

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CTANZ 2017 SYMPOSIUM¹

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This year's theme for the Costume and Textiles Association of New Zealand's (CTANZ) two-day symposium was "Fibre: Connecting People." An exhibition of the same name ran alongside the symposium at the Waikato Museum, curated by Yanni Split of Creative Fibre. A vibrant display of textiles and garments, fibre art and craft explored the perspectives of migrants as represented through favourite pieces from their homelands. Richly embroidered clothing, delicate lacework, intricate handcrafted pieces in crochet, felt work and traditional dress all featured in the show. Traditional dress garments and textile heirlooms sat alongside works by modern practitioners of traditional fibre arts.

According to the symposium page on the CTANZ website, "The global connection of textiles allows cultures to express their values, emotions and heritage through textile story telling. This intimate connection allows textiles to speak of their journey, its social and physical environment expressed through pattern, colour, fibre, texture and stitch."²



Figure 1. CTANZ 2017 Symposium. Photo montage: 1. Dance costume – detail (Kiribati); 2. Marion Moreno (Chile), The Women of Chile; 3. Rag rug on sack substrate (England); 4. Tivaevae (Cook Islands); 5. Set of plate protectors (cotton bobbin lace – Denmark); 6. Silk wedding gown (Japan), Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

The symposium presentations over the two days fell roughly into three themes: the stories behind the frocks (conservation and research into dress and textiles); garments and textiles as art; and textiles as vehicles for the transmission and translation of ideas, expressions of different cultures and identity.

Doris Du Pont opened the symposium with an appeal for open-heartedness and mutual cultural exchange, which she saw as offering unparalleled opportunities for the enrichment of society. In her keynote presentation she unpacked the story behind the *Flaunt Suit*, a case study of mutual collaboration across two cultures involving

Du Pont, a Pakeha designer, and John Pule, a poet and painter from Nuie. Her collaboration on the *Flaunt Suit* (2003) was a coming together of art and fashion. The screen-printed design of the fabric was based on a work on paper by Pule, translated into a repeating textile pattern and transformed into a highly tailored garment.

The tailoring of the piece was a comment on fashion as the domain of the white, middle-class West, and also on the notion of tailoring to accentuate the idealised “norm” of feminine curves, which is given precedence over cultures where garments are wrapped and tied. Fashion is not just clothing, it is a vehicle to present oneself. It is the façade by which one can reinvent oneself and also a means to conform, to fit into the current tribe. It is a performance of clothing involving the creator, wearer and audience or commentators. The prevailing Western hegemony highlights the irony that in order to acquire a certain status and acceptance, a Pacific Island woman needs to dress and acquire status via Western dress. The *Flaunt Suit* hit the runway as a key piece of Doris de Pont’s runway show, “Let’s Gather Here,” held in St Kevin’s Arcade, K-Road, Auckland, as part of Fashion Week 2003. “Let’s Gather Here” presented an alternative view of New Zealand and the Pacific at the time and made waves in Europe and the US as well as closer to home.



Figure 2. Doris du Pont, *The Flaunt Suit*, 2003, Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

What do nuns keep in their pockets? While this was not something I had ever thought to ask myself, I learnt that Mother Suzanne Aubert of the Sisters of Compassion kept a Bible and a cheese sandwich in hers. Chrissy Teley gave an illuminating talk about the clothing goings-on under a nun’s habit in a kind of anatomy lesson involving habit layering, hoods and frills. The ornate frill on Aubert’s cap had vexed her as she asked questions about the vow of poverty sworn by women religious. The vow was a commitment to a life of simplicity and austerity, but “that” frill seemed at odds with the simplicity espoused in every other aspect of the nun’s garb. This was an intriguing talk which covered both the history and “sacred geometry” of women religious’s garments and “nun dolls” across the centuries, and the influence of the aesthetic of the French peasant dress on the design of the habits worn by Aubert’s order. (Incidentally, at the symposium there were an uncanny number of people in the room who were familiar with the workings of a goffing iron.)

Firmly in the vintage historical camp was Dr Tracey Wedge, whose presentation investigated sightings of textiles allegedly made for Mary Queen of Scots in New Zealand museum collections, including a fragment held in the Otago Museum. Upon these threads hung tales which spanned 500 years of history – tales of conquest, colonisation and the allure of the “black queen” as an important historical figure used to capture the public imagination. The care with which these delicate fragments had been preserved revealed how they had been cherished as family treasures before making their way into public collections, along with the stories of their provenance. However; close examination and comparative research revealed that these pieces were unlikely to have been touched by the hand of the Queen, as claimed. Nevertheless, they remain valuable as the surviving scraps of ornate, ancient garments and remind us that such textiles were a symbol of birthright during their period and an expression of extreme wealth and power.

