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Women’s work or creative work? Embroidery in New South Wales high schools.

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Abstract

Embroidery is traditionally regarded as women’s work and the teaching of embroidery as a means of preparing young women for domesticity, a view which has been reinforced by historians studying changes in the high school art curriculum that occurred with the introduction of the Wyndham Scheme in New South Wales in the early nineteen sixties. This paper argues that those involved in promoting and teaching embroidery in NSW high schools at that time had a different agenda. They wanted embroidery to be seen as a legitimate form of creative work. The paper considers the relationship that developed in the sixties between the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW and the NSW Department of Education. This relationship resulted in a series of ventures intended to promote embroidery as creative, artistic expression rather than as domestic work. The paper argues that, in this context, embroidery was a vehicle for women’s agency and self-determination.

Key words: art education, history, women, embroidery, Australia, art worlds
Author biography

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Introduction

The changing context in which embroidery has been produced over the centuries was discussed by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock in Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology. They explained that embroidery has not always been an exclusively female craft. Until the Middle Ages needlework was executed by men and women at all levels of society. However with the advent of Opus Anglicanum embroidery, an exacting technique requiring exceptional skill, the practice of embroidery as a commercial enterprise passed into the hands of the Guilds which regulated training and work practices. At first women had a place in the Guild system, though not necessarily as full members, but eventually a split occurred whereby professional embroiderers were men and amateur embroiderers were women. Parker and Pollock place this change in the mid to late 16th century. They argue that what followed from this was an emerging view of embroidery as a pastime suitable for gentlewomen; a practice that symbolized domestic virtue, and which was trivialised as a result.

Parker expanded on these ideas in The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine. Parker’s central thesis is that since the time of the Renaissance embroidery has been used as a means of subjugating women, of training them to be submissive. She explains how in the sixteenth century amateur embroidery became more widespread, aided by the availability of professionally drawn patterns and printed pattern books, until eventually embroidery came to be considered an exclusively female occupation. According to Parker, over the following centuries the teaching of embroidery was used to ‘inculcate obedience, submission, passivity and virtue’ in young women, until by the nineteenth century embroidery was seen as ‘evidence of the naturalness of femininity’.

This view has been reinforced in recent years by historians studying the history of art education in secondary schools in New South Wales, Australia, who have made links between the inclusion in the curriculum of decorative arts such as embroidery and the perceived lowly

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3 Parker, Subversive Stitch, 128.
4 Parker, Subversive Stitch, 189.
status of art as a subject. McKeon described art in the years prior to the introduction of the Wyndham Scheme as a feminised school subject:

Art as a proper pursuit for girls emerged from the post‐colonial desire to train the population in skills which inculcated accuracy, discipline and industrially marketed dexterity. The period from World War 1 to the fifties saw governments continuing to constitute schooling goals in terms of filling needs for academic scholarship, for industry and to manage the home. It was, and to a degree remains, socially diverting for girls to demonstrate intuition and creative self expression.5

McKeon argued that art was a form of domestic training in which girls were ‘expected to draw prettily and embroider and make clever designs’ and ‘a feminised pursuit which is deliberately disengaged from preparation for long term vocational and intellectual practice.’ 6

In his account of the events which led to Sydney University’s acceptance in the early nineteen sixties of art as a matriculation subject, Peers drew similar conclusions, also making a link between embroidery and domestic work:

The 1947 NSW syllabus in art reflected the prevailing attitude that a subject for girls should continue a tradition in which they were being prepared to manage the home of their future husband. The art‐craft activities are modelled on practices utilised by women who are represented by the syllabus writers as domestic workers, and therefore aims (sic) to reproduce skills – such as embroidery and aesthetic appreciation through the study of ‘great masterpieces’ – which would presumably be utilised by women in the home.7

Peers went on to cite questions taken from leaving certificate papers, using them as evidence that the art curriculum was intended to perpetuate a state in which women remained dependent on men.8 He used the theories of Luce Irigaray to present events as a contest between binary opposites – the masculine and the feminine – suggesting that John Dabron, the influential Inspector of Art for the New South Wales Department of Education, consciously strove to recast art as a masculine subject in order to achieve the desired outcome.

