

ABOUT MARGARET GRAFTON

Margaret Grafton (1930–2004) was born in England and trained there as an artist, later working in theatre and set design with her husband Dennis Grafton before migrating in 1955. She established her Darlinghurst studio in 1963 and worked, using a high-warp loom, on major public works commissions until the late 1980s. Many of her public works, some 29 in all, can be seen today in law courts, hospitals, city councils and NSW Parliament. Her tapestries are in the collections of The National Gallery, State galleries, the Jewish Museum, and individuals in Australia and overseas.

Margaret Grafton was one of Australia's few independent tapestry weavers. Jane Burns, former Director of the Crafts Board of the Australia Council, says "... she stood out in the second coming of the Crafts Movement as someone who was neither a 'spinner or weaver' nor a textile sculptor like Jutta Fedderson, Ewa Pachuka or Heather Dorrough. She chose a highly successful path of public commissioned artwork and helped pioneer today's public art field". Craft historian Grace Cochrane notes her singular significance amongst her artist-weaver contemporaries such as Ian Arcus, Diana Wood Conroy, Solvig Baas-Becking, Liz Nettleton and Rosemary Whitehead. (Cochrane, *The Crafts Movement in Australia: A History*, 1992.)

From the outset Grafton's practice was experimental in design and technique, well suited to the challenge of the 'image weaver' in an architectural project to develop an original interpretation of site, context and subject. She worked closely with architects Philip Cox, Andrew Andersons and Peter Johnson, and it was Grafton's crucial working philosophy to create an original tapestry, from concept to finished article. Her first commission, and perhaps her most important work, was the Tocal Chapel tapestry, like the building's radical design and construction, combines modern iconography with ancient weaving techniques. Philip Cox, who commissioned the work, referred to her rendering of Isaiah's vision—wherein wolves and sheep live together in peace—as "... almost a State Bayeux Tapestry". In 1965, Ian McKay and Philip Cox won the Sulman Architectural Prize and the Blacket Award for the Tocal Agricultural College complex.

Andrew Andersons, then working for the Government Architect, "hated bronze coats of arms" and commissioned seven heraldic tapestries for the Parramatta Court House (1972–4). Andersons also commissioned Margaret Grafton in 1980 to weave the State Coat of Arms for the NSW Parliament (the lift lobby), and a tapestry rug in 1983 for the foyer to help link the new and historic Georgian parliamentary buildings. Today the heraldic Parliament tapestry holds an exemplary place in the NSW Parliament's Textile Art Collection.

Heraldic tapestries can also create controversy. Grafton's first foray into metallic weaving was so apocalyptic caused such a stir that she abandoned metal for twenty-five years. Her silver 'waterfall' tapestry for the State Banco Court with its distinctive cedar paneling and tiered public galleries, hung for only four days. The tapestry was commissioned in 1975 by Peter Johnson of McConnel, Smith and Johnson. It and it was reported that Justice Street thought Grafton's use of aluminium foil in combination with traditional wool was inappropriate. When asked to take it down, she refused. Curator and art historian Daniel Thomas came to her aid writing "Fantastic, the first silver tapestry I know of anywhere ... the silver lightness of the weaving emanates beneficent friendliness, suitably embodying the institute of law and justice". Nonetheless, it was removed by officers of the court and stored in a cupboard in the

Queens Street complex, re-emerging seven years later and re-hung in Newcastle Courthouse, albeit shortened by a metre.

One year after the Banco tapestry, McConnel, Smith and Johnson commissioned a second heraldic tapestry in 1976 on behalf of the Commonwealth Government, this time for the Federal Ceremonial Court in Queens Square. Whilst not as radical in its use of material - it was all wool - it was a trademark, innovative Grafton tapestry, combining sculptural or high-relief woven elements with traditional tablet and inkle weaving. This tapestry received a more friendly welcome from The Law. In 1977 Justice Dean wrote a kindly note to the artist: "... it is a work of both beauty and integrity".

As with her return to metal weaving as seen in this exhibition, the botanical motifs in her late works were prefigured in earlier public artworks. During the 1980s Grafton produced commissions for several Sydney local governments. Of this group of works, the Bottle Brush Tapestry of 1984 for Holroyd Community Centre in Merrylands was her favourite with its 7-metre high central floral panel woven in wedge-weave a feature. Her last large-scale public commission was a narrative tapestry—as was her first major work, the Tocal Tapestry—and had faith and feminism as themes. The Sisters of Charity wanted to commemorate the Order's work with women convicts and the poor, and it was this aspect of their work that 'spoke' directly to the artist who successfully imbued the tapestry with this charged history. Finished in 1988, Grafton's tapestry hangs in the foyer of St Vincent's Hospital, Darlinghurst, in Sydney, founded and run by women as a free hospital in 1857.

With the decline of public-works building and commissioning after the late 1980s, and in addition to her continuing studio work and private exhibitions, Grafton turned her energies to philosophy. She had earlier set out many of her ideas on tapestry and weavers through the ages in 'The Decentred Unicorn' after viewing the Renaissance masterpiece, the Unicorn Tapestries, in New York's Cloisters Museum in Paul Taylor's dynamic new *Art & Text* magazine (1981). She held that the best tapestry is 'something else' other than an interpretation of an artist's design. She saw the upsurge of art weaving and sculptural weaving in Australia from the mid-1970s as in a continuum of tradition and argued that the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, established from 1976 as a reproductive service for artists and designers, entrenched a "baroque European stereotype". Her point can be differently made saying elsewhere that she had "never been asked by a painter to paint one of her tapestries."

Awarded her PhD from the University of Sydney in 1997 on her thesis 'Opposites: Opposition and Difference The Underside of Philosophy', she presented academic papers at numerous conferences on deconstruction and on the craft–design distinction and art–craft divide. Her final paper, 'Suck or Subvert, An Ethic of Tapestry Weaving?' (2004), reflected on the ethics and nature of tapestry weaving through the prism of her life's work.

Margaret Grafton worked from a studio at the manse in Palmer Street Uniting Church for many years before moving to McElhone Place in Surry Hills. As a single mother she was helped by her commissions to raise three sons, but sometimes this was not enough and had to work part-time to, in another sense, make ends meet. Active in the period of the Green Bans, she co-founded Darlinghurst Resident Action Group (DRAG) with architect Colin James and Robert Tickner (later a city councillor, then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs in the Keating Labor Government). DRAG was one of a coalition of groups (with Residents of Woolloomooloo, Woolloomooloo Residents

Action Group and Victoria Street Action Group) formed in 1973 to keep the area's heritage and socio-economic diversity. DRAG and ROW remain active today.

The last word belongs to the artist: "Patient and continuous weaving, quiet, small in extent, direct apprehension of reality in a difficult medium. The sober weaver's mind reflects, says no and no and no to elaboration yet the mystery of the random enters. Kinetic energies come into play; rhythms of the hand weave and coalesce with the just beyond of what has been expressed. The object lives." (Margaret Grafton, 2003).