Leaping forward to the nineteenth century, Gracie Matthews looked at links between dressmakers and fashion in her forensic discussion of two wedding gowns – the same but different. This was a tale of the migration of ideas from fashion catalogues and the influence of international shipping routes on fashion directions in New Zealand. American journals and catalogues were more readily available than their European counterparts, purely in terms of sailing time. We rustled through the history of another silk taffeta, “The Burwell Dress,” with Prescilla Gear who traced the journeys of Lily Rea, captain’s wife, from the Liverpool docks in 1858 and the dress’s many journeys across the Atlantic and sub-continental shipping routes until its arrival in the Southland Museum collections in Invercargill.

Fast-forwarding, this time to 1970s Waiwhetū, Migoto Eria took us on a tour of weaver Erenora Hetet’s personal wardrobe. This talk ranged over the beautiful woven cloaks for which Erenora is famous to the clothes designed and worn by her as a housewife. All her clothes were made by Mrs Maisey, seamstress, of Lower Hutt. At the ‘for best’ end of her wardrobe were the garments made for the Mrs Wellington competition, which revealed an operatic influence in their style and the use of elaborate embroidery. Some of Erenora’s everyday outfits were embellished with screen-printed elements designed and applied by her husband, carver Rangi Hetet.

The seamstress theme was also evident as Rosemary Deane delved into the trunks and pulled out favourite pieces from the Norma Evans collection, now housed at the Rotorua Museum. A farmer’s wife who had lived most of her early married life in hardship on marginal land, later in life she became president of the Women’s Division Federated Farmers and the Country Women’s Institute. Norma’s wardrobe was influenced mostly by the *Australian Woman’s Journal* in the days when pattern instructions were economical and a knowledge of sewing skills was assumed in the reader – e.g., “Sew side seams, put in zip.” As a skilled tailoress Norma was extremely resourceful, also making her own accessories to complete her unique style, including bread jewellery and millinery. One piece of headwear she made from a recycled felt hat – the brim of which she steamed at train stops in the jets of steam from the engine she was travelling in on her way to her father’s funeral.

“Mending,” once a formal part of the New Zealand curriculum for young girls, has fallen by the wayside in the wake of cheap clothing and loss of skills. In her research into items in museum collections which had undergone stitching repairs, Dr Stella Lange has spent many nights trawling through *Papers Past* in her investigation into the value of mending. She concluded that “Repair” is the missing “R” in Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Her research using key words turned up many advertisements for boarding houses, and it became apparent that the availability of “mending” as an in-house service was a feature in ads for accommodation for men. Not so for women – who, it was assumed, would have these skills by virtue of their gender. (The presence of a piano was the other means by which to sort the wheat from the chaff when searching for superior lodgings.)

Also on the theme of repair, fresh from Fashion Revolution month in Dunedin, the instigator of New Zealand’s first Sewing Lounge and the travelling SEW LOVE truck, Sarah Lancaster, shared her tales from the road. At pop-up sewing DIY pit stops, she took sewing to the people in a road trip to promote a “make it, mend it, up-cycle it” attitude for the twenty-first century. Bringing people together over the sewing machines in her mobile workshop, she shared her sewing skills and her unique brand of SEW LOVE, in the process saving jeans from the landfill, one patched denim knee at a time. Fix-it cafes and sewing lounges are starting to appear around the world in a reaction to over-consumption and as the hidden social and environment costs of fast fashion become apparent.

In keeping with the migration theme, Christine Keller told her story of coming to New Zealand as a German immigrant, teaching at the Dunedin School of Art and now sharing her skills with community and master-weaving classes at her new venture, Dunedin’s LoomRoom. The two self-built flying-8 looms (fly-shuttle countermarch looms with eight harnesses) she started with, designed by Hamburg weaver Andreas Moeller, were the first looms of their kind in Australasia. The revival of traditional loom weaving has also seen social enterprise initiatives such as Operation Tea Towel, run by Keller and her apprentice Adrienne Martin, and special art projects involving bespoke items such as the Balmer series tea towels designed and woven by Keller and Pam McKinlay for a recent art and science project. Bringing the theoretical ideas of scientists to a wider audience through the medium of textiles, and

specifically weaving, was the subject addressed by Pam McKinlay, drawing examples from the Balmer series and other textile works.

Cloth and the rites of passage featured in Glenys Mann's talk. Cloth holds within itself the silent imprint of energy and memory of wear on the body over the years. Her practice as an artist incorporates these cloth documents' "coded maps of the path each person has taken" in her work, often with a garment's surface enhanced by embroidery, and here and there a series of mending marks and other stitchery.