6 McKeon, ‘Eighty Five Years’, 40.
In this paper I suggest that such a reading presents a limited view of the teaching of embroidery in high school art classes in the fifties and the sixties. Rather than presenting embroidery as ‘women’s work’, many of those involved in promoting and teaching embroidery in NSW high schools in the fifties and sixties had a different agenda. For the women involved, embroidery was not a form of domestic training. They wanted embroidery to be seen as a legitimate form of creative work, accepted by the arts community, and for (certain kinds of) embroiderers to be regarded as professional practitioners. Furthermore, there is evidence to show that John Dabron himself played a role in promoting creative approaches to embroidery within high school art classes in the nineteen sixties.

**Embroidery in the art class**

The NSW art syllabus which had been introduced in 1947, allowed for students to submit for their final work for the Intermediate Certificate and for the Leaving Certificate ‘one finely conceived and executed piece of Art-Craft work’. Included among the choice of techniques was ‘Needlecraft generally and embroidery, appliqué, cross stitch and crewelwork...’. It was in this context that students in some schools were introduced to the possibilities of stitching as a form of creative expression. One of the schools where this happened was Abbotsleigh Girls School, a private school in Sydney’s northern suburbs, where embroidery was taught within the art department at both Intermediate and Leaving Certificate levels. The two women involved were Janna Bruce and Dorothea Allnutt, who initially adopted what could be described as a Bauhaus-type approach to teaching in the art class, with Janna Bruce taking the role of the ‘master of form’ and Dorothea Allnutt that of the ‘master of craft’. According to Frances Brownscome, a student at Abbotsleigh in the mid-fifties, work was designed with the assistance of Janna Bruce and translated into stitch under the supervision of Dorothea Allnutt, although later Allnutt was responsible for teaching both design and embroidery.

Dorothea Allnutt’s approach to teaching embroidery at Abbotsleigh was outlined in an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1960 in which she promoted the use of original designs, a

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10 At the Bauhaus, the renowned German art and design school that existed between 1919 and 1932, each workshop or studio was overseen by two masters – one a master of form, who provided guidance on matters of aesthetics, and the other a master of craft, whose role it was to provide technical training. It was thought that this provided a more complete education than that which could be provided by a single teacher.
variety of fabric and threads and a range of simple stitches. Later in the sixties an article in the *Herald* described how students were ‘making big, bold and colourful wall hangings, using fabric and thread as a painter would use oils or a sculptor stone’. In Australia in the nineteen sixties, embroiderers and embroidery education were strongly influenced by recent developments in the United Kingdom, particularly the work of Constance Howard at Goldsmith’s College in London and Kathleen Whyte at Glasgow School of Art. In 1963 Dorothea Allnutt undertook a study trip to the United Kingdom, where she studied recent trends in embroidery education and took lessons in contemporary embroidery herself. Robyn Oswald-Jacobs, a student at Abbotsleigh in the mid-sixties, commented on the impact that this study trip had on Allnutt’s teaching practice:

> She certainly brought back a lot of word pictures. She told us a lot and her sense of energy was changed. She was much freer in the way she looked at things, so we did a lot of painting on to fabric and embroidery over the top and things like that which really brought together the [different] areas of the art department.

In addition to the work produced for formal examination, Abbotsleigh art students were involved in a variety of collaborative projects. In 1957 students worked on a wall hanging based on the creation story and in the early 1960s students worked two embroidered altar frontals for St Paul’s College at Sydney University. Dorothea Allnutt also worked with students to create costumes and settings for school productions, including large stitched backdrops for Christopher Fry’s play ‘The Lady’s Not for Burning’ and banners for a production of Benjamin Britten’s ‘Noye’s Fludde’, a joint production with Barker College. These were ambitious projects intended for public consumption; proof that in the art classes at Abbotsleigh the focus was definitely not on domestic embroidery.

There is also evidence to show that students were exposed to the idea that art and craft, including embroidery, was a valid form of creative work and a potential career choice for some. Prior to her employment at Abbotsleigh, Janna Bruce had had a varied career as an

