

# The embroiderer's challenge

Picture: MICHAEL CLAYTON-JONES

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Do not underestimate the talent of Victorian embroiderers. **SIAN WATKINS** found bold goings on at their headquarters.

year's piece is next year's discard. You produce pieces for different reasons — sometimes someone sets up a challenge ... 'Oh, you could never use that technique for such and such', and I think 'why not?' So you rise to the challenge."

Four years ago, she won the Australian Wool Board's Inquisitive Award (the work hangs in the boardroom). It was a three-dimensional work that was seen as a no-no in some embroidery circles at the time. It was a picture made up of three delphiniums, slightly raised on loose fabric.

Alison Le Page, the guild's secretary, returned to the group six years ago after a long break. She was having personal problems, she wanted something that she could do "just for me ... I think that's a common reason for many people coming here". She was working on a piece at a classic arts day at Yarra Glen recently and someone leaned over her saying, "Is that going to be a doily?"

"People don't understand the possibilities of embroidery," she says, aggrievedly. McPherson agrees. Embroidery is an accessible form of self-expression, more so than painting or pottery. She shows a landscape, a combination of machine-work and painting made by an English woman, Verina Warren. Warren has created a field of wind-blown, summer-dried grass with a freewheeling sewing machine. Incredible.



No, it's not a doily. Wanda McPherson with a guild Bicentennial project.

The guild brings out overseas tutors with the interest they make on their maintenance fund. Still, Australian embroidery tends to be "more bold and experimental here

than overseas", McPherson says. "England was tied to their wealth of their historical work. Isolated, we didn't have the kits that other countries had in the early days. We

mixed wools and threads, we had to make up our own designs."

► **The Embroiders' Guild of Victoria, 170 Wattletree Road, Malvern. Telephone 509 2222.**

**A** member of the fledgling Embroiders' Guild of Victoria, a Mrs Allan, was working on the lingerie technique (as applied to table linen) at a class in 1967 when the whole fiddly process drove her to verse.

*My stitches are squiggly and far from right  
The design too large, the tension too tight  
The Floche thread is spilt, grimy and rubbed  
The Organdie, once clean, will have to be scrubbed*

But Mrs Allan knotted her brow, flexed her fingers and continued, and her tablecloth, on completion, would no doubt have ended up as another astonishing, yet unheralded, piece of art.

The guild operates from a renovated Victorian house in Malvern (it was a run-down boarding house nine years ago) that grew from fair profits, grit, jam-jar savings and husbandly scepticism.

Several things stand out about the place and the women who run and sew in it. It is incredibly well organised and its collection of historical and contemporary works, catalogued and stored in acid-free tissue paper, is breathtaking. But most of all, one discovers that precocious, flamboyant, inventive works of art are being created behind venetian blinds and suburban weatherboards.

The guild exists to lift embroidery standards, teach techniques (and

preserve old ones), and as a social group. Some members like embroidery's meditative qualities, but meeting with like-minds is important. There are eight country branches, which are now organising their end-of-year break-ups. Ethel Washbrook, reporting on Mildura branch activities, is organising the Christmas dinner. Warrnambool's Christmas dinner will also be held on 10 December.

The guild's president, Wanda McPherson, wears a collar made of drawn-thread work (the embroiderer manipulates the weave of the fabric), made for her by a woman in her 80s. McPherson's work is creative rather than traditional, she being part of the swing towards combining embroidery with painted and dyed backgrounds.

What piece is she most proud of? She can't answer that because "this