

An art form through the eye of a needle

"ACE"
8/1/84

IT IS hardly credible in this age of push-button sensibilities that a collecting circle should have survived and indeed be thriving numbers.

A decade ago, women who lived around Franks, would meet each week in a private home to sew bell pulls and needle cases they gathered about this antiques branch of the Victorian Embroiderers' Guild has 150 members and a staff of work so impressive that it forms the current exhibition on the history of Frankston's McClelland Art Gallery.

The director of this regional gallery, Simon Klose, is vaguely amazed at the popularity of needlework as an art form, adding that even on the days when the gallery is closed, 25 people will come knocking on the doors asking to see what modern needlewomen can do.

Among a number of patchwork quilts in the display of almost 100

By JENNY BROWN

Items is one for a large double bed made by Kathleen Millikans. Restful in shades of blue and white the pattern follows what is called a "drunkard's path" and the card beside it says it took eight months to complete, stitch by tiny stitch. The consistency of the sewing makes visible an extraordinary degree of concentration.

Daphne Mould's six dining chairs, covered in a traditional floral tapestry design, took five years to complete. Most of the work is motivated for personal pleasure, not for reward, so the hours do not actually matter. The common drive shared by these women, who meet over card tables in a Mount Eliza hall every Wednesday, is that of creative meditation. Concentration brought down to a needle point is "utterly relaxing", they say.

Sewing is something most of them need. Enid Lang, the expert on cross stitch, says she sews only at night.

"And if I've had a terrible day and I can sit down to sew, it all washes away. I get really cross if a day goes by and I haven't sewn."

Joyce Boothby, 75, acknowledged by the group as the star, has not only mastered the subtlest techniques of embroidery but can also invent designs and color palettes. She just cannot sit still and do nothing. If not out in the garden she will be inside knitting or sewing.

"My grandmother taught me to crochet when I was a child," she says. "And in the olden days, when we just had the radio we'd all be knitting and sewing." Besides lacking the distraction of television, she tells that "when I grew up, we had to make do. We had to make our own clothes and knitwear. In those days, too, we made our own trousseau. Sewing has always been a salvation".

Joyce has taught her grandchildren, including two grandsons, to knit and do tapestry work. "I wanted them to

pick up these skills because you can make such good use of them."

At the weekly guild meetings, the women each pay 50 cents and spend three or four hours sitting about swapping news and new tricks. Last Wednesday, to coincide with the display, they held their meeting inside the gallery and each sewing circle — of quilters, cross-stitchers, those working with wool and canvas, and particularly the lace makers — was swamped by the interest of the visitors.

Marjorie Irving and Lyn Lord, making lace the old-fashioned way, with bobbins wound with fine white cotton and held fast on a mushroom cushion by constellations of brass pins, had people craning over their work, intrigued that this traditional cottage craft has also made a popular comeback.

Lyn Lord took up lacemaking five years ago after seeing a demonstration in London. "I was just fascinated that you could work all those bobbins

to make a pattern." Marjorie Irving calls it one of the minor achievements of her life and wishes she had started as a child so that she could achieve the very fine results that are possible. "I never get bored with it."

Much of the work that results from the classes and the private hours is given away. "I get enough satisfaction out of finishing something," says Enid Long.

While each meeting hones another skill, the real purpose of the sewing is probably one of friendship "and gossip". You wouldn't believe what they were discussing at the quilters' table ... it wasn't French knots.

The Mornington Guild is just one of the branches of enthusiastic embroiderers that has formed across Victoria. There are other branches at Ballarat, Geelong, Warrnambool and Ararat, but, ultimately, the standards are set at headquarters in Wattleree Road, Malvern.

The exhibition at the McClelland Gallery is open until 20 July.