levy and Les Blakeborough; Mary White, an interior designer who also ran a design school in Sydney; and the architect Neville Gruzman. The goal of the organisation, as described by Marea Gazzard, was ‘to get good people in different fields together so there would be cross fertilisation of stimulation and interest – and more excellent craft would be the result.’ The Craft Association of Australia (NSW Branch) was based in Sydney and, although associations in other states followed, the NSW organisation provided a leadership role until the establishment of a national body, the Crafts Council of Australia, in 1971. At this point it was renamed the Craft Association of NSW.

When talking to people about their involvement in these professional organisations, it is sometimes difficult to identify exactly which body they mean. At one point Cochrane indicates that, after the formation of the Crafts Council of Australia, the name of the Craft Association of Australia (NSW Branch) was changed to the Craft Association of New South

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12 See Cochrane, The crafts movement in Australia: A history, Chapter 3 ‘Beginning Again: 1940-1963’, for a detailed discussion of these years.


Wales, but at a later point she indicates that after the formation of the Crafts Council of Australia, the group in New South Wales was known as the Crafts Council of NSW. The lack of clarity is compounded by the fact that the Craft Association of New South Wales and the Crafts Council of Australia shared premises at different times, and by the fact that many people were involved with both organisations. In this chapter I will refer to the NSW organisation as the Craft Association of NSW in order to avoid confusion.

The community of people that evolved around the Craft Association of NSW and its offspring organisations can also be seen as an art world: a network of organisations and individuals which operated alongside the longer established, more recognized ‘fine art’ world, and which also displayed many of the features which Becker identifies as characteristics of an art world. Because the Craft Association of NSW included those involved in a wide variety of crafts, the conventions that its members shared did not relate to the specific practices involved in making work. Instead the members of this art world had a common commitment to the idea of craft as both a discrete category of objects and an approach to making those objects which, as Dennis Cosley articulated in 1971, involved the ‘workmanship of risk’ at every step. In talking about the workmanship of risk, Cosley was drawing on the work of David Pye, to suggest that it is the craftsperson’s responsiveness to the materials they use and the decisions that they make while working that differentiates craft from manufactured goods. This view is not unlike that articulated by Margaret Oppen in The Record in November the same year. Members of the Craft Association of New South Wales worked cooperatively to organise activities intended to educate people in the crafts, both as audience members and as practitioners, providing a valuable support network and facilitating opportunities for many craftspeople, including embroiderers.

**Independent embroiderers and the Craft Association**

For those embroiderers whose interest in textiles arose independently and who had no formal links with the Embroiderers’ Guild, and those who associated that organisation with domestic embroidery and the maintenance of tradition, joining the Craft Association of NSW would have been a useful way to make connection with kindred spirits. Perhaps the

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17 Cochrane, *The crafts movement in Australia: A history*, p.266.
20 *The Record*, No 117, November 1971, p.9-10. See Chapter 3, pp. 50-51 for an extract from this article.
embroiderer who benefited most from her involvement with the Craft Association was Heather Dorrough. Heather Dorrough describes her connection with the crafts movement as something serendipitous. She was acquainted with Marea Gazzard – both women were married to architects and lived close to one another in Paddington – and it was Gazzard who encouraged to exhibit her work and suggested that she become involved in the crafts organisation. According to Dorrough:

I didn’t know I was doing craft until Marea [Gazzard] told me. When I think about it … the crafts movement adopted me. She was a member of the Craft Association of NSW from 1966, participating in their biennial exhibitions from 1969 until 1979, and serving as President in 1972. When the Crafts Council of Australia was established Heather Dorrough drew on her previous professional experience to design the interior of their premises in King Street Sydney, as well as the exhibitions that were held there. Her work was selected by the Craft Association to represent Australia at the International Craft Exhibition in Stuttgart in 1969 and at the World Crafts Council exhibition in New Zealand in 1970, and she served as a tutor for the Crafts Council of Australia, teaching workshops throughout Australia. The exposure she obtained from her participation in Craft Association exhibitions led to other opportunities. In 1974 her work was included in the Australian Pavilion at Expo ’74 and in 1975 she received a grant from the Crafts Board of the Australia Council, which enabled her to prepare work for her second solo exhibition. By the end of the nineteen seventies, Heather Dorrough had established a career as a highly successful textile craftsperson. It is impossible to know what path Heather Dorrough’s career might have taken if she had not ‘been adopted’ by the crafts movement. Perhaps she would have returned to interior design and built a successful career in that field. What is clear is that her involvement in the craft community played a significant role in the development of her career as a textile artist.

Another embroiderer who ultimately found the Craft Association of NSW a more supportive environment was Diane Hanley. Diane Hanley had studied design at the National Art School, where the only textile process in the curriculum was screenprinting. However she had been exposed to textiles from a young age – her mother was a dressmaker and an embroiderer – and had begun to express her ideas in fabric and thread: ‘I actually dreamed

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21 Conversation with Heather Dorrough, 1 July 2002. Heather Dorrough referred in this conversation to the ‘crafts council’ and a curriculum vitae supplied to the Powerhouse Museum (artist’s file dated November 18, 1983) indicates that she was a member of the Crafts Council from 1966. However the Crafts Council of Australia did not exist until 1971, so it was the Crafts Association of New South Wales that Gazzard encouraged her to join.

my art works in embroidery and in textiles, they were, they were never paintings’.  

Diane Hanley was encouraged to join the Embroiderers’ Guild by Dorothea Allnutt, with whom she taught at Abbotsleigh School. She was actively involved in the Embroiderers’ Guild for several years. She co-ordinated an evening group that met at the Guild’s headquarters, helped with exhibitions, and taught workshops. In January 1976 she was the tutor at the Guild’s summer school. But ultimately she felt that, because her approach was to focus more on design and less on technique, she was not fully accepted. By the mid seventies she discontinued her involvement with the Embroiderers’ Guild and became more involved with the Craft Association of NSW, serving as its president in 1978 and 1979.

The Embroiderers’ Guild and the Craft Association of NSW

As well as attracting individual craftspeople as members, the Craft Association of NSW invited other craft organisations to become affiliated with it. The relationship between The Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW and the Craft Association can be tracked in the Guild’s newsletter, The Record. The first reference to the Craft Association appears in October 1967. It indicates that the Embroiderers’ Guild had been invited to join the Craft Association and that they had made an initial commitment to join for one year. Belonging to the Craft Association of NSW and participating in their activities, especially in the exhibitions they organized, was obviously desirable for those who wanted a higher public profile for creative embroidery. It provided alternative venues to exhibit their work and enabled them to tap into the publicity generated by the Craft Association. However acceptance by the craft world was not automatic.

The membership of the Embroiderers’ Guild included those who designed their own work in a modern style; traditional embroiderers of the highest quality; and also those who were more accurately described as hobbyists – women who enjoyed the process and the products of embroidery, but were happy to follow someone else’s instructions rather than to create original work. Just as there was a disparity between embroiderers’ perceptions of art and the ideals of the fine art community, there was sometimes a mismatch between embroiderers’ own views of their work and the aspirations of those involved in the Craft Association of NSW. When the Embroiderers’ Guild joined the Crafts Association in 1967 it sent a collection of ‘modern work’ for inclusion in a Craft Association exhibition – whoever

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{23} Conversation with Diane Groenewegan on 9 December 2003.} \]

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{24} I discuss a possible reason why she discontinued her association with the Embroiderers’ Guild in Chapter 9.} \]

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{25} The Record, No 76, October 1967, p.3.} \]
undertook the task must have realized that traditional work was not what was required – but this work was rejected. *The Record* reported that:

The Craft Association which we have joined, and which held an exhibition earlier this month in the design centre did not find any of the exhibits offered by the Guild to be suitable for hanging. Our work does not, as yet, fulfil the demand for contemporary design and fit in pleasingly with other forms of art and decoration of the present day.26

This is the first indication of the ambiguous nature of the relationship that existed between the Embroiderers’ Guild and the Crafts Association of NSW.

Australian embroidery had received a positive response from British embroiderers when examples were sent to London for inclusion in Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions and when Lady Hamilton Fairley and Winifred Clayton had visited Australia, so it may have come as a surprise to some people that their work was not considered ‘good enough’ for the Craft Association. However, at that time the work created within the British Embroiderers’ Guild was relatively conservative by comparison with that produced at art schools such as the Glasgow School of Art and Goldsmith’s College. Although Australian embroiderers knew something of the latter, it was the former that they were most familiar with. Their own work may have been comparable with the work produced within the British Guild, but it was a long way – in concept, content and in some cases technique – from the more advanced contemporary work of British art school graduates. Reading between the lines there is a sense that the author of this comment, quite possibly Margaret Oppen, did appreciate the difference and that she wasn’t particularly surprised at the rejection by the Craft Association. In other instances where Margaret Oppen believed that a judgement was unfair she was quick to respond, but in this case the information is presented as a matter of fact statement and there is no attempt to justify the rejected work.

The Guild’s response to this rejection was to address the problem through its educational activities. The same issue of *The Record* contains an article by Cynthia Sparks titled ‘What is Contemporary Embroidery?’ which was, perhaps, a way of promoting thinking and discussion on the topic and in the following months a number of other activities were organized to promote thinking about contemporary design. The summer school in 1968 was taught by Cynthia Sparks and Pat Langford and focused exclusively on modern embroidery, a teacher from the Mary White School of Design gave a lecture on design to a members meeting in March, and investigations began into the possibility of members studying for the City and Guilds in embroidery. Later in 1968 the Guild again sent slides to the Craft Association in the hope that they would be included with slides of Australian craft to be

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26 *The Record*, No 77, November 1967, p.3.
taken by Marea Gazzard to the World Crafts Council meeting in Peru. *The Record* notes that this time some embroidery slides were selected. It would be interesting to know the reasons for the different outcome. Was it that the initial selection was made by someone different? Had the selector’s view of what was potentially acceptable changed in the intervening period? Or was it that changing attitudes and a more adventurous workshop program had led to the production of work that was more in line with the philosophies of the Craft Association? Unfortunately there is insufficient evidence from which to draw any reliable conclusions.

Whatever the reasons, this success was not indicative of a major change in the relationship between the Embroiderers’ Guild organisation and the Craft Association of NSW. Comments in *The Record* suggest a certain level of sensitivity. In April 1970 an article, probably written by Cynthia Sparks, discussed the importance of a professional attitude in their dealings with other professional groups:

> We have to compete with them for attention. I don’t necessarily mean that we compete against them in the shows, although we did so recently in the Craft Association Exhibition in the Design Centre, in which Heather Joynes’ ‘Onions’ was the only successful piece. We were all very delighted at her success and would like to congratulate her on ‘breaking the Craft Association Barrier’. We also have to compete against the word ‘embroidery’ which still conjures up in the average mind the older term ‘fancy work’.

The following month *The Record* reported that the Guild had been mentioned several times in the Craft Association’s own newsletter, concluding that:

> This shows that our work is attracting more interest and is becoming more widely known. Mrs Warren of the Crafts Association notified the guild that if anyone had embroidery to sell it could be offered at a shop to be set up in Berrima.

The comments suggest that the desire to be recognised as part of the contemporary scene was strong, but they also suggest that the Embroiderers’ Guild did not consider its position in the craft world to be entirely secure, that people felt that there were barriers that had to be overcome, and that they also felt that there was a certain prejudice against the term ‘embroidery’.

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27 *The Record*, No 86, October 1968, p.4.
28 *The Record*, No 100, April 1970, pp.7-8. Heather Joynes’ *Onions*, which featured embroidery worked in a variety of threads on commercially printed fabric, had been exhibited in the Craft Association’s exhibition in 1969 and was eventually purchased by the Powerhouse Museum.
There are other indications that creative embroiderers believed that the label attached to their work was in itself a problem. In August 1970 Cynthia Sparks again raised the issue, commenting that:

Instead of the word ‘embroidery’ I wish there were another one we could use that did not still tend to conjure up ‘fancy-work’, and that lent itself more easily to the type of work I am personally interested in. Recent contact with the public at exhibitions has shown that the name embroidery suggests a tedious dullness, far from the lively interest that our creative work inspires.30

The Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Crafts in Australia provides further evidence. Although a significant number of embroiderers participated in that survey and the relevant question allowed for a free response, embroidery does not appear in the list of crafts practised.31 Presumably they were included among those who worked in ‘textiles-fabric’ or in the ‘miscellaneous’ category.

It was reasonable of embroiderers to conclude that there was a problem with the label, but this was certainly not the only reason for the ambivalent response to embroidery from the crafts community. Social position may well have played a part. In the late 1960s and early 1970s involvement in the crafts was often seen as a form of rebellion against middle class conservatism. This view of craft was summarised by Edward Lucie-Smith in 1977:

The crafts … could be thought of as being something which represented a practical form of resistance to the ills of industrialism and the evils of catering for the tastes and indeed the follies of the mass.(sic) …the craftsman himself came to be represented as an ideal, even a heroic figure, living out in practice the values which most people could only half-heartedly aspire to. It was the craftsman’s way of life, even more than his product, which attracted attention.32

This view of the craftsperson can be seen in Fay Bottrell’s The Artist Craftsman in Australia: Aspects of Sensibility (1972), which placed considerable emphasis on this aspect of the selected craftsperson’s lives. In the introduction to the book she wrote:

The working environment of each of these craftsmen-artists in themselves convey life styles or attitudes to living. The works produced are a product of this caring. Without their emotional and intellectual involvements, their materials would remain meaningless.33

31 Committee of Enquiry into the Crafts in Australia. The crafts in Australia : report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Crafts in Australia. Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service, 1975. Table 4D-2, p. 65. See Footnote 8, Chapter 3 for a list of embroiderers known to have participated in the survey.
The majority of the photographs which illustrate the book depict the craftsperson’s living and working space, and in many instances the photograph of the individual appears to have been chosen for the particular image it presented: Mona Hessing is shown wearing dark glasses and a scarf tied rakishly around her head. Patricia Thompson’s *Twelve Australian Craftsmen* (1973) does not place such an overt emphasis on lifestyle, but her text does present the selected craftspeople as stylish individualists. The entry on Mona Hessing opens in the following way:

The critic Elwyn Lynn, writing in the Bulletin in 1969, spoke of Mona Hessing’s ‘intransigent individuality’. He was referring to her work, but the phrase neatly expresses much about Mona herself as well. … she is indifferent to, almost unaware of, the mores of the affluent society and prefers to live in spartan simplicity without the benefit of gadgetry.34

The section on Pru Medlin comments that:

Small and slender, she has pale blond hair which she twists back into a knot, and she wears very interesting clothes and a lot of heavy hand-made rings. She rolls her own cigarettes, very quickly and gracefully…”35

By contrast the creative embroiderers within the Embroiderers’ Guild were, for the most part, middle aged and middle class. By comparison with many of those involved in the Craft Association of NSW they were also relatively conservative – the kind of craftsperson who would be featured in the *Woman’s Day* or the *Women’s Weekly*, but not in Fay Bottrell’s *Aspects of Sensibility* or Patricia Thompson’s *Twelve Australian Craftsmen*. No doubt this different ‘sensibility’ played a role in the gradual loss of momentum of creative embroidery within the craft community from the mid-seventies on. The younger, less conservative embroiderers like Diane Hanley and Nola Taylor who were closely involved with the Craft Association of NSW, began to identify themselves as textile artists, while those who were older and led more conventional lifestyles remained on the margins of the craft world and continued to identify themselves as creative embroiderers.

Another, perhaps more important, factor which contributed to the limited acceptance of embroiderers within the Craft Association of NSW was a lack of knowledge on the part of many of the Embroiderers’ Guild members of current ideas and philosophies of both art and craft. As I have explained, some creative embroiderers did have art training and many of them wanted embroidery to be seen as a viable alternative art form. However, many of the trained artists had received their education considerably earlier in the twentieth century when ideas about art and craft were very different. Their exposure to the ideas and philosophies underpinning recent developments in the crafts was similarly limited. Even Pat Langford,

35 Thompson, *Twelve Australian craftsmen*, p.31.
who was arguably the most familiar of all with contemporary art, had left art school some twenty years earlier and had not yet returned to the United Kingdom to ‘catch up’ on recent developments. Although she subscribed to *Craft Horizons* in the early seventies, her familiarity with that publication appears to have followed rather than preceded her involvement with the Craft Association. The situation with craft was the same as with art. Embroiderers were familiar with the look of recent work, but they were not familiar with the conceptual underpinnings of that work. As a consequence they did not always produce work that was in keeping with the ideology of the Crafts Association.

