

Kingly creativity for Christmas

“Westward leading, still proceeding; Guide us to Thy perfect light”, a line from the well known Christmas carol, *We Three Kings of Orient Are*, became the creative strategy of nine different craft groups from the region of Geelong, Victoria for the annual Christmas Tour at The Johnston Collection, a house museum of fine and decorative arts, in Melbourne.

Lyn Hughes, team leader of the Geelong branch of the Embroiderers' Guild of Victoria who coordinated the making of Christmas decorations, explained that: “Geelong, about 75 kilometres west of Melbourne, is well known for being a busy shipping centre, and Mr Johnston travelled extensively throughout his life, mostly by ship.”

Because I was so impressed with last year's tour (see *Threads*, April 2009, p18), I was keen to see the 2009-2010 decorations, made by different craftspeople and perhaps inspired by different objects. How would this year's tour, with nautical and travel themes, enhance its context to reflect the Christmas season, Mr Johnston, his exquisite collection, and his generosity in bequeathing his house, Fairhall, and its entire contents to the people of Victoria? The Geelong embroiderers decorated the Green Drawing Room, the largest room in the house. Its traditional use was as a focal point for entertaining.

“We selected the colours, ruby/rose, green and gold, to coordinate with the rose glass, the green of the drapes, and the gold in frames and on the desk,” Lyn Hughes said. “They reflected the peace and elegance of the room.” This was immediately reflected in the large Christmas tree, beside the fireplace, which was in full view upon entering the room. It was decorated with over one hundred stars made by many Guild members. The cream and gold satin backed shantung was richly embroidered, beaded, and finished with gold to catch the light.

The three kings and their camels of the tour's title, designed and made by Geelong embroiderer Gail Spong, were stationed at the entrance to the room. Gail used materials as diverse as baked polymer clay, pellets, white wood shavings and polyester fibre in the construction of the figures, and dressed the men in robes of silk and satin, hand and machine-embroidered to reflect some of the form of the surrounding mirror frames and the French bureau plat upon which they kept watch over proceedings.



Three wise men bearing gifts, with camels, made by embroiderer Gail Spong, displayed on a Jean-David Fortanier and Jean-Charles Ellaume, Bureau Plat (1745-1749). The Johnston Collection A0029.

The camels were knitted in chunky wool, and embellished with a multitude of fibres and trimmings. Gail's many musings over fine art and old Christmas cards and experimentation with different materials resulted in resplendent individual figures with quirky engaging facial expressions.

Another Christmas tree, an ingenious “tree of sails”, situated at the opposite end of the room, was directly inspired by a painting by Englishman Thomas Luny. Embroiderer Pauline Shirlow initially took ideas from fellow Guild member, Janet Clarke. Her eight branches/sails of vilene, heavy calico, gesso and acrylic paint were then attached to a timber centre trunk/mast and base made by Gordon Griffiths. These branches/sails, rigged as on a sailing ship, were then covered with more than 300 gold machine-embroidered and edged stars.

The room was decorated to host a simple yet elegant Christmas Eve soirée. Guild members provided meticulously crafted traditional presents in bespoke packaging for the gift exchange. A sub-group of Guild members catered for the gathering with a lavish fruit and cheese supper. The wet-felted bananas, apples, mangoes, limes, lemons, pears, kiwifruit, mandarins, grapes and cherries were exquisitely made and arranged, as were the strawberries made by the Guild's younger embroiderers. Geelong's Third Wednesday Group transformed the Blue



Felted fruits, made by Geelong embroiderers and strawberries, made by Geelong Juniorss, displayed in large Slop Bowl from Scottish 36-piece bone china tea service, The Johnston Collection (A0661). Photos: Vivien Caughley.

Room, a smaller room, by using the line "Bearing gifts we traverse afar" as their theme. The centrepiece, a globe made out of dry-felted English Leicester fleece in white and deep blue, reflected both Mr Johnston's heritage and travels and the colours of the room.

A demonstrably larger-than-life New Zealand, prominently displayed, raised a laugh. Ingra Polic, its maker, stated that "while representative of a real globe, I did not want it to become an exercise in geography."

Of special note were two breathtaking slumped glass Christmas trees made by Vicci Crowley-Clough of the Geelong Textile and Associated Artists Inc, which decorated the Yellow Drawing Room upstairs.

Standing over a metre tall each, they provided different challenges of technique, scale and surface texture, and matched their setting superbly.

To do all the decorations and all their makers justice would require several Christmas Tours each year. Particular praise needs to be given to Sue, our tour guide, one of a dedicated team of volunteers. Because The Johnston Collection is a house museum with no roped-off areas and no labels, the encyclopaedic knowledge of the guide and the ability to convey it succinctly is of paramount importance to the tour's success. Although our tour had a specified start and end time, we were able to linger at decorations that caught our attention, and Sue answered our many questions with aplomb.

This second visit confirmed that the Christmas tour at The Johnston Collection, with creativity, handcrafted excellence and authoritative knowledge, is both a welcoming and an inspirational experience, a "Star with Royal Beauty Bright." I suspect Mr Johnston would approve.

The 2010-2011 Christmas Tour, to be led by the craftspeople of Warrnambool, is scheduled to run from November 3, 2010 to February 25, 2011. Again, I have already put these dates in my diary, as bookings are essential.

For further information regarding the Embroiderers Guild of Victoria, see www.embroiderersguildvic.org
 For further information regarding The Johnston Collection, see www.thejohnstoncollection.org

Vivien Caughley

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Globe (above) made by textile artist Ingra Polic, Geelong. Slumped Glass Tree I and Tree II made by Vicci Crowley-Clough. Photos: Vivien Caughley.

