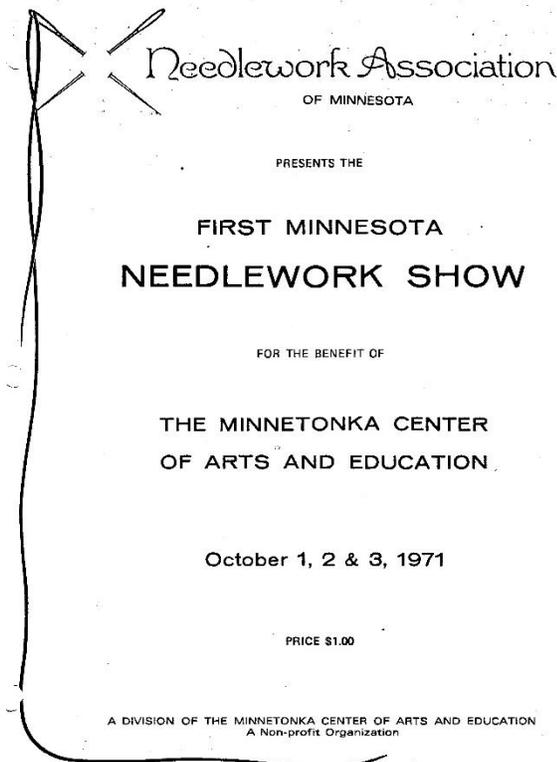


NEEDLEWORK GUILD OF MINNESOTA: The First Ten Years

By Marjorie Tarr



In 1971, Marnie Hensel and Mary Dayton were the leaders of a group from the Minnetonka Center of Arts who decided that a needlework show—like some held back East—would be a good way to raise funds. It would be the first needlework show held in Minnesota. To add more authenticity to this claim, they declared themselves the Needlework Association of Minnesota, a division of the Art Center, chose a logo of crossed and threaded needles, and had some letterheads printed.

The show was open to the public from October 1-3, 1971, and on the first day Georgiana Kane, one of the many interested viewers, asked how she could

join this Needlework Association. Someone on the show committee must have decided that there could be Life-After-A-Show-Closing, so a paper was put at the hostess desk soliciting the names and addresses of those who might be interested in membership in a permanent needlework group.

During the months following the show, some thought must have been given to how such a group should be organized, and guess who was acting as President *pro tem*? Georgiana Kane called our organizational meeting on May 18, 1972. We were to be the Needlework Guild of Minnesota and our first slate of officers elected that day included Georgiana Kane, President; B. A. Rizer and Barbara Cullen, Vice Presidents; Jane Winton, Secretary; and Chloe Massie, Treasurer. The speaker was Mrs. Margaret Anderson, a painter and needlework designer. Despite being confined to a wheelchair and able to paint canvases only by holding a brush in her mouth, her spirit and enthusiasm were a bright and optimistic send-off for our new-born organization. Although we were declared a Guild on that day, there were leftover letterheads and postcards printed with the

"Association" title which were used during our first year alternately with our new name of Needlework Guild. This is the sort of thing that drives historians crazy even though it was laudable from the standpoint of economy and good housekeeping.

From May until October 1972, all efforts went toward producing the "Second Minnesota Needlework Show." This second show (the first one produced by the official body, the Guild) was chaired by Mrs. William Mitchell who was not herself a Guild member. Three very important things were learned from Needlework II:

- (1) It is difficult to devise a fool-proof entry form.
- (2) It is wiser to choose a show director from within the membership.
- (3) Annual shows come too close together!

Sometime after Needlework II was over, it was suggested that perhaps the Guild really ought to have a set of bylaws. Betty Peyton secured copies of bylaws used by Guilds elsewhere and these were used to guide the writing of our first constitution. The bylaws were accepted by the membership at the second Annual Meeting on May 17, 1973. Therefore, in a legalistic sense, the Guild started life at that point and we are only nine years old. However, deep in our hearts, we know we are really are ten today.

In June 1973, we received Volume I, Number I of the Guild newsletter. There had been letters and notices of various sizes and shapes mailed out during the previous year, but this marks the beginning of the newsletter in its present format. Kaye Jones set very high standards for the newsletter, and over the years its excellence has continued.