Nevertheless, some Embroiderers’ Guild members did achieve a place for themselves in the broader craft community, maintaining their association with the Embroiderers’ Guild at the same time that they explored opportunities elsewhere. After Heather Joynes’ success at ‘breaking the Craft Association Barrier’, creative embroidery began to appear more frequently in the Craft Association’s biennial exhibitions. Acceptance into these exhibitions was considered to be quite a coup. According to Heather Joynes, the Craft Association was ‘a body to be reckoned with [and] if you got exhibited it was really good’. In 1973 the Association received an Australia Council grant to fund a souvenir catalogue which provides a valuable visual record of the work that was included. The creative embroidery included work by Ruth Arthur, Heather Joynes, Prue Socha, Jean Vere, Pat Langford and Jeanette Kerr; one of Heather Dorrough’s appliquéd wall hangings was also shown. In 1971 Heather Joynes, Pat Langford and Prue Socha were included in *Craft 70’s* (sic), a joint venture between the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Crafts Council of Australia. This exhibition was shown at the Art Gallery of NSW, before travelling to other venues throughout Australia. Another significant success was the inclusion of *Cascade* by Heather Joynes in *Crafts Australia*, the collection of Australian craft sent to the World Crafts Exhibition in Toronto in 1974. Of the creative embroiderers who emerged from the embroidery community those whose work achieved the most recognition within the craft community were Pat Langford, Heather Joynes and Prue Socha. The work of all three women was acquired by the Powerhouse Museum and embroideries by Pat Langford and Prue Socha were acquired for the Crafts Council of Australia’s collection.

Creative embroiderers were also involved in the Craft Association of NSW in other ways. The extent of their involvement varied, depending on the individual’s personal circumstances and their particular interests. For example, Cynthia Sparks provided administrative help, collating data for the Association’s monthly calendar, while Heather Joynes and Prue Socha served on committees. Heather Joynes recalls that when she was on

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the committee with Heather Dorough, Marea Gazzard and Joy Warren in the early nineteen seventies she was there, in part, to represent the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW. According to Pat Langford, her participation was limited because she was teaching full time but she does remember attending meetings and ‘putting my two pennyworth in, what did I think should happen … it was always the case that I felt the crafts were neglected and embroidery should be part of a full time course in an art school.’

Many of the better known embroiders also taught under the auspices of the Crafts Association and later the Crafts Council of Australia, travelling to rural areas and interstate. Prue Socha taught regularly for the Craft Association, recalling that at one point Fay Bottrell had attended her classes at the Association’s headquarters in King Street. In 1974 Cynthia Sparks returned to New South Wales from England to teach at the summer school at the University of New England and under the auspices of the Crafts Association taught enough workshops to pay for her husband to accompany her on the six week trip. A particular coup was Heather Joynes’ invitation to teach three-dimensional canvaswork embroidery in Canada in 1973. She spent just over three weeks in Vancouver, teaching workshops of various lengths and giving several lectures. Heather received a grant from the Crafts Council of Australia to help cover the cost of the airfare: ‘Jane Burns was so pleased to have somebody going somewhere instead of having them come here’.

Heather Joynes was responsible for two other interesting ventures in the early nineteen seventies. One was a film titled *The Creative Stitch* which was produced by her husband Jack Joynes in 1974. According to Heather Joynes, the idea for the film came to her husband when she was teaching at the summer school at the University of New England. It was a self-funded project, although after it was completed the Craft Association provided $500 which enabled the Creative Embroidery Association, which had been established in November 1973, to acquire the film from Jack Joynes. The Creative Embroidery Association then arranged for its duplication and distribution. Some copies were sold in Australia and others were hired out for a fee of $10, but the greatest sense of satisfaction came when four copies were purchased by Dorothy Allsopp on behalf of the School

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38 Conversation with Prue Socha, 28 April 2003.
Equipment Department of the Greater London Council. Heather was also later involved in the production of a series of four slide kits by Educational Media Australia, a company which produced audiovisual material for use in schools. Each kit dealt with a different group of embroidery stitched – flat stitches, knotted stitches, looped stitches and chain stitches – and contained slides showing how to execute the stitches as well as finished creative embroideries that use those stitches. The finished works included embroideries by Heather Joynes, Pat Langford and Prue Socha, as well as some other members of the Creative Embroidery Association.

Conclusion

The emergence of professional craft organisations in the nineteen sixties, and the accompanying identification of craft as a discrete area of practice, had an impact on the embroidery community in New South Wales. To the Embroiderers’ Guild organisation, the Craft Association of NSW appeared to offer an alternative means by which to promote embroidery. For a time there were formal links between the two organisations: no doubt it benefited the Craft Association to have another organisation affiliated with it and paying membership fees. But ultimately these links were discontinued. In Becker’s terms the two art worlds existed alongside one another, rather than becoming integrated. However individual practitioners did cross the boundaries between them. There were occasions where those who were more closely linked with the crafts community found it beneficial to participate in the embroidery world, as when Heather Dorrough and Fay Bottrell taught workshops for the Embroiderers’ Guild. More often it was creative embroiderers, especially those with professional aspirations, who participated in the opportunities provided by the crafts community. Even so, it must be acknowledged that the benefits went both ways. Individual creative embroiderers gained a great deal from participation in Craft Association exhibitions and from the teaching jobs that followed, but the Craft Association also benefited from a group of teachers who were willing and able to teach for the Association throughout the state.

A more general consequence of the developing view of the crafts as a profession was that greater attention was focused on the status and reputation of individual craftspeople. The aspirations of some embroiderers were being raised at the same time that new opportunities for professional practice were presenting themselves. By the early nineteen seventies a number creative embroiderers, both those who had been working in the medium of embroidery for some time and those who were newly engaged in the pursuit, had began to

think of themselves as professionals rather than amateurs in the field. The complex relationship between amateur and professional practice of embroidery is the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter 9

‘If we had insisted upon special training and complete professionalism we would have had an organisation of about ten people.’

Marea Gazzard

In 1999 Barbara Lee Smith, an American embroiderer known internationally for her writing on embroidery as well as for her own work, wrote an article titled ‘In praise of amateurs’. ¹

In it she responded to the complaints of the British tapestry weaver Marta Rogoyska that all sorts of people without accepted credentials were identifying themselves as artists. Smith’s argument was that, rather than decrying the amateur practitioner, the textile community should welcome the contribution that amateurs make. She was, in effect, repeating Becker’s argument that amateurs play an essential role in ensuring the viability of an art world. However, as with Becker, the underlying assumption of Smith’s article is that there are different levels of practice: that there is a difference between the amateur and the professional, and that there must be some way of differentiating between them.

For those embroiderers with professional aspirations, the relationship between amateurs and professionals takes on particular significance. As Roszika Parker explains in The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine, embroidery has long been regarded as women’s work, and of little consequence. In fact, Parker and Pollock suggest that it is because it is seen as women’s work that embroidery is not considered to be art:

what distinguishes art from craft in the hierarchy is not so much different methods, practices and objects, but … where these things are made, often in the home, and for whom they are made, often for the family… ²

So for the embroiderer who wants their work to be considered as art, or who, at the very least, wants to be seen as a serious, committed practitioner, being linked too closely with amateur, domestic embroidery can be a distinct disadvantage. It is therefore necessary to establish ways of differentiating between amateurs and professionals within the embroidery world.

This chapter discusses status and reputation within the embroidery world in Sydney and the relationships that existed between amateurs and professionals, looking at the issue from two perspectives. First, there are the ways in which the Embroiderers’ Guild organisation itself tried to exercise some control over the status of embroiderers, through its efforts to facilitate the introduction of embroidery courses in higher education and its attempts to develop its

own systems for identifying and accrediting certain embroiderers. Second, there are the ways that individual embroiderers went about establishing themselves as professional practitioners.

**Defining amateurs and professionals**

In the twentieth century the term ‘amateur’ came to be used in a disparaging way, to identify someone as ‘not serious’, a dabbler or a dilettante, as opposed to a professional; but this was not always so. Many of the fields of endeavour now identified as professions – astronomy, archaeology and social work, to name just a few examples – were once the purview of the amateur. Since ‘these endeavours were too new, too little in demand, or too underdeveloped to be pursued as livelihoods’\(^3\), it was only those who earned a living in some other way who could afford to indulge their interest in them. Indeed it could be argued that William Morris himself came to the crafts as an amateur practitioner and only later transformed his interest in design and the crafts into an income producing endeavour. However, as Robert Dessaix explains in his essay ‘Loitering with intent’, while the word dilettante once ‘connoted a serious, disinterested passion for the systematic study and promotion of the arts’, attitudes changed with the emergence of the concept of professionalism, to the point where status and income depended not on knowledge but accredited competence.\(^4\) The categorising of people as amateurs or professionals has become a means of gate keeping, of defending territory against incursions by those considered less qualified to participate in an activity.

In the arts the relationship between amateur and professional practice is not so clear cut, as the familiar terms ‘Sunday painter’ and ‘amateur dramatics’ suggest. This issue is discussed in some detail by Robert Stebbins, who identified a list of attributes that can be used to identify a profession. His list can be summarised as follows:

1. Professionals produce unstandardised products and services;
2. Professionals acquire a specific body of theoretical knowledge and techniques;
3. Professionals share a strong sense of identity with their colleagues;
4. Professionals master a generalised cultural tradition associated with their line of work;
5. Professionals use institutionalised means of formally or consensually validating the adequacy of training and the competency of trained individuals;
6. Professional work constitutes a calling in which the monetary reward derived is secondary to the work itself;


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7. Professionals are recognised for their special authority;
8. Professional services and products provide an avenue for attainment of certain important social values; and
9. Professional work is self-regulated or autonomous.\(^5\)

As Stebbins points out, there are some occupations, especially those in the arts, which satisfy many of these criteria but which have no formal, institutionalised means of validating the training and competency of their participants. Stebbins is attempting a ‘scientific’ definition of professionals, which he can then use to ‘orient the study of amateurism’.\(^6\) According to his theory, amateurism only exists in occupations where people practice as professionals: where there are no professionals, there are no amateurs – only hobbyists. Since his study deals primarily with amateurism in the fields of entertainment and sports, which do not have formal means of accrediting professionals, he finds it necessary to address this paradox. He does so by identifying two categories of professionals: those who provide a service to individuals and those who create a product or perform some kind of ‘work’ that is consumed by the public. According to Stebbins, the latter are not usually interested in their particular pursuit being accepted as ‘a profession’, even if they do regard some people who practice it as professionals, and therefore the criteria dealing with accreditation is not relevant to this particular group. This logic allows Stebbins to categorise some who work in sport and the arts as professionals, and thereby to consider others as amateurs. He notes that there is in fact a direct link between the absence of control mechanisms and the presence of amateurs in certain professions.

While there may be no institutionalised mechanisms by which to identify professionals in the arts, in a fully fledged art world there are various informal means by which to differentiate between amateurs and professionals, and informal structures set in place to maintain the boundaries between the two. While it is possible for someone to migrate from amateur to professional practice, as the career of someone like Rosalie Gascoigne demonstrates, most people ‘know their place’ in the art world hierarchy. By and large Sunday painters do not compete for the same exhibition spaces with professional artists, and amateur performers do not compete for the same audiences as professional actors or musicians. But the relationship takes on a particular significance in the crafts, because the boundaries between amateur and professional practice are even less well defined in the crafts than they are in many other areas of the arts.

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\(^5\) List adapted from Stebbins, *Amateurs, professionals and serious leisure*, p.33.

Inclusiveness was an inherent characteristic of both the crafts community and the embroidery community in Sydney during the nineteen sixties. Marea Gazzard indicated that in its early years the Craft Association of NSW was egalitarian in nature:

We always had this layer of very good professional people involved … [although] we didn’t want to be exclusive and elitist … the whole purpose was to have an intermingling of different categories … if we had insisted upon special training and complete professionalism we would have had an organisation of about ten people…

Similarly when Margaret Oppen established the Embroiderers’ Guild branch in Sydney she needed to appeal to a broad audience, and considerable effort was expended in attracting participants at all levels and in all forms of embroidery. Both organisations needed to be inclusive, in order to ensure that they remained viable. However, an inevitable consequence of mixing amateurs and professionals within the one organisation is a level of ambiguity about who belongs in which category.

It is not surprising that this sometimes resulted in tension. Those involved in the Arts and Crafts Movement in the late nineteenth century had dealt with similar issues. Edward Lucie-Smith points out that the leaders of the Arts and Crafts Movement did not always welcome amateurs: ‘[CR] Ashbee, for example, thought that “collectively the output of the amateur, which is in bulk an output of very second rate work … has absorbed a large part of the craftsman’s market in many directions”’.

Almost one hundred years later, similar comments were being made about the crafts in Australia. In 1975, the (anonymous) author of an article discussing the Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Crafts in Australia, remarked that ‘As a leisure activity the crafts are almost too popular’.

This observation was echoed in 1977 by Ralph Turner, who accompanied an exhibition of British jewellery to Australia and on his return wrote about Australian craft for the British journal *Crafts*. Turner commented that, because of the limited opportunities for training, the crafts in Australia seemed to have developed from an artisan base, with the result that ‘everyone feels that they can take part, looking at or making things, on an equal footing’, something that he considered to be both good and bad.

From the perspective of aspiring professionals, the

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presence of amateurs in the marketplace lowered standards and undercut prices: ‘It’s the people making for love that ruin the market’. 11

In the embroidery community the concern was not all one-sided. Some amateurs thought that ‘the professionals’ made things hard for them. Writing in The Record in 1968, Ness Wansey commented that in the recent Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition the decision to arrange the work according to aesthetic criteria ‘led to some comments from the more discerning that in fairness to the Guild students, it would have been better to keep their work separated from that of the professionals’. 12 It isn’t clear who she was identifying as professionals: perhaps it was work from the British 62 Group that was shown that year, or perhaps it was work from local embroiderers like Pat Langford. Either way, the sub-text was that work by enthusiastic amateurs suffered by comparison with work from ‘professionals’.

Another comment, which hints at the existence of tension between those who aspired to professional status and those who embroidered for pleasure, came from Isabel Craig, who in earlier years was identified as a particularly innovative designer and who embroidered for Marion Hall Best and worked as the interior designer’s assistant. Isabel Craig was someone who at one point could have been categorised as a professional herself, but under the heading ‘A Heretic Writes’, she said:

Well here we are starting a nice new year with nice new ideas and all resolved to do better this year with our embroideries and our designs. We feel we have seen the light! Unfortunately that light burns a bit low at times. We are all going to work our own designs with great skill and cleverness and taste … but the day dawns and the fingers itch and not one idea filters through … So! One falls for a pack! Now my friends, ‘pack’ is a dirty four letter work in the Guild – so one does this work in secret or one brazens it out! … My lights unfortunately are dim and low. I am a heretic writing for heretics … Ever heard of a traitor being drummed out of the regiment? Well watch for it! 13

Interestingly, her letter was followed by a quote from Dr Johnson: ‘Change is not made without inconvenience, even from worse to better’. Given that the editor for that issue of The Record was Gillian Browne, one of those interested in creative embroidery, the quote may have been intended as a subtle comment on the letter.

Isabel Craig was writing from the perspective of someone for whom embroidery was a satisfying hobby or pastime, a pleasurable pursuit with a pleasing end product. Stebbins would not regard embroiderers such as these as amateurs, but rather as hobbyists or dabblers.

13 The Record, No 139, March 1974, p.6.
Generally speaking, this kind of embroiderer was not interested in creative embroidery: an interest in creative embroidery generally indicated a commitment beyond that of the ‘dabbler’. In the embroidery world there was – and still is – a large group of practitioners who approached their craft from a much more serious perspective than that of the hobbyist, but who did not necessarily aspire to professional status. Stebbin’s concept of ‘serious leisure’ offers a useful way of thinking about this particular group of embroiderers. He provides a list of qualities that he believes differentiate ‘serious’ from ‘casual’ leisure. These include:

1. persistence or perseverance when difficulties arise;
2. the tendency for some people to have ‘careers’ in their endeavours;
3. the expenditure of effort in order to acquire knowledge, training and skill in the chosen pursuit;
4. the acquiring of ‘durable benefits’ such as self-actualisation and a sense of belonging from the pursuit,
5. the development of a unique ethos around the pursuit; and
6. the tendency to identify strongly with the particular pursuit.14

These qualities can be identified in many of the creative embroiderers who were working in the early nineteen seventies – women like Jean Vere and Dorothy Gandevia who had had careers in other areas, who invested time and energy into developing their technical and design skills, who took advantage of opportunities to exhibit their work and who identified themselves as creative embroiderers, but who did not aspire to professional status. In Stebbin’s terms these were ‘serious amateurs’. But although the hobbyists and the serious amateurs made up the bulk of the embroidery community, there was also a belief that in order to raise the status of embroidery it was necessary that some individuals be acknowledged as operating as professionals.