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11 ‘You Needn’t be Such a Lazy Daisy’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August, 1960, women’s section.
12 ‘Students Break Away From the Traditional’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 September, 1968.
14 *The Pauline*, No 59, 1963:13. One frontal was designed by Janna Bruce (identified in *The Pauline* by her married name, Mrs Sowerby-Drake) and completed in 1961. It is not clear who designed the second frontal, but as the design is sophisticated it seems likely that it was also the work of a professional artist such as Janna Bruce.
independent artist, both in Sydney and in the UK, and she continued her own arts practice in conjunction with her work as a teacher at Abbotsleigh. She was not the type of woman to train girls to be domestic and compliant. Dorothea Allnutt’s background was more conservative. Whereas Bruce had studied with Dattillo Rubbo in Sydney and at the Westminster School of Art in London, where the focus was on training people to be professional artists, Allnutt’s design training was undertaken at the Ballarat School of Mines, which had a more technical and craft-based approach. However, she too was aware of the possibility of a working life in the arts and crafts as a consequence of her experience working for Frances Burke’s screenprinting business in Melbourne during the World War. Allnutt’s work as a teacher of embroidery both at Abbotsleigh and in various forms of adult education, along with her own creative work, led her receiving in 1973 one of the first Australia Council Grants to be awarded to a textile crafts-person; the grant allowing her to return to the UK for further study of embroidery and an update on recent developments in embroidery education. When applying for the grant, she was provided with glowing references by Betty Archdale, the famous former headmistress of Abbotsleigh; the incumbent headmistress Kathleen McCredie; and also by Jean Vere, on behalf of the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW. All spoke of her commitment and significant contribution to the teaching of embroidery.

With teachers who believed in the possibility of a career in the creative arts, it is not surprising that students also adopted this view. In 1968 the Sydney Morning Herald reported that Eden Dietrich, an Abbotsleigh student who had gone on to study art at East Sydney Technical College, had already sold some of the embroideries she had made whilst at school, while Robyn Oswald-Jacobs, who has worked as a textile designer, as director of the Frances Burke Textile Centre at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and as a futurist consultant, identifies Dorothea Allnutt as a significant mentor. Oswald-Jacobs notes that hers was a ‘career that was all started by Dorothea’, who not only encouraged her whilst she was at school but also encouraged her to study design once she had left school.

The 1960s

By the time Eden Dietrich and Robyn Oswald-Jacobs were students at Abbotsleigh, Dorothea Allnutt was part of a community of women, all interested in contemporary approaches to

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15 Dorothea Allnutt, Application for Australia Council Grant, File No 73/369, Australia Council.
16 ‘Students Break Away’.
17 Oswald-Jacobs, conversation with author, 8 January 2003.
embroidery. Embroiderers’ Guilds have a reputation as bastions of tradition, but this was certainly not the intention of Margaret Oppen, whose efforts led to the establishment in 1957 of a NSW branch of the Embroiderers’ Guild in London. With a background as a painter and printmaker she was firmly committed to a view of embroidery as creative expression, saying that:

In contemporary work the idea comes first, last and all the time. ... Contemporary workers have many resources, not just conventional materials, colour, threads and stitches ... The final choice from all these things is not made at once ... Design goes on until the last stitch is ended off.18

As the number of women interested contemporary embroidery increased, they began to work together to establish support networks based around this new way of working. The result was the emergence of what can be understood as an art world, according to the theory proposed by Howard Becker.19 As Becker explains it, an art world is a cooperative network which operates according to shared conventions – that is, a set of common understandings of how artworks are made, what they look like, and how you evaluate them. Art worlds develop processes for promulgating these conventions; systems for distributing art works (exhibitions, galleries and the like); an audience for the work; and processes whereby judgements are made about the work produced within the art world. Essentially, contemporary embroiderers in NSW created an environment in which it was possible to pursue the practice of embroidery with a high degree of seriousness. There were opportunities for education in embroidery and exhibitions which presented their work to the public, and by engaging with the local media they promoted their particular form of creative work to the broader community. By the early 1970s some members of the community were presenting themselves as ‘craft professionals’.20

During the 1960s a relationship developed between the Embroiderers’ Guild of NSW and the NSW Department of Education, resulting in a series of ventures which served the dual function of consolidating this fledgling art world and promoting contemporary embroidery in NSW schools. In order to explain this unlikely liaison, it is necessary to backtrack a little. Margaret Oppen had been a longstanding member of the Sydney art community and in the nineteen forties she was involved with the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW. Indeed, it seems that it

19 Becker, Art Worlds (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).
was through the Society that her interest in modern embroidery was kindled.\(^{21}\) Another member of the Society was John Dabron, who by the nineteen sixties occupied a senior role as an inspector of art within the NSW Department of Education. John Dabron had a long standing interest in textiles, having exhibited hand weaving in a Society of Arts and Crafts exhibition as far back as 1940,\(^{22}\) thus it was that Margaret Oppen and John Dabron knew each other. By all reports, Margaret Oppen, a member of the Arnott’s biscuits dynasty, was adept at using her social connections to advance the causes she was interested in,\(^{23}\) and in 1961 she arranged for John Dabron to open an exhibition of contemporary embroideries.

