Christmas at Fairhall

is brought to life through the skilled crafts groups and artisans of Bendigo

FAIRHALL is a grand Georgian-style house in east Melbourne, home to the late William Robert Johnston's private antique collection. Since 1991, there began a tradition of decorating Fairhall for Christmas. This year over 60 highly skilled women artisans from various groups in Bendigo are involved in the Christmas show. Embroiderers, porcelain painters, quilters, members of the CWA, textile artists, spinners and weavers, as well as a milliner, a sand artist and a sculptor have made interpretations of the collection through their works of art.

The show's title 'Five Golden Rings and Other Glorious Things' is inspired by the Christmas carol 'Twelve days of Christmas' and relates to Bendigo's gold rush past. It is a collaborative process between the Bendigo artisans and the museum.

"Taking the inspiration for the Christmas decorations from objects in the collection is really a concept initiated by the former director and curator of the gallery, Nina Stanton," explains Robyn Ives, (former) acting director and curator.

"Each of the groups chose a room and selected the objects they wanted to reinterpret. Some of the artisans have chosen to weave a story relating to Mr Johnston's life around their work to give them a focus".

William Roben Johnston's collection began, when, as an eight-year-old boy, he received a gift from his grandmother - a small Minton coffee cup, made in 1811, which is still in the collection. The Central Victorian Porcelain Artists Guild adopted this cup as inspiration for the making of a matching saucer.

"The lady who executed the saucer was chosen because she is wonderful at copying fine detail," said Robyn.

It is in the blue room that the Bendigo Porcelain artists decided that Mr Johnston would be having breakfast, so they have created art pieces to befit that theme. "All the china on the table, including the napkin rings have been handpainted and painstakingly gilded. The inspiration for the design is the Baxter plate; the flowers and colour scheme on that plate are translated back onto the hand painted china."

There are other items within the table setting that have been meticulously recreated by the Bendigo group and represent the type of detailed work you will see throughout the show. Nothing in the home can be an actual food source so the two boiled eggs, cut in half and ready for Mr Johnston to eat, have been boiled, cleaned out, lacquered, filled with plaster and painted. His glass of orange juice is melted candle wax, the toast is made from painted salt dough, the silk strawberries are individually beaded, slumped glass becomes marmalade and sugar cubes are

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"Five Golden Rings and other Glorious Things" runs from 3rd November 2008 - 27th February 2009

Bookings can be made by phone: 03 4418 2518 or by email or online

www.smallertowncollection.org

THE YELLOW ROOM: Christmas angels, Bendigo Textile Artists

Photos Olivia Gill
...it has encouraged a great deal of interaction between the groups.

re-imagined with the help of tiny threaded beads.

It is in the French sitting room that Bendigo artist Suzie O’Shea’s dancing ceramic frocks mirror the Wedgewood “Dancing Hours” figures in mahogany frame on the wall. She has also wrapped her white and gold ceramic figures in layered folds, replicating the soft white undergarment and thin gold fabric worn by a regal looking woman in a magnificent 1683 portrait, painted by Mary Beale.

'Jugged Hare' was inspired by Mr Johnston’s Victorian collection, which dates to 1820-6, and the eight-year-old member of Bendigo Spinners, Weavers and Handcraft Group, she explains that her group’s Christmas tree was inspired by Mr Johnston’s Venetian Blackamoor console table and looking glass, which dates to about 1820.

The theory is that the top of the console represents Christ ascending into heaven and the little Blackamoor figures at the bottom represent hell. To reflect this, the spinning begins with angora rabbit, which is hairy and light, then we move down the Christmas tree we have used alpaca, mohair and silk, which is more textured as we head down towards hell. The entire tree is made from hand spun fibres.

The Bendigo Textile Guild chose the yellow drawing room for inspiration. Their stylised Christmas tree has drawn inspiration from various items including a marble obelisk, a glass tear drop hanging from a green chandelier and handmade Egyptian cartouches that echo those on a knife box.

An eight-year-old member of the group has contributed to Mr Johnston’s Christmas by recreating the peaches on the table from polymer clay, whilst the oldest – an 85-year-old made the fabric peaches and chocolates.

The Bendigo women involved in this incredible show expressed a satisfying sense of achievement, it has stretched not only their imaginations but their technical abilities and it has encouraged a great deal of interaction between the groups.

The wonderful thing about groups coming together to work on shows such as this, is the sense of community that evolves from it,” said Robyn.

Unfortunately, due to the sheer breadth of the work involved, not all the groups work could be represented in this article, needless to say there are many beautiful creations left for you to discover.

Before working in her current salon, Kelly McCarthy worked from home. This mother of three young children says that with her third child going off to school soon she thought it was time to conduct her business from a commercial premise.

"What I want to do is offer an affordable, professional service, which allows me to escape the demanding lives I was doing and be pampered. Being a mum I know what it’s like to be time-poor for myself and it’s reassuring you can still receive quality service at affordable prices.

Kelly offers a full range of beauty treatments, using quality products including spray tanning, which is chemical free and comes in different brands to suit all skin types and her YoungBlood mineral cosmetics is fantastic for people of all ages.

"It is a water resistant, talc free and chemical free product that is made up of only three minerals. The results are amazing, it is easy to apply and you end up with a natural healthy glow”, said Kelly.

The other great thing about Simply Beauty being located on the edge of town, not have to worry about bumping in to the Bendigo Spinners, Weavers and Handcraft Group, she explains that her group’s Christmas tree was inspired by Mr Johnston’s Venetian Blackamoor console table and looking glass, which dates to about 1820.

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