Writers in the crafts have proposed many different ways of categorising craftspeople. Some have attempted to establish empirical criteria that can be used to determine the status of an individual practitioner. Despite Stebbins’ view that those in the arts aren’t interested in accreditation, the completion of a recognised course of education and training is considered by many to be a prerequisite for professional status – as Marta Rogoyska’s comment suggests. Alex Bruce has suggested that there are three categories of professional crafts practitioners, allocating people according to the income they earned from their craft: full-time, part-time or semi-professional, the latter described as being more serious than a hobbyist but pursuing their craft primarily for its intrinsic rewards rather than for financial

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14 List adapted from Stebbins, *Amateurs, professionals and serious leisure*, pp. 6-7.
gain.\textsuperscript{15} Bruce’s semi-professionals are Stebbins’ serious amateurs. Bruce did not mention hobbyists, although by implication they are the ‘other’ to his professionals. Barbara Lee Smith’s view that it is the commitment of time – ‘art as a profession, involves full-time, 40-plus hours a week work that is connected to fiber (sic) in some way’\textsuperscript{16} – that marks out a professional could also be considered an empirical measure. It is what Stebbins refers to as the ‘common sense view of a professional’: someone who spends the majority of their working hours involved in their particular profession.\textsuperscript{17}

Others have suggested more subjective measures. David Williams developed categories based upon the reasons why people pursued a craft: self expression, ideology, economic reward, personal interest, or therapy.\textsuperscript{18} But for craftspeople, as for many artists, one of the most common ways of identifying someone as a professional is through their exhibition record. This point was made in Michal McCall’s study of female artists in which she explained how, for the women she interviewed, the prestige of the venues in which an artist exhibited determined whether or not that artist was considered to be ‘serious’. Some women preferred to exhibit in venues that did not actually produce sales for them, rather than in venues that did result in sales – if the former were considered more prestigious than the latter.\textsuperscript{19} A similar comment was made recently during an online forum run by Craft Australia, when Beth Hatton pointed out that the criteria used by Craft Australia to allocate their ‘Craftmark’ included ‘the exhibiting of works (in well regarded galleries) and the placement of work for sale (in accredited galleries)’.\textsuperscript{20}

Both empirical and subjective ways of differentiating between amateurs and professionals were used within the embroidery community in New South Wales between 1960 and 1975. The Embroiderers’ Guild organisation focussed on more formal and empirical strategies, through its efforts to have embroidery introduced into tertiary education and an attempt to develop its own accreditation system. By contrast, individual embroiderers who aspired to professional status took a less formal route, developing exhibition records as a way of attesting to their serious intent.

\textsuperscript{16} Smith, ‘In praise of amateurs’, p.7.
\textsuperscript{17} Stebbins, \textit{Amateurs, professionals and serious leisure}, p.21.
Training and accrediting embroiderers

Although in the visual arts and crafts there is no formal accreditation system and it is possible for individuals without any formal training to become fully fledged professionals, education is one of the devices frequently used to differentiate between amateur and professional practitioners. This point appears not to have escaped the attention of embroiderers. In the early years of the Embroiderers’ Guild, whenever a profile of a tutor or other significant person within the organisation was published, emphasis was placed on that person’s qualifications as a means of reinforcing their suitability for the roles that they filled. An early profile on June Scott Stevenson drew attention to her training at Edinburgh School of Art and the Royal School of Needlework, while much was made of Margaret Oppen’s studies at the Julian Ashton School of Art in Sydney and her training at the Slade School in London. Pat Langford’s studies at Plymouth School of Art and Goldsmiths College were also frequently emphasised.21 It is not surprising, therefore, that a key concern was to provide opportunities for local embroiderers to attain formal qualifications in embroidery. Although the long term goal was to see embroidery introduced into tertiary education in Australia, in the short term an alternative possibility was explored: the enrolment of candidates as correspondence students in a British program.

City and Guilds qualifications

The Embroiderers’ Guild in London offered a range of education programs and initially one of these was considered as a possibility. In early 1968 the Record reported that ‘the [Sydney] Guild was arranging to have two members enrolled in a Diploma course by correspondence with the London Guild’.22 Heather Joynes and Ann-Marie Bakewell were identified as the intended candidates. The following month a correction was printed. Cynthia Sparks explained that the London Guild did not offer a diploma course, but that it awarded certificates to candidates who submitted work of an appropriate standard and it also offered correspondence courses for beginners.23 Ultimately it was decided not to pursue this avenue but instead to enrol students in the City and Guilds embroidery course. There is no obvious explanation for this decision, although it is possible that the time taken to complete the London Guild’s certificates was a deterrent. Certificates were offered in nine areas of

21 Interestingly, although Pat Langford spent seven years as a full-time and part-time student at Plymouth College of Art, she did not hold the National Diploma of Design qualification, a fact that was not widely known in the embroidery world. Her only formal qualifications were City and Guilds Stages 1 and 2.
22 The Record, No 79, March 1968, p.3.
23 The Record, No 80, April 1968, pp.8-10.
embroidery and only if candidates managed to successfully complete seven of these certificates over a period of five years were they eligible to be awarded a ‘Gold Thimble’. The City and Guilds program could be completed much more quickly.

Although Pat Langford had acquired City and Guilds qualifications prior to migrating to Australia it appears that the catalyst for the venture was Cynthia Sparks, since the issue was not raised until after her arrival in Sydney. As she had been actively involved in contemporary embroidery circles in England she would have been able to provide up-to-date information about what was available, enabling the Embroiderers’ Guild committee to make an informed decision about how to proceed. There is some ambiguity about the exact dates that the candidates in Sydney began the course, but in 1970, Heather Joynes and Prue Socha were the first students to sit the City and Guilds final examinations. Both recall that it was a challenging process. They had been provided with a syllabus, which outlined what they were required to produce but provided very little detail. According to Heather Joynes they ‘had to produce a notebook of work with as many techniques as possible’ and ‘two major works, one of which had to incorporate several techniques in a harmonious whole’.  

These were posted to London for assessment. They also sat the same formal examinations as students in the United Kingdom, invigilated by the Sydney Technical College: a three hour design paper, a three hour theory paper, and a six hour practical paper. In 1971, Ann-Marie Bakewell and Fay Patterson also successfully completed the course. The following year Robin Jeffcoat and Audrey Bernays from Wollongong were awarded certificates.

In 1987 Prue Socha recalled that when she and Heather attended their exams, the young male invigilator asked ‘what are you doing this for?’, to which they replied ‘we’ve no idea, we think we’ll go home!’ Heather Joynes said that it was Margaret Oppen who first raised the possibility with her and who actively encouraged her, Prue Socha and Ann-Marie Bakewell to undertake the program. Apparently the Embroiderers’ Guild covered at least some of the fees involved, the intention being that, if successful, the women would subsequently teach for the Embroiderer’s Guild. Although the records are sketchy on the matter of whose fees were paid by the Embroiderers’ Guild it seems that Heather Joynes, Prue Socha and, possibly, Ann-Marie Bakewell were sponsored by the Guild, while Audrey Bernays and Robin Jeffcoat paid their own fees. There is no evidence one way or the other about Fay Patterson, who appears to have disappeared from the embroidery scene soon after.

25 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Prue Socha, 6 April, 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
26 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Prue Socha, 6 April, 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
The City and Guilds qualification was considered suitable preparation for a teaching role and a qualification that conferred some status on the holder. By the time they sat their exams, Heather Joynes, Prue Socha and Ann-Marie Bakewell were already teaching for the Embroiderers’ Guild. Heather Joynes and Prue Socha had taken over Cynthia Sparks’ classes in early 1970, while Ann-Marie Bakewell had been co-ordinating an evening group for several years. All continued to teach for the Embroiderers’ Guild for many years as well as for other organisations, including the Craft Association of NSW and, later, the Crafts Council. Robin Jeffcoat and Audrey Bernays were both based in Wollongong and therefore not as involved in activities at the Embroiderers’ Guild headquarters. However in 1974 when the demand for the newly introduced correspondence course in creative embroidery became overwhelming, Audrey Bernays was recruited to oversee a second group of assessors. Presumably her City and Guilds qualification was considered appropriate training for this task. The City and Guilds venture was successful both from the point of view of the Embroiderers’ Guild organisation and for the individuals involved, but only a small number of people were able to complete the program before the London Institute stopped making it available by correspondence, effectively cutting off what, at the time, was the only way of attaining a recognised qualification in embroidery. This presented a problem, so in the early seventies the Embroiderers’ Guild became increasingly involved in lobbying to have embroidery offered at the tertiary level in New South Wales.

**Embroidery at the tertiary level**

One of the reasons often identified as contributing to the success of British embroidery is that in Britain embroidery is taught within art schools, leading to a higher standard of work, both technically and conceptually, and a greater acceptance of embroidery as an art form. Cynthia Sparks made a comment to this effect in *The Record* in 1970.27 Tertiary education in embroidery also ensures an ongoing supply of suitably qualified teachers, something that clearly was a matter of concern for Margaret Oppen. In Victoria, Marion Fletcher had begun teaching an embroidery class at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology around 1953.28 However in New South Wales there was no comparable course of study available. Embroidery occupied a very minor part of the course offered by the School of Fashion in the New South Wales technical education system. When, in late 1960, the technical college considered introducing a course in embroidery it looked to the Embroiderers’ Guild to

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supply a suitable teacher. In art courses, embroidery did not appear at all. According to Fay Bottrell her involvement in textiles came about by chance. She and Mona Hessing discovered a lot of old looms at East Sydney Technical College and taught themselves how to use them. Their interest in textiles proceeded from there. Similarly, Diane Groenewegen explained that it was screen printing which provided a link between her art school training and her long standing interest in textiles and embroidery, since embroidery was not offered in the course.

While Margaret Oppen had surprisingly little to say about embroidery in tertiary education, there is enough evidence to suggest that one of her aims was to see a course in embroidery offered within the tertiary education system in New South Wales. Pat Langford spoke on several occasions of her surprise that embroidery was not taught in art schools in Australia and of her efforts to raise this issue at meetings of the Crafts Association and similar organisations. Since she and Margaret Oppen were close friends throughout the nineteen sixties, with similar attitudes and ideas about art and embroidery, it is not unreasonable to assume that they held similar views about the importance of embroidery education at a tertiary level.

Anne Baker suggested in 1980 that the summer schools that were introduced at Armidale in 1969 may have been seen as a way of introducing embroidery at a tertiary level. However, it was not until the visit of Hannah Frew in 1970 that there was any significant interaction between the Embroiderers’ Guild and tertiary art schools on the question of embroidery education. During her three month stay in Australia, Hannah Frew visited Newcastle where, as well as conducting workshops, she gave lectures to students at the Newcastle Teachers College and the National Art School. Following her visit discussions occurred between the Guild and the National Art School. According to The Record:

Approaches have begun to have embroidery included in the established courses of the National Art School, both here and in Newcastle (Mr Ware, Head of the N.N.A.S. referred to

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29 Minutes of the Embroiderers’ Guild committee, 14 September 1960; Minutes of the Embroiderers’ Guild committee, 7 October 1960.
30 Phone conversation with Fahy Bottrell, 23 February 2004.
32 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Pat Langford, 15 April 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive; also conversation with Pat Langford 25 November 2002.
33 Transcript of interview between Dr Ann Ross and Anne Baker, 18th March 1987, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
the visit of Hannah Frew and also the inspiration given by the film the Growing Art of Embroidery).\textsuperscript{34}

In the following year Mr Ware was invited to open the Newcastle Branch exhibition and in his speech he once again referred to the work of Hannah Frew:

Mr Ware … paid tribute to Hannah Frew saying he had been intrigued by her work. She had stimulated great interest especially in regard to church hangings. He added ‘I’m sure some of this work will be coming from the Art School as a result of this inspiration.'\textsuperscript{35}

At the time of writing it has proved impossible to discover exactly when fibre was introduced at the Newcastle College of Advanced Education, into which the art school was incorporated. According to the Williams report produced in 1978, Newcastle was not one of those institutions that offered textiles or fibre\textsuperscript{36}, although by 1982 when Brett Alexander, now a lecturer at Newcastle University, enrolled as an undergraduate student, fibre was being taught and Jutta Feddersen was on the staff. Brett Alexander’s understanding is that it was introduced by a woman called Dawn Burston, but he does not know when; nor does he know anything about Dawn Burston’s background.\textsuperscript{37}

In 1973, the Embroiderers’ Guild also had some contact with Goulburn Teachers College where, according to \textit{The Record}, Barbara Osmond was introducing a three year textile course which incorporated weaving, spinning and embroidery.\textsuperscript{38} The syllabus provided in the 1972-73 \textit{Teachers College Calendar} indicates that Barbara Osmond was teaching contemporary approaches to embroidery; she was using Constance Howard’s \textit{Inspiration for Embroidery} and Kathleen Whyte’s \textit{Design in Embroidery} as textbooks. Perhaps the Embroiderers’ Guild thought this course offered potential as a way of training embroiderers to a professional level. However, at the time the textile course was a component of the primary teaching course offered at the Goulburn Teachers College, rather than an independent course, and therefore access to it was limited.\textsuperscript{39}

By 1975 frustration with the lack of educational opportunities in embroidery was being openly expressed. In a report to Embroiderers’ Guild members, Jeanette Kerr wrote:

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{The Record}, No 116, October 1971, p.11.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{The Record}, No 122. June 1972, p.12.
\textsuperscript{36} D Williams, \textit{Craft education and training in Australia. A report to the Crafts Board of the Australia Council}, Arts Information Program of the Australia Council, North Sydney, 1978
\textsuperscript{37} All my attempts to find out more by contacting various departments of the University of Newcastle, including the University archives, have been unsuccessful.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{The Record}, No 137, November 1973, pp.8-9.
\textsuperscript{39} A separate diploma course in textiles was introduced when the college became a College of Advanced Education in 1975.
In NSW our Guild is the only centre for Embroidery knowledge and teaching. The small amount of Embroidery teaching in the Teachers College courses for school Craft teachers is obviously inadequate – proved by the number of teachers who attend our schools and classes.  

Rather than the Embroiderers’ Guild being able to look to tertiary institutions for trained teachers, people were still looking to the Guild for training. As late as the mid 1980s, technical college teachers in New South Wales were enrolling in the correspondence course in creative embroidery to upgrade their skills in embroidery, and the proficiency certificate introduced by the Embroiderers’ Guild in 1980 was accepted by the Department of Technical and Further Education as an appropriate qualification for teachers of the Creative Needlecraft certificate.  

In August 1975, in an article that also reported the death of Margaret Oppen, Jeanette Kerr wrote:

We are writing to both [the Crafts Board of the Australia Council and the Minister for Recreation and Culture] again to express our views that Crafts Board finances would be well spent establishing Craft Teacher/training establishments, at the tertiary level Design, colour, then chanelling (sic) to the various crafts, especially including Embroidery, with which we could assist. Correspondence has also been sent to the Design School being established on the Macquarie University campus and the Alexander Mackie School endeavouring to have embroidery included in their syllabus.  

What the Guild wanted was for embroidery to be taught at a tertiary level in NSW. In the fifteen years between 1960 and 1975 Margaret Oppen used her own connections and the force of her personality to raise the profile of embroidery in educational quarters. The schools competition, the exhibitions in the Education Department Gallery, the Guild summer schools and the in-service training course taught by Embroiders’ Guild members to high school teachers all served to increase interest in embroidery at the school level. But the one objective that was not achieved was a place in New South Wales where interested students could pursue further education in embroidery, a point Dorothea Allnutt drew specific
attention to in her report to the Australia Council after her trip to the United Kingdom in 1974.43

In 1975 major changes occurred in the tertiary education sector in Australia, resulting in the establishment of colleges of advanced education, many of which offered training in the arts. However, rather than teaching embroidery, which was what Margaret Oppen and the Embroiderers’ Guild desired, these institutions introduced more generic textile programs, such as that offered in the School of Art at Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education where both Heather Dorough and Fay Bottrell were employed as lecturers. When Diane Hanley enrolled at Alexander Mackie to upgrade her East Sydney Technical College Diploma to a formal teaching qualification she was able to produce some of her work in textiles – but the specific skills she used were not ones she learnt at the college, they were skills she had acquired elsewhere.

**Guild accreditation of embroidery teachers**

At the same time that embroiderers were studying for the City and Guilds qualification, there were ongoing discussions about the Embroiderers’ Guild itself offering some sort of formal educational program. In 1968 an anonymous letter published in *The Record* canvassed the idea:

> ...I cannot help feeling it is high time we in this country graduated ourselves, to setting our own standard of excellence, and offering our own certificates. The Embroiderers’ Guild of N.S.W. might well be the first to start in a simple way, to construct a framework by which to train teachers of the future, with the **aim** of issuing elementary certificates in types of embroidery, the **object** to provide instructors in disciplined stitching for beginners, for the reason that the Guild is expanding so rapidly that we have barely enough to offer as it is.

> …We have many fine exponents of, and specialists in certain classes of embroidery, who lack the confidence which official approval and vested authority would give them to instruct groups of learners. We also have enough skilled and knowledgeable members to form a board of examiners to approve the issue of certificates... (emphasis in original)44

The letter generated further discussion, with correspondents in general agreement with the idea – although it was some time before anything came to pass. Eventually it was decided that rather than an educational program which culminated in the issuing of certificates of achievement, the Guild would award teaching certificates to those they deemed of a suitable standard to teach.

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43 Report submitted to the Director, Crafts Board, Australia Council for the Arts by Dorothea Allnutt, Australia Council File No 73/369.

