

## MAKING AND DOING AT HOME: PATCHWORK AND OTHER SEWING CRAFTS AS OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

Jane Malthus and Moira White

School of Design, Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand

### INTRODUCTION

The Otago Museum in Dunedin, New Zealand, is home to a sizeable collection of post World War Two textile crafts made as occupational therapy by Frances Jane Eames. Hand stitched patchwork bedspreads, garments, a curtain and a variety of 'soft' toys provide wonderful examples of creativity, but also of making-do, by re-using and recycling of fabrics, prints and surface designs available in the mid-twentieth century. Eames was housebound and often bed-ridden for over fifteen years by what has been described as severe rheumatoid arthritis, and was encouraged and aided by her daughter Jane, a physiotherapist, to keep her hands occupied with these sewing projects that are superb examples of mid-twentieth century women's domestic craft, some of which are now part of Otago Museum Collections. This paper provides context and showcases some of Frances Eames' extraordinary output and offers an opportunity to consider occupational practices of the past in the light of current theory.

Frances was born in England in the late nineteenth century (c.1890) and trained as a nurse/midwife, marrying Norman Barker about the end of World War One, and giving birth to Jane on 20 July 1921. Norman Barker died in England, and Frances then married Albert John Eames in 1925 and the family emigrated from England to New Zealand. Frances continued working at least intermittently in New Zealand as she is listed as a nurse in a Dunedin street directory in the early 1930s (Stone, 1932).

Jane studied physiotherapy in Dunedin graduating in 1943, then worked in private practice and at the Mater Hospital in Dunedin. While she was not trained in occupational therapy, Jane's skills would have led her to realise that her mother needed to have her mind and hands occupied as her condition got worse, and to keep moving those parts of her body that she could move without too much pain. She would have wanted to provide her mother with some goal directed activity that had meaning for her and was a labour of love, (Caulton and Dickson, 2007). She would have been very aware of the loss or limitation of activities that prevented Frances from taking part in normal life on an equal basis with others, and the resultant possibility of feelings of hopelessness, depression, and anxiety (Orchanian, 2012).

Occupational therapy is concerned with the individual's ability to perform life tasks, meet their own needs and be a contributing member of a community (WFOT, 2012). The profession of occupational therapy developed considerably in various parts of the world between World Wars One and Two, partly as a need to return people to combat or productive war work. The first texts and schools were established overseas during World War One and various associations of professionals began in the 1930s. In New Zealand in the 1920s Trained Masseurs' Associations were established as precursors to both occupational and physio therapies (Kai Tiaki, XIII, 1920, p. 42). But despite talk of a team approach to rehabilitation between the disciplines, in Otago at least, Occupational Therapy was established as a separate specialty, becoming a department of the Dunedin hospital in 1941 (Shaw, 2013).

Jane probably helped her mother with many life tasks such as grooming, shopping, cooking, and significantly for this paper, 'to engage in satisfying recreational and avocational pursuits.' (Mosey, 1981, p. 7). So, for her mother, Jane took on the role of occupational therapist as well as physiotherapist, and the collaboration between therapist and client must have been planned by both in order to achieve best possible outcomes. Presumably Jane undertook these roles with the blessing and even prescription of Frances's medical doctor, since that was usual procedure for both professions at this time. Because pain, swelling, 'undue heat' and limited movement characterise various rheumatoid conditions, occupational therapy was done with careful grading and timing. Crafts requiring several distinct movements were thought more suitable (Hick, 1948).

It was apparent that textile and dress items were treasured in this household, as Jane's baby clothes and toys, and the dolls clothes made by her grandmother had been brought to New Zealand and kept, so it was probably inevitable that the therapeutic craft chosen would concern textiles. However, any craft had to be done without machinery, as Frances was often bed-ridden during the 1950s and 1960s. Patchwork fitted this requirement and had been revived as a hobby during World War Two in places such as London, because it was portable and could be done during black-outs. It is of course entirely possible that Frances's interest in patchworking and other textile crafts predated her arthritis, and she had already been joining patches before she became bed-ridden.

To diversify the range of movements and provide alternative recreational and creative interest, as Levine (1987) and Cronin and Graebe (2018) have pointed out was necessary for patients in these circumstances, Frances also made items other than patchwork. Hooked floor rugs that re-used and recycled knitted textiles into modernist designs, dressed dolls and soft toys are part of the Otago Museum collection of her work, but some also went to fundraisers for the Catholic church, schools or charities. Inspiration and patterns for the hooked rugs and soft toys may well have come from craft and home-making magazines of the period, such as *Stitchcraft*, but the materials used were those on hand, or donated by local businesses or friends.



Figure 1 & 2: Humpty Dumpty and dolls. Frances Eames, 1950's-60's. G2008.446, G2008.482, G2008.476. Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin

However, patchwork was the most prolific of the activities, and Frances recycled garment fabric scraps or old sample book pieces into curtains, tablecloths, bedspreads, toilet bags, a skirt and dressing gowns, which were used to decorate, brighten and warm their Dunedin villa. The fabrics to supply this quantity of output must have come in part at least from friends and fellow church members, so social connections were recognised and remembered in the display of the resulting useful household items. As Fitz Gerald (2003) points out, the use of fabric gifts as mementoes included in patchwork was not new.