Partway through our second year (February 1974) it was decided that our Guild should have a group project—other than putting on a show, that is. Members were directed, via the newsletter, which stitch to use to make one five-inch needlepointed square. These completed squares were brought to the Annual Meeting on May 1974, so a few stitchers could assemble them into a large banner. It was at this same meeting that our bylaws were amended. Our year would no longer begin with the Annual Meeting. Instead it would run from June 1 through May 31 and it would climax with an Annual Meeting sometime in May. Because of this change in the bylaws, our third year has thirteen months in it and

it both begins and ends with an Annual Meeting, another possible stumbling block for historians.

Needlework III was held the following autumn (October 1974) after a more reasonable two-year break which allowed stitchers more time to complete new projects. Our eight-foot banner of some ninety squares was prominently and proudly displayed.

When Sally Schreiber came to teach two workshops in January, she also met with the general membership in an evening meeting. I believe this was the first evening meeting held by the Guild. By springtime (1975) the Guild was starting to plan for its next major project—a Bicentennial gift for the state of Minnesota. New needlepointed upholstery for the sixteen dining room chairs would be designed and stitched by Guild members for use in the Governor's mansion. About this same time, the Minnetonka Art Center assigned us a permanent case for month-long displays of needlework.

During our fourth year we had our first Guild trip outside the metropolitan area (October 1975). Until then we had met at the Minnetonka Art Center or in various churches in the area. Now we took a chartered bus to Duluth to see the first needlework show—Needleart '75—of our sister guild in Duluth. By autumn, a group of stitchers were busily at work on the Governor's chairs, and we were ready to consider a new group project. Betty Lounsbury was appointed coordinator of a quilt project of unknown time or dimensions. Also, our library began to grow, and it was growing harder for librarian Marilyn Hann to carry all the books to and from each meeting.

In April (1976) the first evening stitch-in was held at Sarah Ahern's. This was different from an evening general meeting with a speaker, and it led to the formation of the "After Hours Stitchers", a small interest group within the Guild framework, especially for members who had daytime commitments which prevented them from attending most Guild functions. During that spring, renovation of the old Hill Elementary School next to the Minnetonka Art Center was begun. This would eventually become the Guild's home. The final big moment in our fourth year was a tea for all Guild members at the Governor's mansion to celebrate the completion of the chairs. Besides the happy stitchers and their admiring friends, Mrs. Anderson also entertained Muriel Humphrey (a

Guild member), three former governor's wives (Jane Freeman, Iantha Levander, and Florence Rolvaag) and stage star Mary Martin. Marnie Hensel, organizer, and Betty Peyton, designer, received many well-deserved compliments for the completion of such an involved and generous project.

During Year 5, our newsletter added photographs to its layout, the name of the Guild quilt project was changed from 'Minnesota Memories' to 'From the Land of Hiawatha', and we had our first meeting at Center East, the renovated 'Hill School. Not only did the Guild have a new home, but when a special bookcase/cabinet was built for us, the library also had a new home and no longer had to be hauled back and forth. Needlework IV under the direction of Barbara Hanson was held in October 1976 at the Art Center and attended by some 2000 visitors. Guild attendance was also increasing and when the November meeting with Judy Gross drew 92 people, our Board realized that some thought must be given to choosing the kind of presentation that would be visible, audible, and enjoyable for such large audiences. It was decided that one way to include more members would be to form several small interest groups patterned after the already successful after-hours, quilt and counted thread groups. With the formation of these small groups, it was felt that meetings for the entire membership need only be held bimonthly, but after just a few months we returned to a schedule of monthly meetings, half of them of an informal nature and half with guest speakers. At another meeting, (March 1977) we tried an experiment with an assignment or project outlined in the newsletter, with the



From the Land of Hiawatha quilt, currently in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society.

completed 'homework' to be brought to the March meeting for display, discussion, and critique.



1986.273.1 (detail) Minnesota Historical Society

From the *Land of Hiawatha* quilt detail.