The exhibition, which was held at the Chatterton’s Gallery in Sydney, featured the work of Pat Langford, who had arrived in Australia in late 1960, having studied art in Plymouth and embroidery at Goldsmith’s College in London, where Constance Howard was promoting the practice of embroidery as art. Although she had done some school teaching in England, Pat Langford did not set out to be a teacher when she arrived in Australia. However when John Dabron opened her exhibition he was so taken with her work that he asked her to work for the NSW Department of Education, despite the fact that she had no formal teaching qualifications. Langford recalled him asking her ‘do you think you could do this in a school?’\(^{24}\) She worked as an art teacher at Asquith Girls’ High School for three years, teaching embroidery within the art department, before leaving the government education system to teach at Ravenswood, a Uniting Church school, where she became head of the art department. Like the students at Abbotsleigh, Langford’s students, first at Asquith and then at Ravenswood, submitted embroideries as their major works for Leaving Certificate art. Here again was an example of art being taught as a form of creative work, this time with the active encouragement of John Dabron.

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\(^{21}\) Margaret Oppen, who initially trained as a painter, taught at the Society’s design school at Double Bay in the late 1940s. The program, which was developed for the Society by Ann Gillmore Rees, included modern embroidery. Under Rees’ influence, Oppen began experimenting with embroidery and in 1949 her embroideries were included in an exhibition she and Ethleen Palmer held at the Grosvenor Galleries in Sydney.

\(^{22}\) Arts and Crafts Society of NSW papers, MLMSS 3645 3(9) MLK 02077 Mitchell Library, Sydney.

\(^{23}\) See, for example, Jean Vere’s comments in *The Record* 201 (1980). Pat Langford made similar comments in a conversation I had with her on 25 November 2002.

John Dabron’s comment to Pat Langford indicates that although Dabron was keen to encourage this more adventurous approach, not all of the embroidery being produced in NSW secondary schools was contemporary in nature. The inclusion of embroidery in the secondary art class was dependant on the presence of a teacher who was interested in the craft and possessed the requisite skills. In many government schools embroidery was taught only in the needlework department, where the emphasis was still on traditional embroidery and the acquisition of technical skills.25 In 1964, Margaret Oppen commented that one of the difficulties faced in promoting embroidery was that ‘Needlework teachers do not really have the time for teaching original design, and craft teachers who teach design very seldom include embroidery’.26 In order to address this problem, the Embroiderer’s Guild organised a range of activities, beginning with a series of summer schools, the first of which was held in January 1962.

The two week long workshop covered a range of topics including designing with paper cuts, the use of colour, and the history of embroidery. At this time the Embroiderer’s Guild did not have its own premises and so the classes were held in the NSW Teachers Federation building in the city. The timing of these schools, in the long summer vacation, made it possible for secondary school teachers to attend. At the first summer school, taught by Pat Langford, eighteen of the twenty-one participants were Department of Education teachers.27 In subsequent years teachers continued to attend, indication of a solid interest in contemporary embroidery within the school system.

The Embroiderers’ Guild also presented specialist in-service training courses for teachers. In 1965 Margaret Oppen and Pat Langford were involved in a summer school at Newcastle Teachers College, where they presented lectures on ‘Design for Needlework’, while in 1967 a school for embroidery teachers was held in the May school holidays. In 1974 Guild tutors were still performing such tasks. It is difficult to assess the exact impact that these activities had on

25 This difference in approach can perhaps be accounted for by the training undertaken by those teaching in the two systems. Needlework teachers in Department of Education schools completed their practical training at Technical Colleges, where the emphasis was on patternmaking and dressmaking skills. By contrast, private schools were free to employ teachers like Pat Langford and Dorothea Allnutt whose education and experience was broad based.
the teaching of embroidery in schools but Margaret Oppen herself was optimistic about their success. In writing of the school for teachers in 1967 she commented:

Many of our old friends from previous schools were back and this is the best proof possible that these classes are of real value to school teachers. It should eventually become apparent if the Guild continues to hold educational exhibitions, through the work of school girls, that the teaching of the Guild is spreading where it will be most appreciated by the rising generation.\(^{28}\)

Given the rapid increase in interest in stitched textiles in both art and textile classes in New South Wales schools from the 1970s on, it is reasonable to conclude that her predictions were accurate.