44 *The Record*, No 81, May 1968, p.11
The idea of a graded system of certification of teachers may have come from Barbara Osmond. In August 1973 she wrote a lengthy letter to Diana Pockley outlining her ideas on the matter. 45 The scheme she proposed involved an ‘A-level’ certificate being awarded to those with formal qualifications in embroidery and some teaching expertise, and ‘B- and C-level’ certificates being awarded to those who had accumulated a certain number of certificates of expertise in individual types of embroidery. The proposal was not unlike the system of certification offered by the Embroiderers’ Guild in London and previously rejected as being unworkable. Ultimately the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW introduced a modified version of the scheme proposed by Barbara Osmond. It proved to be an extremely contentious move.

Interested embroiderers had to apply for accreditation and to attend an interview at the Embroiderers’ Guild’s headquarters. Neither Prue Socha nor Heather Joynes felt that this should be necessary since they now had their City and Guilds qualifications and were already teaching within the Embroiderers’ Guild and beyond. They refused to attend the interviews with the committee set up to oversee the process. In the end in 1974 Dorothea Allnutt, Audrey Bernays, Merle Glover, Robin Jeffcoat, Pat Langford were all awarded Teacher’s Certificates. Certificates were also sent to Prue Socha, Heather Joynes and Ann-Marie Bakewell, despite their unwillingness to participate in formal process the Embroiderers’ Guild had established. 46 However, some applicants who did confirm to the procedures that that been set in place were awarded a lesser Instructor’s Certificate, which enabled them to teach design but not embroidery.

In retrospect this could be considered an error of judgement. There was a period in the early 1970s when the crafts in general were flourishing and links were being established between the Embroiderers’ Guild and the broader craft community. For a time it seemed as if Margaret Oppen’s goals were being fulfilled. However, the decision taken in late 1974 to run with a two tiered certification system discouraged several of the Guild’s younger members who ultimately looked elsewhere for opportunities and professional recognition. Diane Hanley is one who springs to mind. 47 Her credentials were as good as most of those who were accredited as Guild teachers, and better than some. She was a graduate of the

45 Letter from Barbara Osmond to Diana Pockley, dated 28 August 1973, Embroiderers’ Guild archive.
46 The Record, No 148, December 1974, p.2. The Record does not elaborate on the background story. The details of this are revealed in a series of uncatalogued documents contained in a box in the Guild archive, and were confirmed by informal conversations with Heather Joynes and Prue Socha.
47 My thoughts on this issue are based on an ‘off the record’ conversation with Dianne Groenewegen (formerly Diane Hanley), 9 December 2003.
National Art School, had been producing embroideries since the early sixties, and had taught in the art department at Abbotsleigh in the late sixties. She had taken over as the convenor of the evening group that met in the city and was responsible for popular and innovative inclusions in some of the Guild’s major exhibitions. Despite this impressive background, she was one of those awarded an Instructor’s Certificate rather than a Teacher’s Certificate. Eventually Diane Hanley became more involved in the Crafts Council and discontinued her association with the Guild, although not her involvement in textiles and embroidery. Another was Nola Taylor, who had studied commercial art in Brisbane before becoming involved in embroidery. She was also awarded an Instructor’s Certificate rather than a Teachers Certificate and she too eventually parted company with the Embroiderers’ Guild and became involved with the Women’s Art Movement and in working as a community artist in western Sydney.48

Although formal training was used as a means of ascribing status to some embroiderers and City and Guilds qualifications opened doors for others, the failure to establish local educational opportunities and the ill-fated attempt to develop institutionalised accreditation processes means that the Embroiderers’ Guild’s efforts in the early nineteen seventies to have embroiderers and embroidery attain professional status through training and accreditation cannot be considered successful. Instead, where embroidery did manage to achieve a level of recognition as a form of professional craft practice it was through the endeavours of individuals, and involved the application of many of the same kinds of criteria as are used in other areas of the visual arts.

**The sale of embroidery**

Although earning a living is one of the criteria often used as a measure of professionalism, it is one which has distinct limitations when applied to the crafts and is even more rarely applicable in the embroidery field. In Chapter Seven, I briefly discussed the difficulties of earning a living through embroidery, extrapolating from sales records from one of Pat Langford’s exhibitions. In the mid-sixties an article on charges for embroidery quoted Margaret Oppen on the topic: ‘[she] says that she has tried to make a living through embroidery (as an experiment) and has not found it practical: for, working as fast as she possibly could, she still fell short of a reasonable return.’49

49 *The Record*, No 62, June 1966, p.3.
Further evidence is provided by the report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Crafts in Australia, published in 1975. The report does not single out embroiderers as a group but it does provide evidence that working in textiles was not a profitable pursuit:

The central problem for the craftsman is that, despite a great and growing demand for craft goods it is still extremely difficult for him to make a living simply from the sale of his products. Some potters and jewellers were able to do so by working far beyond normal working hours, but textile workers, spinners and weavers were unable to, no matter how hard they worked.\(^{50}\)

The statistical information provided in the report supports this assertion. People working in textiles formed the majority of those earning little or no income from their craft, and were minimally represented in the highest income category. Embroiderers, of necessity, must seek financial support from other sources.

However, as Becker explains, although it can be liberating for an artist not to be constrained by the expectations of the distribution system, there are disadvantages to being a self-supported artist: ‘People who use alternative [distribution] systems created for those rejected by the regular system … may mark themselves as non-serious'\(^{51}\) – or as what Stebbins categorises as hobbyists or ‘mere dabblers'.\(^{52}\) For women working in a genre traditionally associated with domestic or hobby production, this is a significant risk. Therefore, even though it was not possible to earn a viable income from embroidery, being willing to engage in the sale of work was one of the ways that aspiring professionals could differentiate themselves from amateur embroiderers.

There were a few embroiderers selling work very early in the nineteen sixties. Margaret Keggin placed her work in a store called Scandinavia House in Double Bay on a sale or return basis and remembers selling around twenty panels between 1960 and 1963, the most expensive of which was 15 guineas.\(^{53}\) Scandinavia House was run by Axel von Rappe who was one of the members of the steering committee responsible for the formation of the Crafts Association of Australia.\(^{54}\) For others, like Pat Langford and Heather Dorrough, sales were an anticipated outcome of involvement in solo exhibitions. Pat Langford recalled her satisfaction when some of the work in her 1961 exhibition at Chatterton’s Gallery was sold:


\(^{51}\) Becker, *Art worlds*, p.97.

\(^{52}\) Stebbins, *Amateurs, professionals and serious leisure*, Chapter 3.

\(^{53}\) Letter from Margaret Keggin, 27 July 2004.

'it was a lovely feeling. And of course some of the ladies at the Guild would have bought as well. I expect Margaret [Oppen] bought something.' But these embroiderers were the exception. At this early stage most of those involved in creative embroidery should be categorised as amateurs; it was not until late in the 1960s that the idea of selling work or of considering embroidery as a profession began to spread.

The change in attitudes towards the sale of work in the creative embroidery community can be traced by examining the catalogues from Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions. The catalogue for the 1966 exhibition reveals that only a small number of works had prices listed. Some others were clearly labelled ‘not for sale’, but in most cases there was no notation at all. In 1968 the catalogue included a note that most of the exhibits were lent by their owners and not for sale, but directed enquiries about ‘the few works for sale’ to Heather Joynes. This suggests that, although they may have enjoyed the public recognition of their work, for most of the exhibitors in the mid-sixties the question of selling simply did not arise.

By 1972 this had changed. The May issue of The Record commented with some satisfaction on the sale of embroideries that had been produced in the summer school that year and noted that Jean Vere had been commissioned by a firm of architects to produce another, while the catalogue for the Guild exhibition held in July that year listed prices for about half of the contemporary exhibits. It is also possible that in that year some of the works identified as being ‘not for sale’ were being kept for future exhibitions in commercial galleries, since Prue Socha and Pat Langford, who both had some had items listed as not for sale, were to hold an exhibition at the Divola Galleries the following year, and Heather Joynes had also been discussing the possibility of a joint exhibition of embroidered clothing with Heather Dorrough. Given the commonly held view that links professionalism with the earning of income, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the increasing number of embroideries available for purchase is an indication that embroiderers were beginning to regard themselves as professionals or to harbour aspirations in that regard.

Exhibiting as professionals

In the arts, exhibitions are a significant way in which an individual’s professionalism is measured and are one of the ways that people develop and shape their careers. In this process, not all exhibitions are equal. Exhibitions which are open to anyone who is

56 The majority of these were works by Pat Langford who arrived in Sydney in 1960 with experience in exhibiting and selling her work – at that stage mostly painting.
57 Conversation with Heather Joynes, 27 November 2002
interested and where most or all of the work that is submitted is hung, are generally regarded as low-status exhibitions. In the mid-sixties to late sixties when there were few other opportunities available, the Embroiderers’ Guild open exhibitions served a useful function. A number of other textile practitioners who were not directly involved with the Embroiderers’ Guild participated also participated in its exhibitions during the nineteen sixties, including several, like Jutta Feddersen and Heather Dorrough, who went on to establish significant careers in textiles. However, in terms of establishing professional status these open exhibitions, which included embroidery for domestic purposes, rate lowly. For those with serious aspirations, Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions have little currency and for some may even be considered a negative. As Parker and Pollock point out, ‘any association with the traditions and practices of needlework and domestic art can be dangerous for an artist, especially when that artist is a woman.’

Neither Heather Dorrough nor Jutta Fedderson make mention of the Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions in their curriculum vitae, and even those more closely affiliated with the Embroiderers’ Guild organisation make limited use of these exhibitions in theirs. In the catalogue of a joint exhibition of work by Pat Langford and Prue Socha at the Art of Man Gallery in 1978, Prue Socha indicated that she had ‘exhibited with the Embroiderers’ Guild throughout Australia and New Zealand’. Pat Langford, who had a more significant exhibition record, mentioned only her solo displays at the Embroiderers’ Guild headquarters.

**Selected exhibitions**

Selected or curated exhibitions are more highly regarded, with the level of prestige varying according to the sponsoring body, the reputation of those choosing the work and, in the case of selected exhibitions, the level of competition involved. A selected exhibition which attracts many entries for a small number of places is more prestigious than one where a large proportion of the submitted work is hung. Until the establishment of the Tamworth Fibre Exhibition in late 1975, the exhibitions organised by the Craft Association of NSW, later the Crafts Council of Australia, were the only selected exhibitions available to embroiderers, and to be included was regarded as a measure of professional acceptance. According to Grace

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60 See the comment by Heather Joynes in Chapter 8.
Cochrane embroidery was included in the first exhibition, which was held in 1967. However, Cochrane provides no specific details, and in the absence of a catalogue it is only possible to speculate what the embroidery was. The Embroiderers’ Guild had submitted work but none was chosen. Possibly it was work by Heather Dorrough, who exhibited in every Crafts Association exhibition – although at this point she was still making large appliquéd wall hangings which were not usually described as embroidery. As I explained in chapter 8, it took some time for creative embroiderers who had emerged from within the Embroiderers’ Guild to achieve success in the selected exhibitions organised by the Craft Association of NSW. Nevertheless, their willingness to engage in the process suggests that they understood the value of these exhibitions in building a professional profile, even if it sometimes resulted in rejection.

**Solo exhibitions**

Solo exhibitions are another measure of professional status, regarded as evidence of serious commitment to arts and craft practice. However, this way of denoting professionalism presents particular challenges for embroiderers. The first challenge is to assemble sufficient work to fill a solo exhibition. This requires a sustained effort for an artist in any medium, but is all the more difficult when the process is as time intensive as embroidery can be and especially if the maker is employed full-time in another job. The second difficulty is to find a place in which to hold an exhibition, and in the early nineteen sixties there were few venues available. Not surprisingly between 1960 and 1975, only a small number of embroiderers tackled the challenges.

In an essay published in 1999, Joan Kerr drew attention to the fact that successive exhibitions of women’s work in Australia have been claimed to be ‘the first’, even in instances where the claimant was clearly aware of earlier exhibitions. One must, therefore, be careful of making claims that cannot be substantiated. However on the basis of available evidence the first solo exhibition of embroideries in a commercial gallery in NSW does appear to have been Pat Langford’s exhibition at the Chatterton Gallery in 1961. This was also the first time she exhibited embroideries in a gallery context, although she had exhibited paintings in England prior to her arrival in Australia. In 2002 Pat Langford commented on the importance of that exhibition to her embroidery career: ‘it’s from that exhibition, this is the start of my life, where it’s my embroidery that gets me everything’. Pat Langford did

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not exhibit again in a commercial gallery until 1973, but during the sixties she had several solo exhibitions of her work in the Embroiderers’ Guild rooms in Sydney. She believed that exhibiting was a necessary aspect of professional arts practice, noting that when she went to teach at Ravenswood School in 1965 there was an expectation that ‘as a professional person’ she would be involved in exhibiting. It is perhaps a little surprising that she chose the Embroiderers’ Guild as a venue, since it was not an especially prestigious one. The arrangement with the Chatterton Gallery had been facilitated by Margaret Oppen, but during the nineteen sixties the gallery scene in Sydney was changing rapidly so perhaps Margaret Oppen’s contacts were no longer useful in this regard. Or since Pat Langford was juggling a full time teaching position, the demands of family life, and teaching for the Embroiderers’ Guild, as well as maintaining her own embroidery practice, it may simply have been a matter of taking the opportunities where she found them. Whatever the reason for the choice of venue, she saw these exhibitions as another way of demonstrating that she was working as a professional in her chosen medium.

Heather Dorrough was the next person to have a solo exhibition of embroidery, or what might be more accurately called stitched textiles, in a commercial gallery in Sydney. Although she had studied textiles as part of her National Diploma of Design course at Eastbourne College of Art in England, her subsequent training at the Royal College of Art was in interior design and she had worked professionally in that field in London, New York and Sydney. According to Heather Dorrough, she fell into working with textiles when she used textile samples left over from her interior design work to create a panel to cover a door in the family home. The piece attracted attention from friends and business acquaintances, she was asked to make more, and eventually Dennis Cosley, an arts administrator in Sydney, suggested an exhibition. The exhibition at the Darlinghurst Galleries in late 1965 was to have a profound effect on her career. Heather Dorrough believed that it established her as an exhibiting artist and led to the many opportunities detailed in the previous chapter. Although her involvement in these later exhibitions played a crucial role in establishing her career, the importance of this first exhibition should not be underestimated.

Another embroiderer who held solo exhibitions towards the end of the nineteen sixties was Vivien Hadgkiss. In 1969 she held two exhibitions: the first was at Macquarie House in Canberra, where she exhibited with Doreen Folkerts, and it was followed by a solo exhibition at the Frances Jones Studio in Sydney in August. This exhibition was reviewed in The Record:

64 Ibid.

65 Conversation with Heather Dorrough, 1 July 2002.
The exhibition of embroidered panels by Miss Vivien Hadgkiss at Frances Jones’ studio was strongly reminiscent of the English art schools and greatly resembled the style of many of the panels we have seen from the English embroiderers in the last few years. Miss Hadgkiss’ sense of colour is exquisite, and she uses a variety of materials, beads, shells, plastic tubing and metal shapes in very much the same way as Mrs Sparks’ students have learned to do in her creative embroidery classes. Some of the titles, Artichokes, Pomegranate, Cocoa Pod etc show the art of designing from nature, while others such as Façade and Dreams derive from abstract shapes.66

Vivien Hadgkiss’ next solo exhibition was held in 1970 at the Helen West Gallery in Young. In 1971 she exhibited again at the Macquarie Galleries in Canberra67, and in 1973 she participated in a joint exhibition also held at the Helen West Gallery. What is notable about Vivien Hadgkiss’s career as an embroiderer is that she seems to have come to it independently, and to have built her exhibition record without the advantage of the local connections which proved useful to Pat Langford and Heather Dorough. The Macquarie Galleries were particularly prestigious and to have exhibited with them was something of a coup for an embroiderer.

Vivien Hadgkiss’ solo exhibition in Sydney brought her to the attention of the local creative embroidery community and when the Creative Embroidery Association was formed she was invited to become a member, but despite what must have been a considerable degree of determination, she was unable to capitalise on these early solo exhibitions in the same way that Heather Dorough and Pat Langford did. Although she continued to participate in group exhibitions, wrote articles on embroidery68, and played a significant role in the development of creative embroidery in Canberra69, her reputation has faded.

This can be ascribed in part to the same reasons that other women have been forgotten. Despite an outgoing personality, even those closest to her knew very little of her personal life and no documents appear to have been preserved.70 However, the nature of her work

66 *The Record*, No 95, Sept 1969, p.5.
67 According to an advertisement in *The Record*, the latter was to be an exhibition of work by Vivien Hadgkiss and her group. As Hadgkiss is known to have later taught embroidery in Canberra it is possible that this was a group of her students.
68 For example, ‘Metal thread embroidery’, *Craft Australia*, 1978, No 2.
70 Heather Joynes, who was Vivien Hadgkiss’ closest friend in Sydney, knows few details. She believes that Vivien was from the north of England and came to Australia some time in the nineteen fifties. No-one is certain exactly when she was born – according to Heather Joynes she had falsified
also played a role. Despite the positive review in *The Record*, many of Vivien Hadgkiss’ embroideries now look rather dated. According to some reports, she had studied at an art school in England and a press release for an exhibition in Canberra indicates that she had studied creative embroidery at Chichester College in England in 1965. However there is no evidence to indicate the extent of her training in embroidery; the training at Chichester College may have been an extended course or it may have been only a short workshop.

