

Detail of Panel 1, *Beginnings/The Village of Patuxet*, showing the village of the People of the First Light, the Wampanoag

Photo courtesy Pilgrim Hall Museum

# Making History About History

by Cheryl Christian



Elizabeth Creeden,  
tapestry designer

Photo by C. James Smith. Courtesy Pilgrim Hall Museum

The Plymouth Tapestry tells a more comprehensive story of Plymouth Colony.

**I**n Plymouth, Massachusetts, a small group of people are working on a project that reinterprets the history of another small group, settlers and indigenous people who met four hundred years ago. These historians and stitchers are

reexamining the history of the founding of Plimoth Colony in 1620 to include diverse perspectives and rendering their exploration of these events in an epic embroidery, a visual, accessible, and moving work of art and history.

In 2016, Pilgrim Hall set a course for the creation of the Plymouth Tapestry, twenty six-foot long embroidered panels. A number of panels were to debut in 2020 for the long-planned year of festivities that would celebrate the fourth hundredth anniversary of the colony's establishment (See "The Plymouth Tapestry" in the December 2018 issue of *Needle Arts*). Instead, Pilgrim Hall was blown off-course by an international pandemic, leading to many months of being becalmed in its voyage, developing a narrative history in stitch.

Many are familiar with the desire of a group of English Separatists to found their own colony, the voyage of the *Mayflower*, and the attribution of Thanksgiving to a repast enjoyed by two divergent groups on the coast of Massachusetts. The tapestry takes the traditional understanding of these events and adds a seldom considered perspective, that of the native Wampanoag. "What we're doing is different," states historian Dr. Donna Curtain, executive director of Pilgrim Hall.

Curtain continued:

*We want the historical interpretation to be accurate and incorporate multiple perspectives. The fact is, history isn't just from one point of view. When something occurs and five people witness it, each witness is going to have a different perspective and will give different meaning to it. Our job as historians is to reflect that essential complexity. So, one of the things for us that is tremendously important in this case is making sure that the indigenous perspective is part of this heirloom narrative that's being created. . . . When you are looking at colonial history through a different lens than the scholarly European scholarly lens, it's very, very different. There are different ways of knowing. Understanding history from a different cultural perspective is one of the things the tapestry is going to be able to do sensitively and yet with regard for scholarship.*

Photo by C. James Smith. Courtesy Pilgrim Hall Museum



From left, Sandra Murray and Elizabeth Creeden working on Panel 4, *Intellectual Roots of Protestantism*



Detail of Panel 2, *Moshe the Giant*, showing Moshe overlooking land and sea as he creates Cape Cod and the islands

Curtain elaborated, “Here’s the basic question the tapestry has to answer: How do you tell the history of a people who date back fourteen hundred years?” To help answer this question, the team of historians includes the Wampanoag advisor, Linda Coombs. Wampanoag history is not communicated as it is in Western tradition with its church registers, chronicles of history, court records, wills, and inventories. Wampanoag history is documented through the memory and traditions of the Wampanoag people. To tell the Plymouth story, there is an interplay of early English observations of flora and fauna, European documents, and Wampanoag cultural knowledge.

The research is on-going and the process recursive. The historians and the tapestry artist and designer, Elizabeth Creeden, work together, the historians relating ideas and concepts they think are important, and Creeden rendering those ideas in drawn designs that will in turn be translated into embroidery. The drawings are reviewed and amended as necessary to ensure accuracy and appropriateness.



First Man and Woman, detail from Panel 1, *Beginnings/The Village of Patuxet*. Note the embellishments of early wampum worn by the First Man and grasses of dyed porcupine quills to honor Native American embroidery traditions

To interpret and illustrate the ideas, Creeden conducts her own research that goes beyond what the group of historians have done. Stacks of books on ships and seventeenth-century rigging pile up on the immense drafting table upstairs in her home. Prints of native Americans, illustrations of plants and animals, reproductions of fine art provide visual references that compliment her own reading of the history, architecture, and cultures of the times.

“I’ve had to go into places of which I had no knowledge,” Creeden related. “Religion, for one. It was interesting exploring it.” However, some research was quite difficult to process, however, and engendered strong emotions.

“I knew nothing about the Great Dying. That was tough,” Creeden commented. It took months to complete the drawings to illustrate that period in a thoughtful manner that respected Native Americans. She read about the arrival of European diseases, for which the native populations had no immunity. Entire groups were decimated between 1616 and 1619. To thoughtfully illustrate the Great Dying on *Panel 11*, she researched burials and cultural practices, and worked closely with Coombs.

Along the way, her personal research touched on written history and forensic research has treated Native Americans, which made for a difficult journey in creating the panel. It further underscored to her the importance of accurately telling



Detail from *Panel 2, Moshe the Giant*, showing the map of the indigenous peoples of the northeast coast with indigenous place names

the natives’ story with great sensitivity to the people, their practices, and the great tragedies that befell them. Every detail relating to the Wampanoag was been carefully considered and vetted by Coombs, including those in *Panel 11*, from the women who were cooking and caring for the sick, the man who tended a woman, the cutting of a braid in mourning a lost loved one, to the logs they used to ford the creek to reach the burial site during winter.