Figure 3: Padded quilt using printed fabrics. Frances Eames, 1940's-50's G2008.377. Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin

According to Margaret Agutter, writing for *Pitman's Craft for All Series* in 1949, patchwork involved either pieced work where the small geometric shapes are first mounted on paper patterns, or appliqué, where odd shapes or patches are applied directly to a foundation fabric. Agutter (1949) recommended cotton prints and small patterned chintzes as the best materials to use for patchwork bedspreads and curtains, but also stated that silks and satins and 'the modern artificial silks produce a beautifully rich fabric when pieced together'. (p.1)

The fascination of all patchwork lies in the fact that the lovely multi-coloured fabric grows under the needlewoman's fingers, and ambition grows with it. A modest cushion cover has a way of blossoming into a handsome quilt, or full skirted housecoat...' (Agutter; 1949, p.2-3)



Figure 4: Chair back cover: Frances Eames, 1940's-50's, G2008.379. Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin



Figure 5: Single bedspread. 2.54mx1.68m. Hexagonal patchwork of plain and patterned fabrics stitched onto plain green Tobralco fabric. Patches have diameter of 2 1/4 inches, 57mm. Frances Eames, 1940's-50's, G2008.408. Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin



Figure 6: Crazy patchwork bedjacket, embroidered, quilted, padded. Frances Eames, 1930's-50's, G2008.381. Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin

Crazy patchwork is the simplest form of appliqué patchwork according to Agutter (1949). It was a favourite form of patchwork in the mid-late nineteenth century, and ideal for showing off interesting fabrics and embroidery stitches (Fitz Gerald, 2003). New Zealand museums hold wonderful examples of the earlier fashion for crazy patchwork, thereby recording fabrics available to settlers then. 'There is no planned design, and each patch of irregular shape and size is stitched in turn to the foundation material in a gaily coloured mosaic....The foundation...may be of any durable, sound material – cotton sheeting, linen or poplin for cushions, quilts or smaller pieces, soft hessian for hangings or heavy furnishings' (Agutter, 1949, p.17). Crazy patchwork uses 'every scrap of stuff however small or strangely shaped'; 'there is no wastage and much of the charm lies in the odd irregularity of size and shape' (Agutter, 1949, p.2.) 'Appliqué patchwork must afterwards be lined, so that the foundation material should not be too heavy or the finished work will be stiff and bulky' (Agutter, 1949, p. 17).

Frances's crazy patch bedjacket, her only surviving item in this form of patchwork, has a number of patches outlined in feather stitch.



Figure 7: Quilted, padded bedjacket. Frances Eames, 1930's-40's, G2008.382. Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin



Figure 8: Dressing gown, with shawl collar and wide front lapels, knitted fabric tie belt, long sleeves with narrow cuff, domes at waist, slightly gathered skirt, with patch pocket on right hand side. Frances Eames, 1940's, G2008.383. Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin



Figure 9: Dressing gown with collar and buckled belt. Frances Eames, 1940's-50's, G2011.287. Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin

Surviving paper patterns for Frances' patchwork show that she and Jane followed Agutter's instructions to make hexagonal patches from a circle with a radius of one inch, 2.5 cm – 'a very attractive and decorative size to work with' (1949, p.10). Once a shape and template are chosen then an 'ample supply' of paper patterns needs to be cut as accurately as possible. They cut accurate hexagons from old medical journals, magazines and newspapers. The fabrics were cut slightly larger and attached with tacking (or basting) to the paper with edges turned over the paper shape. Then each hexagon was whip stitched to its neighbour, in a technique often referred to as English piecing' (Fitz Gerald, 2003). 'The success of all pieced patchwork depends on the perfect fit of each individual patch; an error of a fraction ... will cause a misfit, out of all proportion to its apparent triviality, when the pieces are sewn together' (Agutter, 1949, p.13).

Agutter's *Modern Patchwork* has a chapter on the patchwork housecoat, a 'coat of many colours'. We don't know for certain that Frances and Jane Barker-Eames had a copy of Agutter's book, but the number of dressing gowns produced by Frances strongly suggests that it was an inspiration.



Figure 10: Dressing gown with cord tie. Five diameter hexagons. Frances Eames, 1950's-60's, G2008.403 Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin



Figure 11: One side of hallway curtain, 1130 at hem x 2240mm. Frances Eames, 1950's. G2008.395 Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin

As well as the dressing gowns Frances made household furnishings such as bedspreads, table covers, armrest protectors and a double-sided curtain that hung in the hallway of their house. There was a sense from one visitor at least of the house being 'papered with patchwork' (White, 2012). Bedcovers (or quilts in American tradition), as well as the other items Frances made are durable, decorative, and lasting 'documents of the everyday lives of... women' (Velde, 1999).