According to Heather Joynes, in preparing for an exhibition Vivien Hadgkiss made a list of possible works and then ticked them off one by one. This suggests that she approached her work as a series of design exercises rather than as the exploration of ideas, and this shows in the finished work.

Other women who held exhibitions of stitched textiles in the early nineteen seventies were Vivienne Pengilley, Hannah Lemberg and Dawn Fitzpatrick. Vivienne Pengilley had trained as a painter and exhibited work in that medium in the United Kingdom, but turned to textiles because it was more convenient than painting for a mother with small children. Her appliquéd and embroidered wall-hangings in a pop art style were first exhibited in 1972 at Gallery A, which was known in Sydney for its support of avant garde artists.

Hannah Lemberg had trained as a weaver in Germany and, after moving to Australia, produced furnishing fabrics for Marion Hall Best. In 1974 she exhibited canvaswork pictures, described in the catalogue as tapestries, at the Macquarie Galleries. Dawn Fitzpatrick was another artist who began to work in textiles in the nineteen seventies. She had trained at the South Australia School of Arts and Crafts and for many years worked in drawing and painting, but after making a quilt for a new grandchild she began to work in fabric instead. Her work, very large appliquéd wall hangings done in collaboration with Lee McGorman, was first exhibited at the West Street Gallery in North Sydney in July 1975. Like Vivienne Pengilley’s work, these quilts had affinities with the pop art style, and as one of them depicted Australia Prime Ministers’ wives up to that time, they also struck a chord with

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74 Reception of Pengilley’s work was briefly discussed in chapter 7.
75 Conversation with Dawn Fitzpatrick, 12 August 2002.
feminist art critics such as Sandra McGrath who had recently been inspired by the visit of Lucy Lippard to Sydney.\footnote{S McGrath, ‘Is there a female aesthetic?’, \textit{The Australian}, 12 July 1975, p.18.}

Embroiderers in Sydney were aware of the work of all these women. Hannah Lemberg’s exhibition was advertised in \textit{The Record} and all of the embroiderers I spoke with could remember Vivienne Pengilley’s hangings – but neither of them belonged to, or identified with, the embroidery community. In Vivienne Pengilley’s case, solo exhibitions led to her acceptance as a professional artist in the mainstream art world and to be associated with embroiderers would not have been an advantageous career move, while Hannah Lemberg appears to have worked completely independently, although in the absence of further evidence this conclusion must remain speculation. Dawn Fitzpatrick, on the other hand, did have some limited involvement with creative embroiderers, collaborating with Prue Socha in the early nineteen eighties on an exhibition at the Hogarth Gallery in Sydney, although she too identified more with the art community than with the embroidery world. All three were regarded by embroiderers as successful professionals, a view that largely resulted from their exhibition records.

\textbf{Joint exhibitions}

Despite the occasional solo exhibition, in the early nineteen seventies exhibitions of embroidery in commercial galleries were more likely to involve small groups of practitioners than individuals. There are several reasons for this. A joint exhibition meant that each person had to produce less work than if they had been exhibiting alone, something that must have been a consideration for those working in a time intensive medium such as hand embroidery.\footnote{In the early nineteen seventies, most creative embroiderers were only just beginning to explore the technique of machine embroidery and still worked mostly by hand. By contrast, Vivienne Pengilley who held solo exhibitions almost annually throughout the nineteen seventies, worked by machine, a strategy that must have had a considerable impact on her level of productivity.} Joint exhibitions were also a way in which someone with more experience could mentor someone with less experience, perhaps using their exhibition record to secure the gallery director’s confidence. They also meant that any work involved and any expenses incurred could be shared among the participants. In 1973 Pat Langford and Prue Socha exhibited together for the first time. In this case, Pat Langford was the more experienced partner, even though it was her first exhibition in a commercial gallery in over ten years; until this point, Prue Socha’s work had only been seen in group shows. The exhibition, at the Divola Gallery in Sydney, was dubbed by the \textit{Womans Day} as ‘the first occasion in Sydney
that embroidery has been exhibited in a commercial gallery\textsuperscript{78}, something that was patently untrue but which no doubt served as a useful marketing strategy. The article in which the comment was printed featured the work of the two women, along with other crafts practitioners, under the heading ‘The Crafts Professionals’, which suggests that the idea that it was possible to be a professional creative embroiderer was gaining broader currency.

The following year, the two women were joined by Heather Joynes, first in an exhibition at the Craft Galleries in Newcastle and then at the Divola Galleries in Sydney. The history of the Newcastle exhibition illustrates some of the reasons why joint exhibitions were a popular strategy. Pat Langford had originally arranged for a solo exhibition of her work.\textsuperscript{79} In the course of these negotiations she had been asked to send work to the gallery’s premiere exhibition in August 1973. A receipt from the Gallery indicates that she sold four works from this show. It is quite likely that these sales, together with sales from the Divola Gallery exhibition, left her short of the amount of work required to fill a solo show, and this may well account for the inclusion of work by the other women. There was also a change of gallery staff between the time that the original arrangement was made and the date of the exhibition, and the arrangements had to be re-negotiated with the new director.\textsuperscript{80} The knowledge that at least one of the participants had already sold work in the gallery would have given the new director confidence to go ahead with a revised show. Finally it is worth noting that, although Prue Socha was involved in quite a few joint exhibitions throughout her embroidery career, and despite the fact that her work was of a high standard, she never took the next step and arranged a solo exhibition. Perhaps the support available when exhibiting with others was more important to her than the added kudos of a solo exhibition.

The Creative Embroidery Association

One final strategy used by creative embroiderers to enhance their standing as professionals was to form their own professional support organisation – the Creative Embroidery Association which was established in 1973. The Creative Embroidery Association was a sign that Margaret Oppen’s efforts to promote contemporary approaches to embroidery had been successful, but it also signalled a changing of the guard. By the early nineteen seventies there was a significant group of people working in creative embroidery in a sustained fashion. Creative embroiderers had established broad networks as a consequence of the creative embroidery summer schools at Armidale, which attracted participants from


\textsuperscript{79} Letter to Pat Langford from Stuart Wilson, dated 30 May 1973, Pat Langford papers.

\textsuperscript{80} Letter to Pat Langford from Howard J. Morante, dated 1 February 1974, Pat Langford papers.
outside the Embroiderers’ Guild, and through their involvement with the Craft Association; and many of them had high aspirations. At the same time, they were beginning to realise that it did not enhance their reputation to be too closely identified with domestic embroidery. Cynthia Sparks had made comments to this effect in 1970\textsuperscript{81}, they were echoed in 1974 by Prue Socha:

> the word embroidery seems to put people off … We did try to think up a new name for the work we do to counter this prejudice, but we couldn’t come up with anything suitable.\textsuperscript{82}

There was also increasing dissatisfaction with the way that creative embroidery was being hung in Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions. Margaret Oppen had exercised considerable control over the presentation of earlier exhibitions. Not everyone was pleased with this situation. Among embroidery circles, the story is often told of how she left a group of younger women to carry out the task but upon returning was dissatisfied with the results and insisted that they re-hang the work. Cynthia Sparks also commented that it was Margaret Oppen’s practice to display the embroideries in tiers, in much the same way that paintings used to be displayed, with little or no ‘white space’ between them.\textsuperscript{83} Nevertheless she did arrange the work so that traditional and creative embroideries were grouped into different sections. When responsibility for hanging the exhibitions was taken over by others, this policy was discontinued, leading to a perception that:

> all the creative work was hung down there or up there … [and] stuffed round corners … [and that] … creative embroidery wasn’t getting a fair go.\textsuperscript{84}

As a consequence a small group of women, all of whom belonged to the Embroiderers’ Guild of New South Wales decided to establish an organisation specifically intended to promote creative embroidery. Heather Joynes, Prue Socha, Ruth Arthur, Dorothy Gandevia and Helen Whelan made up the first committee. Heather Joynes and Prue Socha visited Margaret Oppen to explain why they had taken this step, fearing that she may have been upset by it, but according to Heather Joynes, ‘she was quite wonderful really, she just said well she wished us all the best, she could quite see why we’d started it’.\textsuperscript{85} For all her commitment to the Embroiderers’ Guild organisation, Margaret Oppen’s abiding interest was in the promotion of embroidery as art and it is most likely that she saw the Creative Embroidery Association as another means by which this aim could be achieved.

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\textsuperscript{81} See chapter 8.

\textsuperscript{82} Marjorie Besselis, ‘A new image for embroidery’, \textit{Woman’s World}, 23 October 1974, p.27.

\textsuperscript{83} Conversation with Cynthia Sparks, 8 January 2005.

\textsuperscript{84} Conversation with Heather Joynes, 27 November 2002.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
In some respects the Creative Embroidery Association cast its net more widely than the Embroiderers’ Guild. It attracted members from interstate, and not all of those who were involved were members of the Embroiderers’ Guild. On the other hand, membership of the group was restricted. Potential members had to be proposed by a current member and were required to submit work for review. If the majority of those present at the meeting where the work was seen agreed, membership was confirmed. To remain a member it was necessary to be actively engaged in creative embroidery and to participate regularly in exhibitions organised by the association. Thus, membership signified a certain level of professional achievement and serious intent. Some embroiderers, such as Heather Joynes, Pat Langford and Helen Whelan, remained members of the organisation until it disbanded in 1995; others belonged for a shorter period of time, leaving when their interests changed or when membership no longer served their professional purposes. Prue Socha is an example of the former. In the late nineteen eighties she became increasingly interested in quilt making in preference to embroidery. Heather Dorrough fits into the latter category. She was a member of the Creative Embroidery Association in its early years but as her career became more established she no longer needed the opportunities provided by the organisation.

A life in embroidery

By the early nineteen seventies a number of creative embroiderers were operating as professional craftspeople, using the same strategies that other artists do in order to assert their status. They participated in selected, solo and group exhibitions; they sold work; and, eventually, they established their own professional support organisation. When I talked with them about their careers it was evident that Heather Dorrough and Pat Langford were both confident of their status as professionals. However, given the limited opportunities available at the time, and the way in which attitudes to professionalism in the arts changed over the fifteen years covered by this study, it is apparent that conventional ways of thinking about amateur and professional practice do not always apply to creative embroidery. There were some individuals who were regarded as professionals in the field, while many of those who attended classes and exhibitions would properly be regarded as hobbyists. But it is also important to acknowledge that there was a significant group of practitioners who belonged somewhere in between – those who did not conform to generally held views of what a professional is, and who did not necessarily consider themselves as professional either, but who nevertheless made what Stebbins would describe as a ‘career’ in embroidery. I will conclude this chapter by discussing the ways in which six key embroiderers carved out ‘careers’ for themselves within the embroidery world in New South Wales.

Margaret Oppen

By any reckoning, Margaret Oppen must be regarded as one of the most significant contributors to the development of creative embroidery in New South Wales. Although not the only woman involved in the establishment of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW, she was widely acknowledged as the chief instigator. Until her death in 1975 she supported both the organisation and individual creative embroiderers in many ways, being awarded a British Empire Medal for services to the arts in 1973. All of the evidence suggests that art, and ultimately embroidery, was a central part of her life, a means by which she identified herself. Throughout her life she continued to develop her knowledge of her chosen disciplines and she exhibited her work over a very long period of time, from the nineteen twenties when she exhibited prints with the Younger Group of Contemporary Artists until 1973 when a retrospective exhibition of embroidery and other art work was held in the Embroiderers’ Guild premises in Sydney.

Margaret Oppen’s own experiments in embroidery were not as adventurous as those of some of the younger embroiderers of the sixties and early seventies. When she spoke of the importance of embroidery being modern it is clear that she was talking primarily about subject matter and style, rather than about the ideology of modernism. But Margaret Oppen’s importance to embroidery does not lie in her own work in the medium so much as it does in her in her capacity to ability to organize and motivate others. She was a tireless advocate for embroidery in general, but especially for contemporary approaches to embroidery, writing regularly for The Record and encouraging younger embroiderers to be more experimental in their approach. She also invested a considerable amount of energy in making the case that embroidery should be regarded as art and she used her connections to good effect, whether it was arranging for Pat Langford to make contact with the Chatterton Gallery in 1961, ensuring that Embroiderers’ Guild events were covered in the press, or lobbying for the inclusion of creative embroidery in the University of New England’s continuing education program. She purchased the work of other embroiderers and ultimately donated many of these works to the Embroiderers’ Guild collection, thus ensuring their continued preservation. She also provided seed funding for a variety of projects at a time when government funding was not yet available.

Margaret Oppen represents a generation of women whose life in art was mediated by their place in society. Some accounts suggest that Margaret Oppen’s family did not initially approve of her desire to study art, as it was not considered an appropriate pursuit for a well brought up young lady.87 However, according to her son, what was at issue was not studying

87 See, for example, Diana Pockley’s account in The Record, No 60, April 1966, p.2.
art as such, but the possibility of becoming a professional artist, an aspiration that was vetoed by her father who told her that she should set aside any such ideas because ‘other people need the money more than you do’. 88 Ultimatey Margaret Oppen married and had children, at a time when both of these life choices made it difficult to pursue a career as an artist 89, and although her mobility led her to be exposed to British trends in art and embroidery, it must have also made it difficult for her to establish a firm reputation in one location. But in spite of all of these constraints, she managed not only to make for herself what was obviously a satisfying life in art but, by what appears to have been the sheer force of will, to have set in train a series of events that led to the establishment of the Embroiderers’ Guild in NSW and eventually to a thriving community of creative embroiderers.

**Dorothea Allnutt**

Like Margaret Oppen, Dorothea Allnutt had some formal training in art, having studied art and design at the Ballarat School of Mines after leaving school, but she does not appear to have ever contemplated a career as a professional artist. According to her daughter, after completing her studies ‘she didn’t go and get a full time job like a lot of people would have … people didn’t work in those days in the same way as they do today.’ 90 Nevertheless she remained involved in textiles of one sort or another, printing with Frances Burke in Melbourne during the Second World War and demonstrating for the Country Women’s Association, and when her husband was transferred to Sydney in the early nineteen fifties she began to teach in the art department at Abbotsleigh Girls School. When steps were taken to establish a branch of the Embroiderers’ Guild in Sydney she was one of the founding members.

Dorothea Allnutt’s contribution to the development of creative embroidery is not as easy to assess as that of Margaret Oppen, partly because there are fewer extant records and partly because she worked with secondary school students whose subsequent lives and careers are difficult to trace. However if the views of Frances Brownscombe and Robyn Oswald-Jacobs are typical, she was obviously an influential teacher. Her students’ success in the Schools Competition run by the Embroiderers’ Guild during the nineteen sixties is further evidence of this, while her involvement with a variety of community projects, such as the wall hangings produced for the Kings School at Parramatta, suggests that her influence extended

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88 Conversation with Conrad and Alice Oppen, 22 July 2004.
89 Margaret Preston was the only women discussed by Helen Topliss in *Modernism and feminism: Australian women artists 1900-1940* who married; Topliss also points out that none of the women she discussed had children (pp.24-25).
more broadly. In 1973 when she applied for an Australia Council grant to travel to England for further study of embroidery, she was provided with glowing references by Betty Archdale, the famous former headmistress of Abbotsleigh; by the incumbent headmistress Kathleen McCrede; and also by Jean Vere, on behalf of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW. All spoke of her significant contribution to the teaching of embroidery.

Robyn Oswald-Jacobs’ recollection of a teacher who used to duck into the storeroom for a quick cigarette during class indicates that Dorothea Allnutt was prepared to ignore rules when it suited her. However, like Margaret Oppen, she belonged to a generation of women who were influenced by society’s expectations: middle class women were supposed to put their family interests ahead of any professional aspirations they might have harboured. In Dorothea Allnutt’s case there is no real evidence that she aspired to a career as an exhibiting artist, although she did participate in Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions, or even that she was interested in selling her work, but it is obvious that she was passionately committed to embroidery and to passing on the craft to others. For her, embroidery was something more than just an enjoyable pastime: it was a consuming interest and something that she pursued into old age. With that in mind, Perhaps Dorothea Allnutt should be considered as an amateur embroiderer in the traditional sense of the word.

