



The Mitchell Cloth

Two years ago, I was most privileged to be shown a table or bed cover attributed to Catherine Augusta Mitchell (1812-1899) and thought to have been embroidered circa 1870 on Tasmania's East Coast (TMAG accession number P2008.15).

Once more, I have seen the cloth at The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery as an adjunct to a presentation in May 2023, but more of that later.

How did this happen?

A friend, Ann Cripps, during research she was undertaking, was previously shown the cloth which is stored at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery Collections

Table Cover, Catherine
Augusta Mitchell
TMAG Decorative Arts
Collection P2008.15.
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and Research Facility at Rosny. She thought I could be of assistance in identifying stitches and techniques. Our facilitator was Peter Hughes, Senior Curator, Decorative Arts, who kindly arranged for the cloth to be displayed under Museum conditions, having spread it out on a large table under good lighting for us to see.

To describe it as 'breathtaking' would be a great understatement.

Historically, it is believed that it was stitched at 'Lisdillon', a property near Swansea, Tasmania, most likely by Catherine Augusta Mitchell (1812-1899).

Louisa Anne Meredith (1812-1895), famous as a botanical illustrator and natural historian, may well have inspired many women in the area to express their love of botany in reproducing plants through embroidery and sketching. This scientific pursuit provided an outlet for their acute observation of plants at a time when women's domesticity was not expected to include such detailed and specialised work.

This cloth was displayed for many years under glass in the small museum in Lisdillon Church until 2008, when it was given to TMAG by Mr Edmund Smith in memory of his wife, Mrs Zoe Smith. Mr Smith had been given the cloth around 1980 by Mrs Lucy Nicholas, a descendant of Catherine Mitchell.

On black cotton twill fabric, with a cotton backing, and needing some conservation and repair around the edges, this cloth is a thing of extraordinary beauty and has been described by Mr Hughes as one of the best and most significant pieces in TMAG's collection. The nearest thing to it that I have seen is a lambrequin or mantel cover on a mantelpiece at Narryna Heritage Museum in Battery Point, Hobart, in a similar style but of much smaller dimensions.

The theme chosen by Catherine Mitchell was the reproduction in embroidery of flowers and trees of the East Coast heathland: all natives, and superbly accurate in their depiction in stitching as photographs will show. I am no botanist, but I could see banksias, she-oak, kennedia, heath or epacris, grevilleas and wattles amongst the twenty or so varieties of plants depicted in stitches, so clearly portrayed that one could almost feel the prickles of the spiky wattle leaves. For me, the special specimen is the

she-oak sprig in one corner which caught my attention for its shown accuracy yet its obvious simplicity in stitching. Lengths of yarn are laid down in the reproduction of the piece, and small



The Mitchell Cloth,
she-oak corner
Table Cover, Catherine
Augusta Mitchell,
TMAG Decorative Arts
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couching stitches are seen at intervals holding down the yarn, just as the specimen displays its junctions in real life.

The cloth measures 166 cm x 169 cm and is embroidered with a different type of plant in each corner, with linking embroidered specimens along the sides. The centre is filled with a beautiful circular wreath of bush flowers. Despite the cloth's age, the colours are not badly faded or dull, and somehow still have the restrained 'bush' look, set off in contrast by the black background.

Wool yarn has been used in suitably accurate shades for the specimens depicted. I could see some chenille yarn used for wattle leaves — some of the chenille ('caterpillar' in French, and very apt for the purpose) had worn away, leaving just the centre construction visible. For wattle and melaleuca flowers, it seemed that tiny swatches of sheep's wool had been applied, giving a very lifelike appearance despite the flattening of the fleece through age. The extraordinary likeness to the actual specimens is stunning and indeed could be used as an encyclopaedia of plants of the area, so good is the stitched reproduction.

As I wielded a magnifying glass, the stitches I could see were chain, straight, buttonhole, couching, French knots, satin, stem, fly, and more. A raised area of stumpwork in the banksia specimen was visible — threads crossing in diagonals to cover the centre of the spent banksia flower and then further embellished with seed stitches.

The stitches in themselves were simple, as one could see, but the ways in which they were used, and the colour combinations employed, gave a most accurate picture of the plant, and readily helped identification. I imagine that the wool yarn had been hand dyed, as the colours were very subdued and different from the rather gaudy

Berlin Work colours used in items I have seen from around this era. I also pondered the length of time spent stitching this large piece on a black background — maybe outdoors, so the shades could be stitched correctly, or maybe by lamp light in the evenings.

I felt very privileged to have seen such a thing of beauty and accuracy and thanked Peter and Ann for the opportunity to do so and for the chance to photograph it and to read the history and provenance.

More recently, however, the Mitchell Cloth was on display at a presentation at TMAG where Ann Cripps was in conversation with Emeritus Professor and former Governor of Tasmania,



RS32: Mitchell Papers, The Royal Society of Tasmania Library Collection (detail). Used with permission.

Kate Warner AO. Their topic was the book for which Ann was doing her research at the time. She has now published her beautiful book entitled *Plant Collectors, Gardeners, Friends: Hobart Town and Beyond*, on which she was working over the past several years. In it she featured photographs of the cloth and they show in detail the techniques and stitches I have described above.

The great interest shown in the cloth on display by those who attended the function is testament to its uniqueness and importance in the early history of Tasmania.

I do hope that one day it will be on display in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery so that everyone can enjoy this work of art, for indeed that is what it certainly is.

SHEENA SIMS

The Hobart Embroiderers' Guild Inc.

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List of identified specimens: *Banksia marginata*, *Platylobium*, *Dillwynia*, *Callitris* (Oyster Bay Pine), *Indigofera*, *Rubus*, *Clematis*, *Leucopogon*, *Allocasuarina*, *Veronica formosa*, *Epacris*, *Melaleuca*, *Kennedia prostrata* (Running Postman), *Bursaria spinosa* (Prickly Box), *Comesperma volubile* (Love Creeper), *Hibbertia*, *Acacia* (Wattle).

Sheena Sims, second from left, at the viewing of the work in May 2023.

The Friends of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery are very grateful to Sheena Sims for making these notes available to our members.