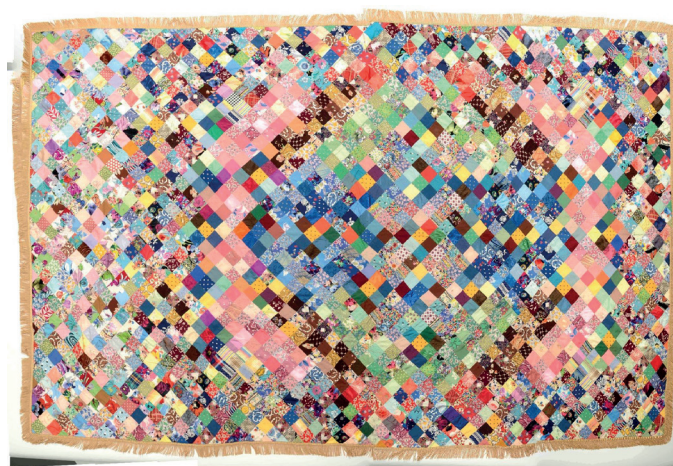


Figure 12: Fringed bedspread. Square patches of 50x50mm on diagonal in a nine patch rhythm of alternate plain and more patterned. Frances Eames, 1940's-50's, G2008.401 Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin

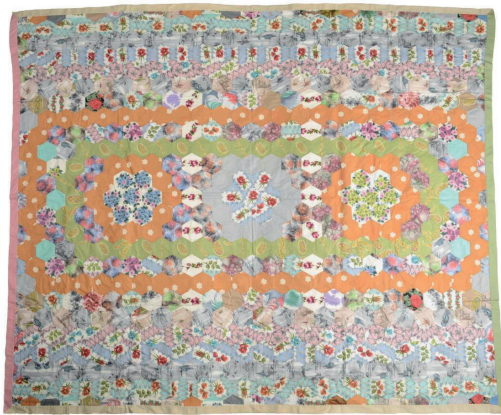


Figure 13: Cotton bedspread made from 613 large hexagon shapes, 1900x1640mm. Frances Eames. 1940's-50's. G2008.405 Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin



Figure 14: Bedspread with lavender theme. Frances Eames. G2011.288 Source: Otago Museum, Dunedin

Many of the fabrics used are repeated among items, so there must have been a reasonable supply of the right kinds of fabric for patchworking, perhaps from parishioners and friends and perhaps some were purchased. Floral fabrics were clearly favourites and the proliferation of daisies and chrysanthemums reflects their ubiquity in fabrics of the mid twentieth century, although it is tempting to also speculate that Frances's Japanese sojourn may have predisposed her to these florals. One can see that Frances became more ambitious and tried more planned designs, no doubt with the assistance of her daughter who did any machine stitching required, such as on the frilled bedspread. Was her aesthetic taste influenced by her time in Japan in the 1920s? That is rather hard to ascertain, since Japanese textile design at that time was inclined towards Western styles, including prints that resembled patchwork (Iwamoto Wada and Irai, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

Creative activities such as needlework have historically been used in occupational therapy, but their use has declined in recent decades (Mullersdorf & Ivarsson, 2016). A recent study in Sweden found that occupational therapists still used creative activities to strengthen the clients occupational performance, well-being and self esteem, and a qualitative study in Britain with 35 women aged 18-87 who had acquired a disability or chronic illness in adulthood, found that needlework activities were commonly viewed as providing a means of managing pain, unstructured time, self-image and reciprocal social roles. The women's accounts confirm the value of creative activity for patients learning to cope with chronic conditions (Mullersdorf & Ivarsson, 2016; Reynolds, 1997). Needlework as occupational therapy clearly became a way of life for Frances Eames: we know that she donated some of her output to the church (Malthus, 2014), and that she entered items into Dunedin's Winter Agricultural and Pastoral Shows. She was placed second or third, and at least once first, in the patchwork section of the needlework crafts, and also placed for best-dressed novelty doll on more than one occasion (e.g. Anon, Otago Daily Times, 1961).



She managed to turn industry and keeping occupied into a form of art, incorporating mass-produced textiles in multiple colours and patterns into what Schoeser (2012) has described as 'carefully judged juxtapositions' of small pieces of colour and pattern to create subtle or not so subtle gradations of colour; '...using the simplest of tools: paper, scissors, needle thread, pins and above all hands' (p. 20). We can only hope that in doing so, she managed her pain, filled her days with enjoyable creativity and felt like she was contributing to her community.

Schoeser (2012) has commented that 'Western patchwork, initially a form of necessary recycling, now 'petitions' for the artistry of finely judged assemblages.' (p.365) But in the case of Frances Eames' patchwork the charm of the slightly more random effects gained by using one's own scraps and those from friends, and fabrics not especially made for the craft of patchwork, such as the recycled evening dresses that appear in the curtain, make for a more pleasing outcome. Her patchwork and soft toy legacy leaves us in awe of one sort of occupational therapy: making and doing on a domestic yet grand scale. It provides a wonderful reference library of mid-twentieth century fabrics, prints and surface designs, and ideas for combining them.

### **CORRESPONDING AUTHOR**

Jane Malthus, Otago Polytechnic; Email: [janemalthus4@gmail.com](mailto:janemalthus4@gmail.com); Tel: +64347996111

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