**Cynthia Sparks**

Cynthia Sparks became involved in embroidery as an interested amateur, rather than as someone with professional training in art, but she too made a career of sorts out of embroidery. In her own words, ‘it’s been my life really since I came out here … I was always travelling around somewhere teaching’. She participated in group exhibitions and was, for a time, a member of the Creative Embroidery Association, but she rarely sold her work and she never held a solo exhibition. For Cynthia Sparks, creative embroidery was an intellectually stimulating pursuit which enriched her life and provided welcome opportunities to travel and teach, but she did not consider herself a professional artist, or even a professional embroiderer. Instead her focus was on teaching. My research suggests that Cynthia Sparks played a far more significant role in the development of creative embroidery in New South Wales than has previously been acknowledged. She taught widely for the Embroiderers’ Guild, as well as for the Crafts Association and later the Crafts Council. She lectured in embroidery; wrote many articles in which she discussed contemporary trends in embroidery; reviewed exhibitions and reported on workshops and

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91 Australia Council file No 73/369.
92 Conversation with Robyn Oswald-Jacobs, 8 January 2003.
93 Conversation with Cynthia Sparks, 9 January 2003.
classes; and organised exhibitions of Australian work to be sent overseas. It seems that she provided valuable assistance to those who were attempting to gain City and Guilds of London qualifications in the late nineteen sixties, while the evidence that she introduced many new ideas and techniques to local embroiderers is compelling.

Cynthia Sparks’ ambiguous status had positive and negative consequences. The fact that she was not constrained by regular employment, or by the need to produce significant bodies of work for exhibition, meant that she was able to pursue her interest in technical experimentation, and that she was also free to travel and teach as opportunities arose. However it has also meant her contribution to the development of creative embroidery is less visible than that of embroiderers with more professional aspirations. Arguably Cynthia Sparks has had a greater influence on the development of creative embroidery in New South Wales than someone like Prue Socha, but because there was a significant amount of press coverage of Prue Socha’s work and some of her embroideries entered public collections in New South Wales, the latter is better known. Cynthia Sparks is one of those women whose contribution to the development of creative embroidery is revealed only through a study such as this, which looks at the broad context in which creative embroidery was produced rather than focussing only on high profile individuals. She doesn’t fit the definition of a professional embroiderer but neither is she someone for whom embroidery was simply an entertaining pastime; she is one of those women who left a traditional career, in her case as a science teacher, and instead developed for herself a career in embroidery.

Heather Joynes

Like Cynthia Sparks, Heather Joynes began her involvement in embroidery as an amateur, but her interest also evolved into something more serious. Her career has followed an interesting trajectory. In early nineteen seventies she achieved considerable success as an exhibiting embroiderer, being the first creative embroiderer to be selected in a Crafts Association of NSW exhibition, and the first to have work sent overseas. She participated in group exhibitions with Pat Langford and Prue Socha, was involved with the Crafts Association, and taught extensively in Australia and overseas. She was one of the embroiderers who established the Creative Embroidery Association and worked with her husband on a film about creative embroidery. To all intents and purposes Heather Joynes was carving out a successful career as a professional embroiderer. However, after holding a solo exhibition of embroidered clothing in 1975, she decided that solo exhibitions were not for her. Despite this, embroidery has been an important part of her life over several decades:
it’s become part of my life really. I couldn’t imagine not being in the Guild and not being involved with embroidery any more. It’s been very good to me … I’ve gone all over Australia, New Zealand, to America and Canada … its been really fabulous.94

In the early nineteen seventies Heather Joynes experimented with machine embroidery, introducing Heather Dorrough to the potential of the technique, and was one of the few to teach it in New South Wales for many years. She was involved in negotiations to bring Constance Howard to Australia in 1978, and played a central role in the Creative Embroidery Association over many years. Later she went on to serve as the Chairman (sic) of the Embroiderers’ Guild in Sydney and to write several books on ribbon embroidery. Heather Joynes does not consider herself an artist – ‘I really am more of a decorator than an artist’95 – and she is another embroiderer who doesn’t quite fit the profile of a professional, being motivated more by the personal satisfaction gained from her work than the desire for public recognition. Nevertheless her influence on the creative embroidery community has been extensive.

**Pat Langford**

Pat Langford was one of a generation of British artists who had trained in techniques such as painting and sculpture in the mid-twentieth century and who subsequently took up embroidery as their primary form of creative expression. When she arrived in Australia in 1960 she brought with her contemporary ideas about embroidery and she had an almost immediate impact on local embroiderers. Within a very short time she had held a solo exhibition of embroideries, taught design classes for the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW, and appeared on ABC television demonstrating approaches to designing for embroidery. She participated in every exhibition organised by the Embroiderers’ Guild between 1960 and 1975 (and virtually every one between then and 2003); she established a correspondence course in creative embroidery for that organisation; and she supervised the Proficiency Certificate course the Embroiderers’ Guild introduced in 1980, as well as other educational programs introduced during the 1990s. Pat Langford taught workshops in creative embroidery throughout Australia, and eventually overseas. She was also a founding member of the Creative Embroidery Association and achieved considerable success as an exhibiting embroiderer.

Pat Langford’s contribution to the development of creative embroidery is also hard to quantify, not for lack of information but because it was so extensive. As a teacher her influence was significant. Although, like Cynthia Sparks, Pat Langford was a great

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95 Ibid.
experimenter and she introduced embroiderers in New South Wales to a wide variety of
techniques, her greatest contribution as a teacher was undoubtedly the emphasis she placed on original design. She numbered among her students several well-known Australian textile artists. As she worked with school children as well as with adults and because many of the adults she taught, especially in the early years, were teachers themselves, her ideas were disseminated widely. Just as importantly, she was an important role model for many of the younger women who were interested in contemporary embroidery. Until her arrival in Sydney the only person in the Embroiderers’ Guild who appears to have been committed to an ongoing artistic practice was Margaret Oppen, who was regarded with awe by many of the younger women in the embroidery community. The presence of a younger woman who was similarly committed to embroidery as an art form, who worked in a contemporary style, and for whom the exhibition and sale of work was an integral part of her practice must have made a career in embroidery seem to many of her contemporaries to be a viable possibility.

The working relationship that she established with Margaret Oppen undoubtedly also contributed to the development of creative embroidery in Australia in an indirect way. There were few people within the Embroiderers’ Guild who could be considered peers of Margaret Oppen. June Scott Stevenson would have qualified, but by the nineteen sixties she was in poor health and was only minimally involved with the Embroiderers’ Guild, while Ann Gillmore Rees lived many miles away. There must have been many times that Margaret Oppen felt alone in her efforts to promote modern approaches to embroidery. Pat Langford’s arrival would have changed that. Despite the difference in their ages, the two women became close friends as well as colleagues. They collaborated on many ventures, from the ABC television programs to the book they produced on the use of paper cuts for designing and Pat Langford commented that they thought alike on many issues. While Pat Langford freely acknowledged the role played by Margaret Oppen in the development of her own career in Australia, it is also likely that the presence of a younger but like minded colleague provided considerable support to Margaret Oppen throughout the nineteen sixties.

Although Pat Langford juggled her involvement in embroidery, a fulltime teaching position and her domestic responsibilities, she always regarded herself as a professional artist. What is distinctive about her career is that although she was a consummate draftswoman, was familiar with the workings of the art world, and remained interested in new developments in visual art until the end of her life, she was also firmly committed to the craft of embroidery. For Pat Langford there was an essential relationship between the theme and content of her work and the techniques and materials by which those ideas were worked out: the two could not be separated. Ultimately this may have worked to her disadvantage, since rather than modifying her practices to make them more acceptable to the art world and pursuing
exhibition opportunities in that arena she remained primarily within the narrower confines of the craft and embroidery communities. However, she would not have seen this as a negative. When I interviewed her in 2002 she commented several times on how fortunate she had been and how rich her life was – and how all of this was due to embroidery.

**Heather Dorrough**

It could be considered inappropriate to include Heather Dorrough in a list of significant creative embroiderers, since she does not identify herself in this way. However, the fact is that she was connected with the creative embroidery community in New South Wales in the late nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies. She was a member of the Embroiderers’ Guild in New South Wales from 1969 until 1974, and a member of the Creative Embroidery Association in 1974 and 1975. She influenced other embroiderers both directly and indirectly. When she taught for the Embroiderers’ Guild, she encouraged students to explore personal ideas and to work on a much larger scale than many of them were used to. She was also an important role model. All of the other embroiderers I interviewed remembered her exhibitions: her early abstract appliquéd hangings, the wearable clothing she exhibited in the mid-seventies, and her self portrait exhibition of the early eighties, while her large work in the NSW Parliament House dining room still attracts considerable interest. For many women Heather Dorrough was an inspiring artist and a potent symbol that it was possible, if your work was good enough, to achieve critical success as an embroiderer.

Heather Dorrough participated in exhibitions organised by both the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW and the Creative embroidery Association, although she does not consider her involvement in any of these exhibitions to have played a significant role in the overall trajectory of her career. She was one of a number of women involved with textiles who took advantage of the opportunities that arose at the time. However by the mid nineteen seventies when her career was becoming more established she began to distance herself from these groups, she chose to align herself with the art world rather than the embroidery community. She explains why:

> The art world seemed to offer a greater depth of ideas, whereas the craft sphere, as I experienced it, was locked into discussion about technique. The ‘how’ rather than the ‘why’.  

In recent years Heather Dorrough has stopped working in textiles, and she is not as widely known as she once was, but her work is held in significant public collections. Of all of the

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96 Letter from Heather Dorrough, 18 August 2002.
97 Ibid.
women working in creative embroidery in the sixties and the early seventies, she is the one whose ongoing reputation is most secure.

Conclusion

A comparison between Heather Dorrough’s career and that of Pat Langford highlights some significant points about the way in which individual careers develop and also about the way in which artist are, or are not, remembered. Both women both believed that a concept or idea was a central component of an art work and both saw themselves as professional practitioners. However their careers played out in very different ways. Although both women had trained at art schools in Britain, Heather Dorrough was several years younger than Pat Langford and would have had a very different art school experience. She entered art school at a time of sustained interest in abstraction and when the early experiments which led to pop art were being carried out. By contrast, Pat Langford’s training was rooted in earlier ideas. She identified Cezanne as an abiding influence, and despite her interest in decoration and pattern, her training focussed extensively on figuration. Furthermore Heather Dorrough completed post-graduate studies at the Royal College of Art, an experience that would have undoubtedly exposed her to more sophisticated ideas than those common in regional art schools such as the one attended by Pat Langford. This post-graduate training in interior design also equipped her to successfully work on the large scale necessary to complete major public commissions. Although training does not guarantee a successful career, it can have a significant influence on the way in which a career evolves.

Both women’s early careers in Sydney were facilitated by acquaintances, but here too there was a difference. Pat Langford’s first exhibition came about as a consequence of her friendship with Margaret Oppen, whose connections were with a more conservative segment of the Sydney art community, and therefore her exhibition was in a lesser known commercial gallery. By contrast, Heather Dorrough was connected with a younger and less conservative circle and her first exhibition was in the Darlinghurst Gallery, which was known for more contemporary work. She was also closely acquainted with those involved in establishing the Craft Association of NSW, whereas Pat Langford’s connections were with the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW. In the case of these two women, their connections with different parts of the art and craft community did influenced the way in which their careers developed, but one of the things that is evident from this research that connections played a part in the development of many individual’s careers in embroidery and also in the promotion of creative embroidery as a genre.

Ultimately, however, it was the interests and aspirations of the individuals concerned that had the biggest impact on how Pat Langford’s and Heather Dorrough’s careers evolved.
Although Heather Dorrough said of her early work ‘I do these hangings for myself … I do the appliqué work simply because I like doing it’ 98, she adopted a professional attitude from the start. Once her career began to take off in the early nineteen seventies she chose carefully which professional opportunities she accepted and she took considerable care over how her work was presented to the public. Her work was sophisticated in terms of its conceptual underpinnings and it was produced and presented with consummate skill. Her training as well as her inclinations equipped her to successfully negotiate the art and craft world systems. By contrast, Pat Langford made a different set of decisions. She was aware that her interest in a more decorative style of work could be a handicap and that the pleasure that she derived from both the materials and techniques of embroidery was not something that the art world would necessarily approve of. Despite this she chose to stay true to her own inclinations rather than changing the way she worked to suit the concerns of the art world. Similarly, although the time and effort she put into preparing for and presenting workshops ate into the time that was available to make work for exhibitions, her commitment to the craft of embroidery meant that she placed a high priority on her teaching and continued to develop new workshop ideas until the last weeks of her life. As a consequence of the different choices she made, Pat Langford’s reputation within the embroidery community is secure, but she is not so widely known beyond those circles.

98 P Thompson, Twelve Australian craftsmen, Angus and Robertson, Cremorne, 1973, p. 66.
Conclusion

In this thesis I have used the ideas of Howard Becker as a framework to look at the practice of creative embroidery in New South Wales between 1960 and 1975, an aspect of craft practice that has been largely overlooked in the literature about art and craft in Australia. I have suggested that the loosely connected network of creative embroiderers that emerged in Sydney over this period of time displayed many of the characteristics of an art world, as identified by Becker.

Creative embroiderers worked according to a set of mutually agreed conventions which were used to define and direct their practice. These were initially introduced from Britain but were modified and adapted to suit local conditions, so that by the early nineteen seventies there were people in both countries who believed that Australian embroidery had its own distinctive characteristics. The creative embroidery community established its own systems to facilitate cooperation, to promulgate conventions, and to engage with an audience. Many of these systems centred on the Embroiderers’ Guild of New South Wales and were intended to promote creative embroidery and increase the number of people who practised it. However, creative embroiderers also reached out to the broader community through the educational programs they established, the exhibitions they held, and their use of the media. They established links with the wider art and craft communities both individually and on a corporate basis.

My research has revealed that the creative embroidery world in New South Wales was more active, and more pro-active, than suggested in previous accounts. An extensive program of educational activities was developed for those within the embroidery community, but workshops were also offered to a wider audience. Creative embroiders established links with the NSW Department of Education and lobbied for embroidery to be included in the syllabus in art schools in New South Wales. Between 1960 and 1975 a large number of exhibitions of creative embroidery were held, attracting significant coverage in the Sydney press. Although only a small number of individual creative embroiderers are identified in the existing literature, exhibition catalogues from the period indicate that many more creative embroiderers were actively involved in producing and exhibiting work.

All the evidence suggests that there were also more points of contact between creative embroiderers and other areas of the art and craft world than has previously been acknowledged. Creative embroiderers participated in the activities of the Craft Association of NSW, they taught embroidery for a variety of organisations including the continuing education program at the University of New England and the Crafts Council, and eventually
they established their own professional support organisation, the Creative Embroidery Association. Significantly, although the conventional reading is that it was the higher profile crafts practitioners like Heather Dorrough who influenced creative embroiderers, my research reveals that the interaction and influence was mutual. Craftspeople also gained from their contact with the creative embroidery community, whether it was through their inclusion in exhibitions in the years when such opportunities were limited, or the chance to earn money by teaching. It is also apparent that those in the craft community learnt from creative embroiderers, in ways that ranged from Heather Joynes introducing Heather Dorrough to free machine embroidery, to the attendance of practitioners like Anne Richards, Liz Jeneid and Lorraine Hepburn at creative embroidery summer schools at the University of New England in the late nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies.

This research sheds further light on the careers of the better known among creative embroiderers, such as Pat Langford and Heather Joynes. It clearly reveals the role played by Margaret Oppen in promoting creative embroidery in New South Wales, even before the craft was identified as such: without her efforts it is most unlikely that the creative embroidery community would have flourished in the way it did. The research also suggests that the influence of Cynthia Sparks was far more significant than previous accounts suggests – and more significant than some within the creative embroidery community have been willing to admit. The contributions of Margaret Oppen and Cynthia Sparks, along with that of Pat Langford, warrant a much higher profile than they have hitherto received. My research also reveals that there are others – talented practitioners like Ruth Arthur and influential teachers like Dorothea Allnutt – whose contribution has been largely overlooked, even within the embroidery community. In some cases, the most obvious one being Ann Gillmore Rees, the stories of significant careers have come close to being lost.

The story of creative embroidery in New South Wales is one which contains both successes and failures. There is no doubt that creative embroiderers in the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies contributed to the development of a flourishing textile community which still exists today, although further research on the years after 1975 is needed to provide a more complete picture of the relationship between the two fields of practice. Creative embroiderers influenced the way in which embroidery was taught in New South Wales schools, in both needlework and art classes. It would be interesting to look more closely at this issue, in particular to see whether the interaction between the Embroiderers’ Guild and the NSW Department of Education had any influence on the textile and design syllabus that was introduced in NSW secondary schools in the mid nineteen seventies, and to investigate the extent of Pat Langford’s influence on embroidery education in secondary schools.
In terms of the work they produced creative embroiderers are often thought to be conservative by comparison with present day practice. There is some truth in this assessment. Most creative embroiderers were unfamiliar with the more advanced thinking of the fine art world, and the ideas on which their work was based were relatively unsophisticated. Nevertheless they were not reactionaries. They were willing to experiment and in their use of techniques and materials they were really quite adventurous for the time. It has been interesting to discover that some of the practices that are considered to be innovatory at the beginning of the twenty-first century, such as stitching on plastic, incorporating metal into embroidery, or working on unusual backgrounds like plastic, were actually being explored as far back as the nineteen sixties. Finally, the role that creative embroidery played in the lives of many women must also be counted as a success. For many individual embroiderers, their involvement in creative embroidery led to rich and fulfilling lives, providing opportunities that they would never have had otherwise. This was a common theme among the women I interviewed, regardless of whether they were amateurs or professionals.

