

THE CRIMSON THREAD OF KINSHIP



As an embroiderer, Sharon Peoples was immediately struck when she discovered the words 'the crimson thread of kinship', a quote from Henry Parkes describing the relationship of the people of the Australian colonies with each other and with the mother country, Britain.

The ACT Embroiderers' Guild commissioned Peoples to design a large public embroidery for members to sew and donate to the National Museum of Australia, then being built on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin. This was the third large embroidery the Guild had undertaken and members welcomed the opportunity to complete this new work as part of the celebrations of the Centenary of Federation. The Guild received funding from the Centenary of Federation Fund.



Peoples read widely while researching the project. From Rodney Hall's novel, *The Island in the Mind*, she formed an image of a collapsed mountain and cloud. Ideas around gender and space, stars and computers are discussed in Margaret Wertheim's books *Pythagoras' Trousers* and *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* and helped distil Peoples' ideas.

'I flew from Europe over Brazil at night and knew then that the southern sky would be the main background', Peoples told me. 'I drew a sketch to approximate scale, 2cm x 12cm, and the images fell into place. A crimson thread and a cloud made of pieces of paper trailing across the sky were the focus.'

'I presented this tiny sketch, with much explanation, to the curator and staff at the Museum, who were very enthusiastic.'

Preparing the working drawings and designs for a large group of women – eighty-five in total – to work took some time. She worked on lengths of brown paper, similar to the colour of the raw linen to be used in the embroidery. 'I worked on a scale of 1:6, then 1:4 as the details became more apparent. Some details could not be scaled down, so the next step was to prepare the whole thing to life size.'



Right: Members of the ACT Embroiderers Guild working on the Crimsen Thread of Kinship, 2000
Photo: George Serras, National Museum of Australia



Above: The Crimsen Thread of Kinship by the ACT Embroiderers Guild, National Museum of Australia
Photo: © Sharon Peoples, Licensed by VISCOPY, Australia, 2005.

The colours and quantity of thread had to be calculated. 'Normally, in my own artwork, I chop and change, choosing colours as I go. Here I had to determine every colour and the quantity before stitching. However, when there were missing colours, or discrepancies, I was able to visit and make a decision. In the end, of course, they had the confidence to do this themselves.'

Like the sky we see from a mountain, or high point in the Australian country, the sky is the predominant feature in the embroidery and domestic motifs are integral to the design.

Reading from the left-hand edge, images of an Aboriginal midden containing sea shells and flints remind us of Australia's ancient past. Several worked shells are appliquéd to the surface, but others are starkly placed among shadows, so that they appear to be three-dimensional. A large wave curves up from the shore, taking us from the detail to the big picture.

Europeans brought paper to Australia, and a crimson thread, emerging from the tan-ochre of the land that fades into the sand, picks up pieces of the collapsed cloud – or paper – and they follow each other across the entire canvas of the embroidery, occasionally tangling together.

A bright orange safety fence emerges from the ground and runs along a rise of trees and bushes, transforming bush and farmland into suburbia. 'I had been drawing and photographing Gungahlin since 1992 – another domestic scene', Peoples explained.

The crimson thread continues, high in the work and occasionally dipping towards the bottom, following a road that runs through rolling hills and picking up larger pieces of paper, and stars are picked out.

Stars transmogrify into symbols of western domesticity – stark white knives, spoons and forks, a teapot and coffeepot float in the dark indigo night sky. The paper sheets become a frying pan and a moon. We are left in no doubt that Peoples feels strongly about the importance of family life and its inherent rituals in the vast universe.

The Guild had only twelve months to complete the new embroidery. Made up of six separate panels, some are densely worked and entirely covered, others have very little embroidery. Peoples explained: 'It would have been impossible in the time frame to cover the surface in embroidery so I designed the work to leave areas of linen exposed to reduce stitching time.'

The National Museum, which had supported the application, offered storage, mounting and framing of the embroidery. Staff members were involved in designing the frames, washing the linen before stitching, and ensuring appropriate conservation standards. The embroidery is worked in Appleton's wool on Glenshee linen, using stem stitch that runs diagonally along the twill weave.

'Seeing the design come to life was the most exciting part of the process for me', Peoples reminisces. 'Gouache and brown paper are one thing, how they translate into wool embroidery on linen is quite another. The most interesting colour to see was the crimson thread, changing colour across the twelve metres.'

At the hand-over ceremony in January 2001, the word 'thrilled' was used by all, from the Director of the Museum, Dawn Casey, the curator Guy Hansen, other museum staff, the embroiderers and Peoples herself. 'To realise a group project which goes so closely to plan is richly rewarding.'

The crimson thread carries with it the unfolding history of Australia, gathering some of the many strands that make up that history. The needle, sewn into the embroidery, symbolises the act of creating and embellishing history. We are left with the lasting impression of the vastness of the night sky, which will always be there no matter what happens below.

A pair of scissors, thimble, samples of thread and several photographs accompany the exhibit. 📷

Meredith Hinchliffe is a Canberra freelance writer on crafts and the arts