



Detail of Hanna Lemberg's stitching on the dress.



Purple grey woollen shift dress made by Hanna Lemberg.

# THE FASHION OF LIFE

The clothing of a German refugee reveals much of her philosophies of life.

**Hanna and Rudi Lemberg shared a love of nature and of colour. For Rudi this resulted in his biochemical study of pigmentation; for Hanna it shaped the aesthetic she brought to textile work, including weaving, tapestries, embroidery and dressmaking. The National Museum holds clothing and a wall hanging that she made. Two tunics in the Hanna Lemberg collection, made between the 1960s and 1970s and worn by her until the 1990s, demonstrate much of Lemberg's attitude towards life, and pose some interesting questions for further research.**

In Germany in the 1920s Lemberg (1899–1998) learnt various textile crafts as part of her social work studies, and taught them to children. Hanna arrived in Sydney in 1935, with her husband Rudi (Max Rudolph) Lemberg, who had been appointed director of the Research Biochemical Laboratories at Royal North Shore Hospital. Hanna and Rudi had married in 1924 after meeting through the German Youth Movement in Breslau (now Wroclaw in Poland), where they both volunteered in a social work program attempting to improve slums. They were both members of the youth group *Wandervogel* ('migratory bird' in German) that encouraged young people to engage with nature and live a simple way of life.

After their marriage they moved to Heidelberg where Rudi worked at the university. By 1933, however, their situation became dangerous. Rudi's family were German Jews, and despite his service in the First World War (where his bravery

had earned him the Iron Cross), he was advised that it would be unsafe for them to remain in Germany. Academic colleagues succeeded in recommending Rudi to a position in Cambridge, where the Lembergs were offered a home with a member of the Society of Friends (widely known as Quakers).

The Academic Assistance Council in the UK sought to find placements for German academic refugees, and this resulted in Rudi's appointment in Sydney. He soon resumed his research into the process of pigmentation involved in vertebrate respiration. Hanna assisted on at least one occasion, helping to process vats of seaweed to isolate and study the nature of its pigments. She produced woven textiles for interior designer Marion Hall Best and exhibited her work. In 1975 an exhibition of her 'petit point' wall hangings was held at the Macquarie Galleries, Sydney.

The couple shared a love of nature and eagerly explored the Australian bush, and carefully documented the plants at 'The Sanctuary', the property they bought in Wahroonga, on Sydney's North Shore. The bark of Angophora trees on the property inspired Hanna's wall hangings, including the one now in the National Historical Collection. By the 1960s Rudi had labelled all the plants and trees in the garden so that visitors could learn about them as well.

In 1956 Rudi and Hanna joined the Quakers, to whom they donated part of their block in Wahroonga and helped to build a meeting house, which is still used today. Rudi said that



*'There was much that appealed to us in Friends, both in their form of worship and their actions; the idea of the unity of faith and life, their sober mysticism, the seeking and exploring (which, like that of the scientist, does not expect to find final truth – static and ultimate or complete truth), the quiet time for meditation, their practical humanism, their acceptance of the stranger and of strange ideas.'*

The dresses Hanna made can be seen to embody some of these ideas. They represent the plain forms of dress often associated with the Quakers. Both of the dresses in the National Historical Collection are tunic-style shift dresses made from woven wool in subdued colours; one in blue-grey and the other a purple-grey.



LEFT: Blue grey zip-front shift dress sewn by Hanna Lemberg.  
ABOVE: Stitching detail. Photos: Jason McCarthy, National Museum of Australia

Bright colours were used in the stitching to decorate her clothing, contrasting with their otherwise plain style. Lemberg folded back the raw edges of each piece of fabric and then used a knotted buttonhole stitch in multi-coloured threads along each edge that formed the seam. The two sides were then attached by crocheting together the loops of thread using brightly coloured cotton. This created the decorative lines that can be seen on her dresses. The technique was an elaborate one, and would not have been any stronger than a regular seam, so it must have been purely for aesthetic reasons that she chose this method. It would have also have been more time consuming than using a plain stitch; even more so as it was all done by hand.

This decoration, however, does not detract from the overall simplicity of the design and material of the dresses. They feature the natural fibres of wool and cotton with which she preferred to work. This conforms to the ideal of simplicity that Hanna learnt both from the *Wandervogel* as well as the Quakers.

They also offer further opportunities for research into Lemberg's life and work. The particular form of crochet technique that she used appears to be one of her own invention. It raises questions about whether Hanna used the techniques she learnt as a young woman in 1920s Germany, or whether she adapted these in response to her life in Sydney, both in response to the different environment she found herself in physically, exploring the Australian bush, and spiritually, as she engaged with the philosophies of the Society of Friends.

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*Curators and registrars on this project assess and accession collections, with a particular focus on enhancing collection research and documentation available online.*