There were, however, some aspirations that were not achieved. Embroidery as such is still not taught at a tertiary level in New South Wales, although it is possible that the lobbying of embroiderers, along with the lively creative embroidery scene that existed in the early seventies, may have contributed to the introduction of fibre and textiles in some art schools. There were certainly links between the Embroiderers’ Guild and the Goulburn Teachers College where a diploma course in textiles was later introduced, and several independent creative embroiderers, including Fay Bottrell and Heather Dorrough, taught in fibre departments in art schools in the late seventies. Perhaps the greatest disappointment for creative embroiderers was that creative embroidery was never really accepted by the fine art community and even today embroidery only rarely finds its way into that arena. Although some examples of creative embroidery entered public collections, these works have rarely been exhibited. The National Gallery of Australia holds a number of works by women discussed in this thesis, but the only stitched textiles included in its recent ‘Transformations’ exhibition came from overseas.

Today creative embroidery is seen as somewhat old fashioned, although even more women (and some men) work in stitched textiles now than did in years covered by this research. In the mid-seventies a generational change occurred, brought about by a number of factors. When Margaret Oppen died, creative embroiderers lost a staunch advocate and eventually the Embroiderers’ Guild withdrew from close engagement with the art and craft community, although individual embroiderers remained involved with the Craft Association of New South Wales and the Creative Embroidery Association became increasingly active in
promoting contemporary embroidery. The women’s art movement led to increased feminist interest in domestic embroidery, but arguably overlooked less politically oriented creative embroidery. The confluence of the feminist art movement and the introduction of fibre and textiles, but not embroidery, into art schools also saw the emergence of a younger generation of women artists who were interested in the expressive possibilities of textiles, but who found it necessary to distance themselves from the more decoratively inclined forms of embroidery in order to achieve acceptance in the fine art world.

However, to overlook the contribution of creative embroiderers is to present an impoverished view of craft in New South Wales. My research should be seen as a first step in redressing the balance. It presents a broad overview of the development of creative embroidery in New South Wales, highlighting some of the important contributions made by members of the creative embroidery community. However, there are many avenues that warrant further investigation. For this research I decided to adopt broad approach, applying Becker’s ideas and using of a variety of practical research strategies, a decision which I believe is vindicated by the rich account that has been revealed. This methodological approach could well be applied to other areas of the crafts where there are large communities of serious amateurs but only a few well known professional practitioners. In the field of textiles, the hand weaving community is one possibility that comes to mind.

There are also many specific questions that have arisen from my research and which I have not been able to fully explore within the scope of this project. I have already identified some questions about embroidery and textile education in secondary schools that would repay further research. The way in which education in textile and fibre evolved in the tertiary sector is another possibility, while the Creative Embroidery Association deserves a history of its own. Despite my argument in favour of a broad study, there is also a case to be made for studying individual embroiderers. My next project is to extend my research on Ann Gillmore Rees, but there are many other embroiderers who warrant their own studies: Margaret Oppen, June Scott Stevenson, Pat Langford and Cynthia Sparks, to name just a few.

There is one other area where further work is needed. In chapter seven I discussed Daniel Thomas’ review of the 1968 Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition and the views of Dennis Croneen, reported in a newspaper article about an exhibition of embroidery by the English embroiderers Ann Butler and Janet Grahame. The former saw creative embroidery as a pale imitation of contemporary painting; the latter was not convinced that embroidery was art. Margaret Oppen’s response to Daniel Thomas indicates that she believed that, because of the material qualities of the medium, the language of art criticism was not sufficient on its own to the task of writing about embroidery. To date there has been little formal or aesthetic
analysis of creative embroidery carried out. As a consequence of my decision to use Howard
Becker’s ideas to frame the research I have not dealt in detail with aesthetic questions either.
Individual embroidery works have been mentioned only in passing and this gap remains to
be filled. Although the number of creative embroideries readily available to researchers is
not large, there are photographic records of a substantial number of works on which to base
such work. It is important that this work is done for, to return to the words of Grace
Cochrane which served as my opening quote, ‘In our world what is not documented does not
exist’.
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Ann Richards, embroiderer
Mary Schoeser, textile historian
John Scott Stevenson, son of June Scott Stevenson
Val Shurley, embroiderer
Cynthia Sparks, embroiderer
Thomas Swailes, great-nephew of June Scott Stevenson
Lyn Szygenda, curator, Embroiderers’ Guild, London
Nola Taylor, embroiderer

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**Monographs**


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Appendix A: Exhibitions of creative embroidery and stitched textiles, 1960-1975

31 May – 24 June 1961
Pat Langford, Embroidered Paintings
Chatterton’s Gallery, Castlereagh Street Sydney

4 – 13 October 1961
Embroidery of all Ages: An exhibition of traditional and modern embroidery
David Jones Gallery, Sydney

20 – 24 August 1963
North Shore Arts Festival
Mosman Town Hall
The Embroiderers’ Guild participated in this exhibition, with over 50 exhibits, most of them traditional. Contemporary work included four panels by Pat Langford, a machine and hand embroidered hanging by May Burgh and Isabel Craig’s hanging *The Minoan Snake Goddess* and an altar frontal and a hanging by Win Thorvaldson.

24 August 1965
Exhibition of embroideries at Christ Church St Ives
Exhibits included Audrey Tucker’s *Mary and the Dove*, and work by Olive Nock

18 November – 4 December 1965
Large scale wall hangings by Heather Dorrough
Darlinghurst Galleries

23 – 24 February 1966
Exhibition of modern and traditional embroidery
Roselands Shopping Centre

March 1966
Exhibition of work by Margaret Oppen (open to the public)
Embroiderers’ Guild Headquarters, Beaumont House, Sydney
15 – 25 November 1966
Colour and Design Related to the Textile Crafts
Education Department Gallery, Bridge Street Sydney

August 1967
A Display of Modern Embroidery
Chatswood Town Hall

20 Sept – 4 October 1967
Craft Association of NSW exhibition
Australian Design Centre
Included two embroideries by Pat Langford

14 – 25 November 1967
Embroiderers’ Guild NSW exhibition
Education Department Gallery, Bridge Street Sydney

September 1968
Exhibition of work by Pat Langford
Embroiderers’ Guild Headquarters, Beaumont House, Sydney

12 – 23 November 1968
Embroiderers’ Guild NSW exhibition
Education Department Gallery, Bridge Street Sydney

5 – 12 April 1969
Embroideries by Vivien Hadgkiss and Doreen Folkerts
Macquarie Galleries, Canberra

3 – 20 August 1969
Exhibition of wall hangings by Vivien Hadgkiss
Frances Jones Studio Woollahra

12 – 23 November 1969
Embroiderers’ Guild Exhibition
Education Department Gallery, Bridge Street Sydney
1969
Craft Association of NSW Biennial Exhibition
Design Centre, Sydney
Work by Heather Dorrough and Heather Joynes

27 April – 8 May 1970
Embroiderers’ Guild ‘Australiana’ exhibition
Department of Education Gallery, Sydney

April 1970
Exhibition of Ecclesiastical Embroidery
Blaxland Gallery, Farmers, Sydney
Included modern ecclesiastical work from Britain

24 – 31 October 1970
Embroidery by Vivien Hadgkiss
Helen West Gallery Young

8 – 14 March 1971
Embroidery exhibition
International House, Sydney University

13 March 1971
Embroidery ’71
Australian hangings plus 62 Group work (open day held on 13 March)
Guild Headquarters, Beaumont House, Sydney

June 1971
Exhibition of work by Ann Butler and Janet Graham
Denis Croneen Galleries, North Sydney

11 September 1971
Exhibition of work by Vivien Hadgkiss et. al.
Macquarie Galleries, Canberra
Late 1971
Craft Association of NSW 3rd biennial exhibition
Blaxland Gallery
Included work by Heather Dorrough, Heather Joynes, Pat Langford, Prue Socha, Jean Vere, Ruth Arthur.

1972
Craft 70s Art Gallery of New South Wales Travelling Art Exhibition 1972
Embroidery exhibits by Heather Dorrough, Heather Joynes, Pat Langford, Prue Socha, Win Thorvaldson.

26 March – 9 April 1972
Exhibition of wall hangings
AMP building, Sydney

July 1972
Exhibition of work by Fay Bottrell
Holdsworth Galleries, Sydney

13 – 21 July 1972
Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW ’72 Exhibition of Embroidery
Grace Bros Gallery, Broadway

4 – 25 November 1972
Collage – tapestries by Vivienne Pengilley
Gallery A, Paddington

6 – 13 November 1972
Embroidery Exhibition
Education Department Gallery, Bridge Street Sydney

March 1973
Exhibition of work by Margeret Oppen
Embroiderers’ Guild Headquarters, Beaumont House, Sydney
22 July – 12 August 1973  
Creative Embroidery ’73  
Pat Langford and Prue Socha  
Divola Gallery Sydney

2 – 22 September 1973  
Collage – tapestries by Vivienne Pengilley  
Gallery A, Paddington

22 September – 12 October 1973  
Talisman embroideries by Vivien Hadgkiss, Marjorie Hadley, Marion Herbert  
Helen West Gallery, Young

October 1973  
Embroideries in Australia: Exhibition to commemorate the opening of The Sydney Opera House  
Location unknown

15 October – 3 November 1973  
Craft Association of NSW 4th Biennial Exhibition  
State Office Block, Sydney  

1973  
Creative Embroidery Association Exhibition  
AMP Building Sydney

1973  
Creative Embroidery and Silver Jewellery: embroidery by Prue Socha, Heather Joynes, Pat Langford, Helen Whelan, Ruth Arthur and Ann-Marie Bakewell  
Fantasia Galleries, ACT.

22 July – 12 August  
Creative Embroidery ’73, Patricia Langford and Prue Socha  
Divola Galleries.
15 March – 1974
Creative Embroidery by Pat Langford, Prue Socha, Heather Joynes
Craft Galleries, The Junction, Newcastle

6 October 1974
Creative Embroidery by Heather Joynes, Pat Langford, Prue Socha
Divola Galleries, Sydney

10 – 24 November 1974
Creative Embroidery Association Exhibition
AMP Building Sydney

3 – 14 December 1974
A collection of tapestries by Hannah Lemberg
Macquarie Galleries Sydney
Note: These were stitched, not woven tapestry

1974
Crafts Australia: Australia’s choice of crafts for 1974 World Crafts Exhibition in Toronto, Canada

1974
Burton Street Gallery, Paddington
Nola Taylor solo exhibition

17 – 24 May 1975
5th Biennial exhibition of the Crafts Association of NSW
Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Ultimo

19 – 31 May 1975
New Horizons in Embroidery
Arts Council of NSW Gallery

July 1975
Exhibition of creative embroidery – Pat Langford and Prue Socha
Divola Galleries
31 October 1975
Exhibition of Embroideries at Robert Menzies College

16 September 1975
Collage – tapestries by Vivienne Pengilley
Gallery A, Paddington

17 – 30 November 1975
Creative Embroidery Association Exhibition
AMP Building Sydney

Tamworth Fibre Exhibition 1975
Embroidery exhibits by Ruth Arthur, Audrey Bernays, Robin Jeffcoat, Heather Joynes, Pat Langford, Sybil Orr, Prue Socha, Jean Vere and Shirley Barton.
Note: the exhibits are identified only by name. These people are known as active embroiderers. It is possible that other participants submitted embroideries and also possible that some of the above mentioned (Robin Jeffcoat in particular) may have submitted entries in other textile techniques.

1975
West Street Gallery, North Sydney
Exhibition of work by Dawn Fitzpatrick in group show
Appendix B: Brief biographies of significant embroiderers

A note on selection of embroiderers

The embroiderers listed in this appendix represent only a small number of those involved in creative embroidery between 1960 and 1975. In most cases, those included were involved in selected exhibitions or exhibitions in commercial galleries, this being an accepted measure of serious commitment to their chosen craft. In a few cases, individuals have been included because they made a significant contribution to the development of creative embroidery in some other way.

Dorothea Allnutt

1910 – 1996

Dorothea Allnutt studied art and craft at the Ballarat School of Mines and subsequently worked as a demonstrator and tutor for the Victorian Women’s Institute and for the Country Women’s Association in Victoria. During the Second World War she worked with the well known Victorian fabric designer Frances Burke. She joined the Embroiderers’ Guild in London in 1950 and moved to Sydney with her family in 1951. From 1953 she was employed as an art and craft teacher at Abbotsleigh School, an occupation that she continued until her retirement circa 1980. She was a foundation member of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW, served as the Chairman in 1960, and taught classes in the early years of the organisation’s history. She does not appear to have exhibited creative embroidery in Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions, although the work of her students at Abbotsleigh was regularly included in the major exhibitions held in the Education Department Gallery in the late 1960s.

Much of Dorothea Allnutt’s own work appears to have been made for family and friends, although she coordinated a number of group projects, including a series of panels for the assembly hall at The Kings School, ecclesiastical embroideries for St Paul’s College at Sydney University and for the chapel at Abbotsleigh School, and a large hanging titled ‘The Curtain of the Saints’. She was a member of the Craft Association of NSW, but did not belong to the Creative Embroidery Association.

Dorothea Allnutt visited the United Kingdom in 1963 to study ecclesiastical and contemporary embroidery. In 1973 she applied for and was awarded an Australia Council grant which enabled her to spend six months in the United Kingdom in 1974. During this trip...
Ruth Arthur

d. 1983

Very little detail is known about Ruth Arthur’s background. She is remembered as a talented embroidery and appears to have been a reserved woman who did not mix socially with other members of the creative embroidery community.

Her work was included in the Embroiderers’ Guild Exhibition at the Education Department Gallery in November 1968, so presumably she was a member of the organisation by that time. She served briefly as the Guild’s treasurer in 1970 and as its secretary in 1972. As well as exhibiting regularly with the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW, her work was included in the Craft Association of NSW exhibition in 1971 and again in 1973. She also exhibited two pieces in the inaugural Tamworth Fibre Exhibition in 1975. She taught for the Lane Cove Creative Arts Group in Lane Cove and was a tutor at McGregor Summer School in Toowoomba in 1973. She was a member of the Creative Embroidery Association until her death in 1983.

Ann-Marie Bakewell

Ann-Marie Bakewell has been involved with the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW since the mid nineteen sixties and her work was regularly included in their exhibitions throughout the late nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies. In 1971 she achieved first place in the City and Guilds examinations in embroidery and from that time was involved in teaching for the Embroiderers’ Guild and other organisations. She was a member of the Creative Embroidery Association and exhibited with that group, but appears never to have submitted work to selected exhibitions or to have aspired to a solo exhibition of her own work.

Shirley Barton

Shirley Barton trained as a commercial artist in Perth and also studied drawing with Thea Proctor in Sydney. In the 1972 she was based in Wollongong and participating in Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions. She joined the Creative Embroidery Association in 1973. She was one of several creative embroiderers whose work was included in the first Tamworth Fibre Exhibition in 1975.
Audrey Bernays

Audrey Bernays is a Wollongong based embroiderer who was awarded the City and Guilds Certificate in Embroidery in 1972. In 1974 she coordinated one of the teams of assessors for the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW correspondence course in creative embroidery and was one of those awarded a teacher’s certificate by the Guild. She joined the Creative Embroidery Association in 1973, exhibiting regularly with that group and her work was shown in the first Tamworth Fibre Exhibition in 1975.

Fay Bottrell

(Fay Endean)
b. 1927
Fay Bottrell trained at the National Art School in Sydney, becoming interested in textiles when she and Mona Hessing discovered a collection of abandoned looms at the college. She worked for Mary White School of Design in Sydney in late nineteen sixties and taught at City Art Institute in the mid nineteen seventies. Although never a part of the embroidery community as such, Fay Bottrell taught workshops for the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW. Her book, The artist craftsman in Australia : Aspects of sensibility, was published in 1972 and her stitched textiles were included in the Craft Association of NSW exhibition in 1969 and in the first Tamworth Fibre Exhibition in 1975. Her work was also shown at the Holdsworth Galleries in Sydney in 1972. In the early nineteen seventies she served on the Crafts Board of the Australia Council. Her work is held in the National Gallery of Australia.