In order to expand the number of teachers interested in contemporary embroidery, a range of other strategies were employed. The small book, *Paper cuts: Designers and Embroiderers*,\(^{29}\) written by Margaret Oppen and Pat Langford, had needlework teachers as its intended audience and was aimed at reducing the reliance on printed transfers,\(^{30}\) which were supplied to schools by the Government Stores Office. Margaret Oppen also lobbied people within the Department of Education who had some capacity to influence policy directions. In 1964 she reported that John Dabron had ‘offered to include a letter for us in the monthly circular to teachers, encouraging the teaching of embroidery as a craft’.\(^{31}\) Ruby Riach, who at the time was teaching needlework at Sydney Teachers College, recalls being contacted by Margaret Oppen some time in the late 1950s or early 1960s and being invited to speak to the Embroiderers’ Guild about embroidery in schools.\(^{32}\) A ‘schools committee’ had been established within the Embroiderers’ Guild and in 1963 it was noted in the organisation’s newsletter, *The Record*, that the retiring 1961-1962 Guild committee had established good links with Miss McLaren and Mrs Bruce, Inspectors of Needlework within the NSW Department of Education.\(^{33}\) And in the early sixties the Embroiderers’ Guild provided several

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articles for the *Needlework Bulletin*. These included an article about the Guild itself, 34 one on the history of embroidery, 35 and an article about designing for embroidery. 36

While these efforts were aimed at the teachers of embroidery, another venture was aimed directly at students. In 1963 the Embroiderers’ Guild introduced a ‘schools’ competition’ for embroidery, offering an award to the most successful school as well as a prize to the most successful individual work. The embroidery was to be judged on design and colour, originality, technical execution and presentation. The competition was promoted in the *Needlework Bulletin* and in three issues of the *Education Gazette* in 1963. 37 While the guidelines were quite broad, meaning that it was possible for original embroidery in a traditional style to be successful, the awards mostly went to more contemporary work. Responding to criticism of this from some Embroiderers’ Guild members, Margaret Oppen wrote that serious embroidery ‘ha[d] always moved with the times’ and the competition was intended to encourage in students a ‘strong original attitude to colour and form’. 38

Between 1966 and 1972 the judging of the schools’ competition took place in conjunction with a series major of exhibitions organised by the Embroiderers’ Guild. The work included in these exhibitions was carefully chosen to promote a view of embroidery as a creative art form. The focus was overwhelmingly on original work, and a significant number of the entries were wall hangings and pictures which were presented to the viewing public as ‘art’. As well as embroideries by Guild members and the entries in the schools’ competition, at different times the exhibitions included work from the London-based 62 Group (a group of British art school graduates), the Mary White School of Design, RMIT, and tapestries by John Olsen and Henri Matisse (the latter borrowed from the Art Gallery of NSW). The exhibitions served to promote embroidery to the community at large, but they also strengthened links between the Embroiderers’ Guild and the Department of Education, all but one being installed in the Education Department Gallery in the city. John Dabron gave the opening speech at the 1966

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36 Pat Langford, ‘Designing for Embroidery’, *Needlework Bulletin* 12 (1962): 12-13. Although this article appears under I.N. Gilbert’s name, notes in the Embroiderers’ Guild archive and a comment in the next issue of the *Needlework Bulletin* make it clear that the article was actually prepared by Langford.
exhibition, speaking about the importance of creativity and of a creative education and about valuing people who broke the rules:

> There are bound to be people who deny all rules of embroiderers (sic) or art techniques. We must value these people. The person who breaks away from accepted rules is someone who can make a valuable contribution ...

At the conclusion of the speech he indicated that he ‘was going to ask schools to come and see the Exhibition; to see what embroidery means.’ He was true to his word and school students did visit. *The Record* reported that a thousand school children saw the 1967 exhibition; among them was a group of 24 students from Finley, some 700km from Sydney.

**Domestic work or creative work?**

As Roszika Parker explains in *The Subversive Stitch*, embroidery has long been regarded as women’s work, and of little consequence. In fact, Parker and Pollock suggest that it is because it is seen as women’s work that embroidery is not considered to be art:

> what distinguishes art from craft in the hierarchy is not so much different methods, practices and objects, but ... where these things are made, often in the home, and for whom they are made, often for the family...

So for the embroiderer who wants their work to be considered as art, or who, at the very least, wants to be seen as a serious, committed practitioner, being linked too closely with amateur, domestic embroidery can be a distinct disadvantage. As an organisation, the Embroiderers’ Guild found it necessary to cater for both traditional and modern embroiderers and there were members who produced work for the domestic context. However, all of the ventures I have described, including the efforts to influence the way that embroidery was taught in schools, were intended to distance embroidery from its domestic connotations, situating it instead in the public sphere and promoting it as a creative rather than a domestic activity.