We began our sixth year (1977-78) with the announced completion of the design by Kaye Jones for our quilt project. Also, we accepted the responsibility for acting as host guild for the traveling National Standards Council of American Embroiderers show, *Stitchery '77*. Agnes Ryan, who was in charge of arrangements with the Northwestern National Bank downtown had to cancel the Guild's evening gala when the show failed to arrive on time.

November brought another first - our first members-only juried show for original work, hung in Center East. Our first white elephant sale was held in March; odd bits of yarns and unfinished projects changed hands and the money raised went to the aid of the library. In April, another show opening had to be delayed. At least seven of the ribbon winners at the United Hospital Show held at Dayton's, St. Paul, were members of our Guild. All ribbon winners were invited to a preview evening reception, but explosions in the sewer lines and the subsequent power failure for several city blocks in the area put an end to that party before it even got started. We closed our sixth year with our first Quilt Show which was hung on time and was not interrupted by any explosions other than those of delight at the colorful display engineered by Jan Tesler and her committee. There had been a hope that the Hiawatha quilt would be the *pièce de résistance* at *Quilts of the '70's*, but when it became obvious that it couldn't be finished in time, it was decided to include it in the show as a 'work in progress', a happy solution.

Our first Guild retreat at the Koinonia Retreat Center, with Helen Richards and Mary McMenamain, started our seventh year. It was so successful a venture that it has been repeated every year since. Needlework V in October 1978 had a new wrinkle - a raffle of hand-stitched items. The finished Hiawatha quilt, after more than 1700 hours of work, was on display for the first time. After the show closed, several pieces were invited by the First National Bank to a showing downtown,

and we hit the “Big City”. Our first out-of-state bus trip, to South Dakota, was a special spring event in April 1979.

Our eighth year continued such established programs as retreat, workshops, interest groups, and juried show, but there were two significant changes. In October 1979, a decision was made that the dues, which had been \$10.00 since the Guild began, would have to be raised to \$15.00. And in December the Board made a major decision to move out from under the wings of the Minnetonka Center of Arts and into a new home and a new relationship with the Elliot Center for the Arts, St. Louis Park.

At our third retreat, (June 1980) our growing affection for Koinonia and our appreciation of its staff and facilities, led the Guild to a decision to make some kind of wall hanging as a gift to be presented the next year. Audre Gaer agreed to guide that project. Our Board decided that the timetable we had been following of biennial October needlework shows was not one that was necessarily written in stone but could be changed. Jan Tesler and Kaye Jones agreed to the joint directorship of a show to be held in May 1981 at the time of the Annual Meeting. They called it *Kaleidoscope - Artistry in Stitches* - surely a more poetic title than Needlework VI. I've always suspected that the name, without the number, was really chosen because no one could figure out just how many shows we had had. Having already ventured into the city of Minneapolis with our First National Bank sponsored exhibit and with guild needlework featured in several downtown shop windows as advertisements for previous shows, we now went “all the way” and hung Kaleidoscope in the downtown Dayton's Gallery 12. The gift for the Koinonia Retreat Center, a wall hanging using the ragging technique and titled *Of Earth and Water, Woods, and Grasses*, was on prominent display. It was later joyfully given and joyfully received and hung at the fourth retreat which began this, our tenth year.

Those of us who have not been on the Board or intimately connected with the ongoing, nitty-gritty of plans and programs don't hear too much about dilemmas of cramped or poorly lit meeting rooms, noisy lawn mowers, auditoriums too light for slide shows, hauling library or hostess supplies, lack of trustworthy video and audio equipment, and awkward airline schedules. After the fact we may hear about more traumatic events: Agnes Ryan's cancellation of the wine and cheese party for the late-in-arriving show, our need to find a new home base after

severing ties with the Minnetonka Art Center, or the stolen pieces of needlework from the second juried show. Another such agonizing moment had a happy ending. Horrified quilters found, when they arrived to stitch, that someone's carelessly placed cigarette had burned a hole through the dust cover over the quilting frame and into the Hiawatha Quilt, scorching a small nuthatch. Neither in-lay nor on-lay appliqué, nor over embroidery, seemed the right answer. The problem was solved, and the scorch marks removed by the deft hand of LaVonne Dorrel, alias Super Spit.

It has been a growing, experimenting, and exciting ten years. What will the next ten bring?