"Dolls of Resistance" was a chilling presentation by Rosie White. Her art looks at the plight of women and children trapped in modern-day slavery – the dark side of human trafficking for labour and sex in New Zealand (New Zealand!). She tells this challenging story through the modality of dolls – as a form of protest and also because dolls are used in recovery counselling with children by Hagar New Zealand, an organisation that works with survivors of this severe form of human rights abuse.

Personal narratives had been incorporated in the cloth and design work of Masters design student Sonya Elspeth. A research trip to look at plant resources used in the making of siapo took her to her parents' birthplace to discover the roots of siapo manufacture and design, helping her unravel ideas of belonging in a journey of personal discovery. The final part of her project explored the narratives of three people she was very close to as she incorporated elements of traditional design with modern techniques (such as laser etching) into her final cloth and garments.

Vigorous discussion followed "Unpicking Patriarchal Threads from Textile Art" by Leafa Wilson, who looked at the hierarchical nature of language in textiles and its distorting effect on the definition of art and craft – women's work is seen as craft and men's work as art. Her talk was richly illustrated with examples ranging from an ornate piece of crewel needlework done by a friend (hobby-craft?) through to Ani O'Neill's textile works (art) and an array of contemporary New Zealand embroiderers. These stitched works have given impetus to the art of embroidery as a form of textile protest art – its potency residing in the vitriol of the message delivered through what is conventionally viewed as a quasi-Victorian ladylike pastime.

Re-contextualising "nana-stitching" for the twenty-first century, textile artist and embroiderer Margaret Lewis entitled her talk "Wanna be in my Gang?" Well known for her street performance work, *the street loves nana*, in which she uses chicken wire as her canvas, her new project was influenced by Gary Glitter and came about as a protest piece against former Whanganui mayor's Michael Law's anti-patch law aimed at bike gangs. Gangs have ways of being identified, using symbols of inclusion which are also simultaneously symbols of exclusion. The backs of Margaret's jackets featured a central panel of needlepoint. For these works, she sourced phrases from many nationalities about belonging in the community, which she embroidered on the fronts. The fronts of the jackets also had special buttons and badges sewn on them, insignia acquired from other "tribes" – e.g., military badges from the First World War and Rotary badges.

One presentation had it all – fibre connecting people across cultures, religion, history, time, and across the oceans and the process of colonisation, as well as wealth, pomp and pageantry. Costumier Gracie Matthews turned raconteur as she recounted an urgent request to source possum fur for a traditional Aboriginal dance troupe in time for a special performance for Pope Benedict's visit on World Youth Day in Sydney in 2008. Asked if she could supply traditional "kangaroo for the men and possum for the women," she knew that procuring kangaroo skin wouldn't be a problem, but possum skin would be difficult as possums are protected wildlife in Australia. In desperation, she turned to a New Zealand fur agent.

Prior to the 1820s, possum skins were an important element of indigenous women's dress in southeast Australia – for warmth in the cooler climate and also for cultural reasons. The first skin gifted at birth, possum garments were then added to during childhood and were used in all ceremonies involving women. Ultimately, the owner would be buried in these garments, meaning that very few remain. Designs painted on the inside of the skins were restricted

to the area where the wearer was brought up. With the arrival of Christian missions, indigenous people were given blankets for warmth and “dissuaded” from their traditional hunting practices.

Gracie’s tale of the procurement of her skins included the significance of dreamtime dances, a brief history of the introduction of possums to New Zealand, and continued through her moments of torture as the skins arrived but were held up in Customs and other bureaucratic byways. With the day of the performance fast approaching, parts of Sydney were effectively closed down as security was ramped up and the skins, albeit tantalisingly close, were no nearer to the dancers. There was a happy ending and a gripping photo finish as the dancers finally took to the stage at an event attended by up to 400,000 people at Randwick Racecourse.³

The programme for the CTANZ symposium for 2017 was varied and diverse, unpacking the stories behind treasures both intimate and public and tracing their passage to our shores from around the globe. Fibre art and fashion continue to play a key part in new histories as new paths are walked and relationships are forged in our increasingly global home. The makers and the wearers give us access to new ideas and vibrant cultural exchange transmitted via the language of textiles. I look forward to attending the next CTANZ symposium “Unbound: Liberating Women” to be held 21-23 September, 2018, in Dunedin.

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1 CTANZ 2017 Symposium, Waikato Museum Te Whare Taonga o Waikato, Hamilton, 19-20 May 2017.

2 <http://costumeandtextile.co.nz/symposium-2007-fibre-connecting-people/>.

3 “Hundreds of Thousands of People fill Randwick Racecourse,” ABC News, 20 July 2008, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-07-20/hundreds-of-thousands-of-people-fill-randwick/229602>. Up to 400,000 people filled Randwick racecourse in Sydney to hear Pope Benedict XVI lead the final World Youth Day mass on 20 July 2008 (see photo).