Despite the difficulty – one could argue the impossibility – of making a living solely by embroidery, there were embroiderers who viewed embroidery as their life’s work. For women

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40 Ibid., 11.
41 *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 23, 1967, women’s section.
42 Parker and Pollock, *Old mistresses*, 70.
such as Dorothea Allnutt and Pat Langford, embroidery was the centre around which their working life was constructed. Other embroiderers demonstrate the characteristics of what Robert Stebbins proposed should be thought of as ‘serious leisure’, where an individual pursues an activity at a level far beyond that of an amateur or a dilettante. According to Stebbins such individuals invest considerable effort in acquiring knowledge and skills in their chosen pursuit, acquire benefits such as self-actualisation and a sense of belonging, and often have careers in their endeavours. Although embroidery did not satisfy all of Stebbins’ criteria for a profession — for instance, there was no institution in Australia where formal qualifications could be obtained and no means for accrediting competence — embroiderers themselves conflated the categories of professional and serious leisure, adopting the view that it was attitude which identified someone as a professional, not formal training or the making of money. Margaret Oppen herself had wanted to be an artist but, although her father was happy for her to study art, she had been told that a career as a professional artist was out of the question. Nevertheless, although she did not earn a living from her art work, there is overwhelming evidence to indicate that art, and ultimately embroidery, was a central part of her life, a means by which she identified herself.

Conclusions

In his analysis of the circumstances by which art was accepted by Sydney University as a matriculation subject, Christopher Peers concluded that:

the move to renovate the curriculum through aligning it more closely with one part of this opposition – the male, academic, ‘professional’ part – than with the older feminised, art-craft part, had the effect of submerging or abandoning the traditions which symbolised and sustained the lower status and value of Art within the school system.

In other words, embroidery lost its place in the high school art curriculum. As this paper shows, this is an oversimplified picture, both of the situation prior to 1962, when art achieved matriculation status, and afterwards. Some feminist theorists argue that it is more useful to focus on what women do, rather than what is done to them, suggesting that:

44 Ibid., 6-7.
46 Peers, ‘Mapping Art’, 64.
women’s collective actions give women a wider range of experience, an identity as part of a group with common interests, and a sense of agency (emphasis in original).  

For Margaret Oppen and her colleagues embroidery was a satisfying form of creative work which took them out of the domestic sphere and into an art world of their own making. This, I suggest, was the view of embroidery she and her colleagues in the Embroiderers’ Guild wished to promote within the secondary school system in NSW. They saw embroidery (and other textile pursuits) not as a means of subjugation of women, but as a form of creative work and a vehicle for women’s self determination.

The use of Irigaray’s lens also coloured Peer’s reading of John Dabron’s motivations. Certain of Peers’ conclusions are compelling. It is clear that Dabron did cultivate links with the architecture department at Sydney University, using the association with a ‘masculine profession’ like architecture to help raise the status of art as a school subject. However Peers also concludes that:

[while] there is no evidence that in pursuing the Department’s agenda, Dabron had intended to alienate the feminine constituency of the subject, or that he envisaged ‘major works’ as incorporating exclusively masculine studio practices … The plan to elevate Art as a subject matter, and to gain matriculation status, incorporated a range of matters that he, like many people of his generation, took as natural and unremarkable, including the prevailing social expectation for women to pursue domestic occupations rather than professional careers.  

Examined more broadly, the evidence suggests the opposite. John Dabron had a long standing involvement in textiles and with women artists. In the 1940s when he first joined the Society of Arts and Crafts of NSW, the Society was run by a committed and energetic group of women; between 1940 and 1948 he was married to the artist Jean Isherwood; and his daughter, Jacqueline Dabron, was also to pursue a career as a professional artist. He was certainly aware that there were women who were successfully pursuing a professional career in the arts. At the same time that he was undertaking the negotiations with Sydney University described by Peers, he was recruiting Pat Langford to introduce recent trends from Britain into the NSW Department of Education and later he provided significant support to Margaret Oppen and her colleagues in their endeavours to promote contemporary approaches to embroidery in the art


classroom and beyond. Perhaps it is more accurate to describe Dabron as a very successful pragmatist. He used the architecture argument to get what he believed was important – art accepted as a matriculation subject – so that the subject would be taken bright students of both sexes who were interested in studying art but were discouraged from choosing the subject because to do so would prevent them from going to University. However, he did this without compromising his own interest in textiles as an art form.