May Burgh

May Burgh is another embroiderer about whom little is known. She trained initially as a primary school teacher, before completing a Diploma of Science and transferring to high school teaching. Her initial interest in embroidery was in traditional techniques, which she studied at the Royal School of Needlework. In the early 1960s she became interested in machine embroidery, apparently teaching herself with the aid of books by Christine Risley and Enid Mason. She appears to have been one of the first embroiderers in Sydney to experiment with the technique, which she demonstrated on ABC television in 1963. Her machine embroidery was included in the Guild exhibition at the North Shore Arts Festival in 1963 and again in the Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition in 1967.
Audrey Dixon

b. 1931 (England)
Arrived in Australia, 1968
Audrey Dixon trained and worked as a secondary school art teacher in England. In the early nineteen sixties she taught herself machine embroidery using books such as Enid Mason’s *Ideas for Machine Embroidery*. She moved to Perth in 1968, where she was a founding member of the Embroiderers’ Guild in Western Australia, and then to Sydney in 1972. She was employed as an art teacher at Abbotsleigh School and became involved with the Embroiderers’ Guild in Sydney, conducting a workshop for high school needlework teachers together with Heather Joynes and Nola Taylor. Her work was included in the Embroiderers’ Guild exhibition in 1972 and in July 1973 it was featured in an article in the *Australia Home Journal*. In 1975 she exhibited machine embroidered collages in a joint exhibition with a photographer in Turramurra.

Heather Dorrough (née Blake-Smith)

b. 1933 (Paddington, UK)
Arrived in Australia, 1960
Heather Dorrough studied for the National Diploma in Art and Design at Eastbourne College of Art in the United Kingdom and completed postgraduate studies in interior design at the Royal College of Art in London. She worked as an interior designer in London and New York before moving to Australia in 1960. Heather Dorrough began to work in textiles in the mid-1960s, holding her first exhibition at the Darlinghurst Galleries in 1965. She became involved with the Craft Association of NSW, participating in its exhibitions on a regular basis and designing the interior of the Association’s office space, as well as some of its exhibitions. She taught interior design at the Mary White School of Design and at East Sydney Technical College, and textile workshops for the Embroiderers’ Guild and for the Craft Association. In the early 1980s she taught textiles at the Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education (later the City Art Institute). For a short time Heather Dorrough was a member of the Embroiderers’ Guild and the Creative Embroidery Association, but she was more involved in the craft community than the embroidery community. Her second solo exhibition was held in 1976 at the Bonython Gallery. By the late 1970s she had established a successful career as a textile artist, with exhibitions at the Robin Gibson Gallery in 1979 and the Crafts Council Gallery in Sydney in 1982 and several high profile public commissions. Heather Dorrough’s work is held in public
and private collections in Australia, including the National Gallery of Australia and the Powerhouse Museum.

Dawn Fitzpatrick (née Baillieu)
b. 1922
Dawn Fitzpatrick trained at the South Australia School of Art, working in painting and drawing until early nineteen seventies when she began working in appliqué. In 1975 she held an exhibition of large scale figurative panels, produced in collaboration with Lee McGorman, at the West Street Gallery in North Sydney. Subsequent exhibitions were held at Ace’s Art Shop and at the Hogarth Galleries in Sydney. She was also commissioned to produce a large hanging for the NSW State Parliament House.

Dorothy Gandevia
1921 (USA) – 1994
Dorothy Gandevia was trained as, and practised as, a medical doctor. Her education in embroidery was mostly informal; she attended workshops at the Embroiderers’ Guild and summer schools at the University of New England. She was one of the embroiderers who worked with Dorothea Allnutt on The Curtain of the Saints in the early nineteen seventies. Her primary interest was in metal thread embroidery. In 1973 one of her metal thread embroideries was selected for inclusion in exhibition which was organised by the Embroiderers’ Guild in England and held at the Commonwealth Gallery in London. Dorothy Gandevia was a founding member of the Creative Embroidery Association, helping to write its constitution, serving on its committee, and participating in its exhibitions. In 1974 Dorothy Gandevia was awarded an Australia Council Grant to travel to the United Kingdom where she attended a residential workshop with Barbara Dawson and took private lessons with Hannah Frew Paterson. She also spent a week in private study at the Embroiderers’ Guild in London. Shortly after her return from England she retired to the country and was less involved in the creative embroidery community from that time on.

Vivien Hadgkiss
d. 1985
Very little is known of Vivien Hadgkiss’ personal life. She was apparently born in the north of England but had ‘adjusted’ her age at some point so her acquaintances were not certain of the date, an act that makes further investigation of her life problematic. She moved to Australia some time in the nineteen fifties. It is thought that she may have attended art school in England and she studied embroidery at Chichester College in the United Kingdom in the
nineteen sixties. Vivien Hadgkiss exhibited embroideries at the Macquarie Galleries in Canberra and at the Frances Jones Studio in Sydney in 1969. As a result of the latter exhibition she became acquainted with several of the women involved in creative embroidery in Sydney, becoming close friends with Heather Joynes. She held two exhibitions at the Helen West Gallery in Young: one, in 1970, was a solo show; another in 1973 also included work by Marjorie Hadley and Marion Herbert. An exhibition of work by her and her students was held at the Macquarie Galleries in Canberra in 1971. She was invited to join the Creative Embroidery Association shortly after it was formed and exhibited regularly with that organisation. She taught creative embroidery in Canberra and wrote an article on metal thread embroidery for Craft Australia in 1978.

Marjorie Hadley

Marjorie Hadley was another embroiderer based in Canberra, who became a member of the Creative Embroidery Association. Her work was exhibited at the Macquarie Galleries in Canberra in 1971, the Helen West Gallery in Young in 1973, and the Fantasia Gallery in Canberra in 1975.

Diane Hanley

(Diane Dowe, Diane Groenewegen)
Diane Hanley trained at the National Art School between 1963 and 1965, before working as an art teacher at Abbotsleigh School. She was a member of the Embroiderers’ Guild from the late nineteen sixties until the mid nineteen seventies, coordinating an evening group, teaching workshops in contemporary work, and assisting with the hanging of exhibitions, although she appears not to have exhibited her own work in Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions. Her first solo exhibition did not take place until 1991. In the mid-seventies she returned to Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education to update her training and later in the nineteen seventies she became more involved with the Craft Association of New South Wales, by then known as the Craft Council of NSW.

Robin Jeffcoat

Robin Jeffcoat studied art at Wollongong Technical College and with John Oslen at the Bakehouse Gallery. In 1971 she was awarded the City and Guilds Certificate in Embroidery. She taught textiles at the Sydney Church of England Girls Grammar School in Wollongong. As well as working in embroidery, Robin Jeffcoat was a handspinner and weaver and her work often incorporated handspun and hand dyed yarns. She was a member of the Creative
Embroidery Association from 1973 and exhibited regularly with that organisation. Two of her works were included in the first Tamworth Fibre Exhibition in 1975.

**Heather Joynes**

b. 1923  
Australia from 1951  
Heather Joynes became involved in creative embroidery in 1966. In 1970 she was awarded the City and Guilds Certificate in Embroidery. Heather Joynes was a tutor for the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW and also taught at several University of New England summer schools in embroidery. She was the first member of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW to have work selected for a Craft Association of NSW exhibition and was the first Australian embroiderer to teach overseas, travelling to Canada in 1973 to teach classes on canvas work embroidery. As well as exhibiting with the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW and the Craft Association of NSW, Heather Joynes participated in joint exhibitions with Pat Langford and Prue Socha and held a solo show of embroidered clothing at the Von Bertouch Galleries in Newcastle in 1976. She was a founding member of the Creative Embroidery Association, exhibiting regularly with the group. Together with her husband Jack she produced a film titled ‘The Creative Stitch’ and also produced a series of slide kits titled ‘Using Stitches’ for Educational Media Australia. Examples of her work are held in the collection of the Powerhouse Museum.

**Margaret Keggin**

(Margaret Thomas)  
Margaret Keggin was introduced to embroidery while completing teacher training at the Cheshire County Training College in England between 1954 and 1956. She later attended Brighton College of Art, studying embroidery and fabric printing. In 1960 she migrated to Australia to teach for the NSW Department of Education, travelling on the same ship as Pat Langford. She was employed at St George Girls High School in Kogarah. She exhibited and sold her work through Scandinavia House in Double Bay. Although she did not join the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW she demonstrated machine embroidery for them in 1962. In 1963 Margaret Keggin returned to the United Kingdom where she continues to work as a textile artist and embroiderer.
Pat Langford

1927 (UK) – 2003 (Sydney, NSW)
Arrived in Australia, 1960

Pat Langford studied painting at the Plymouth Art School in England in the late nineteen forties, completing the City and Guilds Certificate Part 1 at that time. After studying embroidery with Constance Howard at Goldsmith’s College in the early nineteen fifties she completed the City and Guilds Certificate Part 2. In 1960 she migrated to Australia with her family and immediately became involved with the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW. In 1961 she held a solo exhibition of embroideries at the Chatterton Gallery in Sydney. Shortly after, she began to teach art at Asquith Girls High School, later moving to Ravenswood School.

Pat Langford’s involvement with creative embroidery was extensive. She taught widely, both in Australia and overseas. From 1960 until 1967 she was the main teacher of modern embroidery for the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW. Many of her workshops were attended by high school art and needlework teachers, ensuring that her influence was spread widely. She also wrote articles for the Needlework Bulletin, produced by the NSW Department of Education, and appeared on ABC television demonstrating design and embroidery. In 1964 Pat Langford and Margaret Oppen collaborated on small book on designing with paper cuts. Together with Cynthia Sparks and Heather Joynes she taught at the University of New England summer schools in embroidery from 1969 until 1979. In 1974 she developed a correspondence course in creative embroidery for the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW and later was involved in the development of other educational programs for the Guild.

Pat Langford’s work was included regularly in Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions from the time of her arrival in Australia until her death in 2003. She exhibited with the Craft Association of NSW and held several joint exhibitions with Prue Socha and Heather Joynes in the early nineteen seventies. She was a founding member of the Creative Embroidery Association and participated regularly in their exhibitions. She completed some embroideries to commission, including several panels for the Sydney Opera House Trust in 1961, and her work is held in the collections of the National Gallery of Australia and the Powerhouse Museum.

Margaret Oppen (née Arnott)

1890 - 1975

Margaret Oppen studied art at the Julian Ashton Art School in Sydney, and at the Slade School of Fine Art and the Grosvenor School of Modern Art in London, working initially as a painter and wood engraver. She exhibited with the Younger Group of Australian Artists in 1925. During the 1930s, while living in Brighton, England, she attended classes at the
Brighton Art School. In the late 1940s Margaret Oppen taught colour and design with Ann Gillmore Rees at the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW Craft Training School at Double Bay. In 1949 she held an exhibition of fabric printing and embroidery with Ethleen Palmer at the Grosvenor Galleries in Sydney. In the early nineteen fifties she lived in England, studying embroidery at the Royal School of Needlework. On her return to Sydney she established a studio in Turramurra, where she taught painting and embroidery. She was instrumental in the establishment of a branch of the Embroiderers’ Guild in Sydney in 1957, apparently travelling to London to obtain permission for this venture. In 1964 she collaborated with Pat Langford on a small book on the use of paper cuts for embroidery design. Throughout the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies Margaret Oppen was the driving force behind efforts to promote modern approaches to embroidery, organising exhibitions and establishing links with those involved in secondary and tertiary education in Australia. In 1973 she was awarded a British Empire Medal for services to the arts.

**Sybil Orr**
b. 1944
Sybil Orr was trained as a teacher at Armidale Teachers College but was mainly self taught as a textile artist. Although based in Tamworth, in early 1974 her work came to the attention of the Creative Embroidery Association and she was asked to become a member. In 1976 she won the Acquisitive Prize at the Tamworth Fibre Exhibition for an embroidered abstract landscape.

**Vivienne Pengilley**
1944 (UK) -
Arrived in Australia, 1970
Vivienne Pengilley trained at the Sutton School of Art in the United Kingdom and originally worked as a painter. She began using textiles when her children were small, producing large scale appliquéd wall hangings featuring images from popular culture. After migrating to Australia in 1970 she became involved with the Yellow House in Sydney. She held her first exhibition at Gallery A in Sydney in 1972 and continued to exhibit regularly until the mid-1980s when she stopped working in textiles and returned to painting. Several of her works are held in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia.
**Prue Socha**

b. 1930

Prue Socha completed a Diploma of Occupational Therapy in 1949. She joined the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW in the late 1960s and in 1970 was awarded the City and Guilds Certificate in Embroidery. She taught embroidery for the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW, for the Craft Association of NSW, and for other organisations. From 1971 until 1977 she taught embroidery summer schools at the Darling Downs Institute of Higher Education. She was a founding member of the Creative Embroidery Association. Her work was exhibited regularly in Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW and Creative Embroidery Association exhibitions. She participated in several Craft Association of NSW exhibitions and in joint exhibitions with Pat Langford and Heather Joynes in the early nineteen seventies. Her work is held in the collections of the Powerhouse Museum and the National Gallery of Australia.

**Cynthia Sparks**

b. 1920


Cynthia Sparks was trained as a scientist and worked as a science teacher in England. She became interested in embroidery in the early nineteen sixties and attended workshops with various well-known English embroiderers. After arriving in Sydney in 1967 she became acquainted with Margaret Oppen and began to offer classes in contemporary embroidery for the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW. Between 1967 and 1970, she taught extensively in Sydney and in regional areas both for the Embroiderers’ Guild and the Craft Association of NSW. Along with Pat Langford and Heather Joynes, she taught embroidery at the University of New England summer schools in embroidery from 1969 until 1979. Cynthia Sparks wrote extensively on contemporary embroidery for *The Record*, organised for exhibitions of Australian embroidery to be sent overseas, and carried out administrative work for the Craft Association of NSW. She participated regularly in Embroiderers’ Guild exhibitions, but not in Craft Association exhibitions.
June Scott Stevenson

(Mary Wilson Angus, Mary June Angus)
1893 Edinburgh – 1968 (Sydney, NSW)
Arrived in Australia, 1925

June Scott Stevenson trained at the Edinburgh School of Art prior to the First World War. She moved to Australia with her family in 1925 and appears to have been involved in embroidery in New South Wales from that time on. She is reported to have taught embroidery to numerous artists and designers, including Margaret Oppen, Marion Hall Best and Prue Socha. She was involved with the Women’s Industrial Arts Society and wrote articles on embroidery for *Woman*. Her small book on embroidery stitches was published by Ure Smith. She was involved in the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW from its inception, but does not appear to have participated regularly in their exhibitions.

Nola Taylor

Nola Taylor studied commercial art in Brisbane and became involved in embroidery in 1969, joining the Embroiderers’ Guild in Queensland. After moving to Sydney she attended classes with various Embroiderers’ Guild tutors, including Pat Langford and Heather Joynes. She first exhibited with the Embroiderers’ Guild in 1972 and was awarded an instructor’s certificate in 1974. Nola Taylor was a foundation member of the Paddington Crafts Co-operative. She held a solo exhibition at the Burton Street Gallery in 1974 but does not appear to have participated in Craft Association of NSW exhibitions at this time. Later in the nineteen seventies exhibited with and worked as a tutor for the Crafts Council of NSW and during the nineteen eighties she worked as a community artist in western Sydney.

Win Thorvaldson

1905 (United Kingdom) - ?
Arrived in Australia, 1932.

There is little available information about Win Thorvaldson, who appears to have practised several crafts. She was a member of the Arts and Crafts Society of NSW, exhibiting woven textiles with them in 1950. She exhibited with the Craft Association of NSW in 1967, 1969 and 1970; in 1969 her exhibits were her woven hangings. She was a member of the Embroiderers’ Guild in the early nineteen sixties, acting as chairman in 1960. She was heavily involved in organising the Dr Barnardo’s exhibition in 1961 and exhibited at the North Shore Arts Festival in 1963. She collaborated with Dorothea Allnutt on several
ecclesiastical projects and was represented in the Art Gallery of NSW ‘Craft 70’s’ (sic) exhibition by a piece of ecclesiastical embroidery.

**Jean Vere**

It isn’t clear exactly when Jean Vere became involved in creative embroidery. Her work appears to have been first included in an Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW exhibition in 1967, the same year that she became the chairman of the organisation. Jean Vere’s period as chairman of the Embroiderers’ Guild occurred at the time when the organisation was most involved in organising large scale exhibitions. Although reportedly modest about her own output, she was an active embroiderer who produced some significant original works. Her embroidery was included in Craft Association of NSW exhibitions in 1971 and again in 1973, and was shown in the first Tamworth Fibre Exhibition in 1975. She was a member of the Creative Embroidery Association and participated regularly in its early exhibitions.

**Caroline Woodrow (Caroline Wheeler)**

Arrived Australia, 1968

Caroline Woodrow studied embroidery and printed textiles at Hull Art College and Nottingham College of Art in England. She was a member of the 62 Group in England before travelling to New Zealand and then to Australia. She worked as a high school art teacher for the NSW Department of Education in the late nineteen sixties but by December 1970 was employed by the Bernina sewing machine company as a demonstrator, having previously worked for them in England and New Zealand. In 1971 she was sent by Bernina to the University of New England summer school in embroidery to provide technical assistance, the company having supplied machines for students to use. Caroline Woodrow’s contribution to the development of machine embroidery in Australia has not been fully recognised, but it is evident that the interest in machine embroidery as a technique in its own right or as an adjunct to other techniques increased significantly after she became involved in these summer schools.