Creeden was granted permission to draw the panel because she and her son had worked in the native village, and is deeply honored by the trust placed in her. “I am grateful I was able to make the leap, but it was a big leap to draw *Panel 11*.”

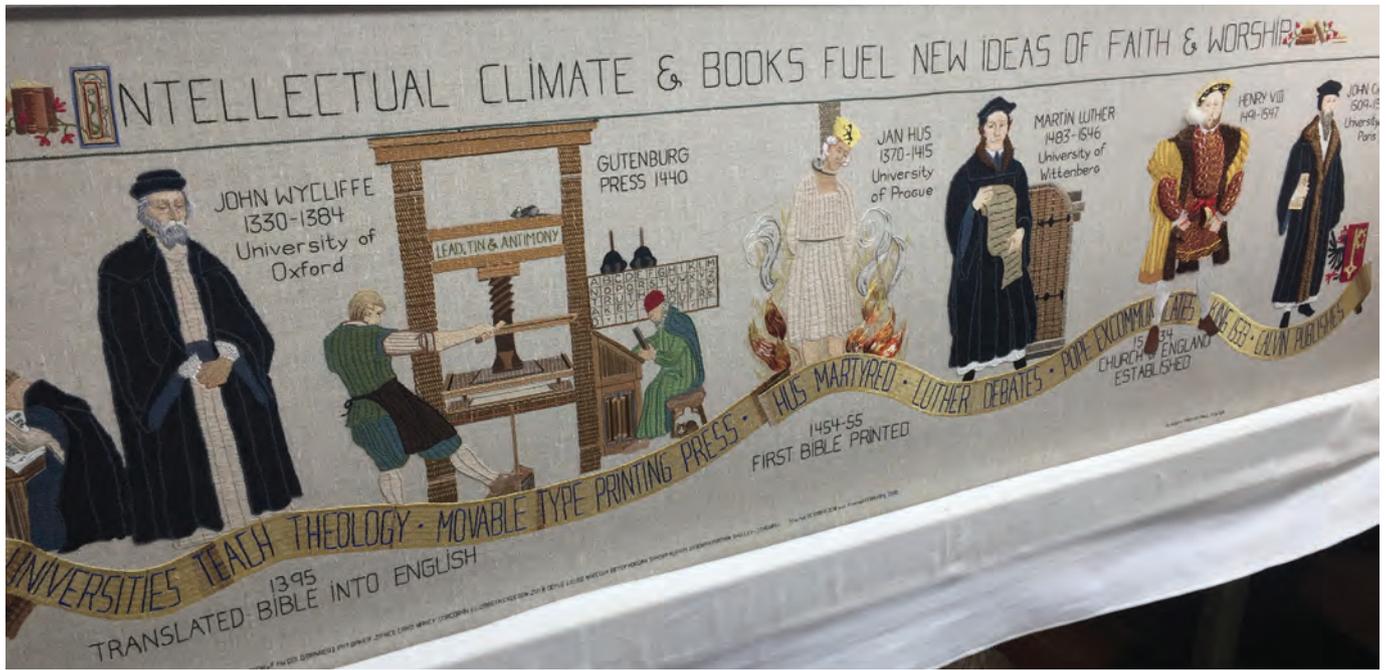
Various threads weave through the tapestry. The first panel begins with Moshup the Giant, who created the lands. He appears in *Panel 11* as well, for in Wampanoag cultural memory, Moshup had a vision that a time of great peril would come and sent word to the people. Curtain observed, Their way of life that had been established for so long was placed under tremendous pressure and began to change in ways that could not have been anticipated.” Creeden drew Moshup and his alarming vision. Throughout the panels she has created a series of motifs that act as omens whenever something bad is about to happen, such as a rooster crowing to warn Separatists of danger, a comet that the Wampanoag acknowledge foretold the Great Dying, or wolves howling when the Separatists are about to be betrayed and jailed.

Photo courtesy Pilgrim Hall Museum



Detail from *Panel 4, Intellectual Roots of Protestantism* showing Jan Huis, an early martyr of the Protestant movement. The layered flames and single-stranded vertical stitches give the scene depth.

Photo by Marie Pelletier Photography, Courtesy Pilgrim Hall Museum



Panel 4, Intellectual Roots of Protestantism

Creeden is also pleased to work with a dedicated group of embroiderers who come to stitch in her house, the studio for the project. The house, a portion of it dating back to the seventeenth century, is a fitting place to be creating a tapestry on events taking place in the same century. Period music softly plays throughout the house, setting the mood for considerate and spiritual stitching.

Two panels are set up in one room, each panel being set within a frame roughly seven feet long and three feet high, and lit by a system designed by one of the embroiderers. They find it difficult to work two-handed as they reach across to stitch in the center of the panel, but they manage just the same. Quarters are close; five to six people work on a panel at any given time. That is roughly three stitchers on either side of a six-foot panel, working essentially, elbow to elbow.

Members of the group have come to the project in diverse ways. "I've been needlepointing for a long time," embroiderer Jim Smith said. A neighbor told him about the project. He had samples to show and was admitted to the group. Sandra Murray came every day to stitch when Pilgrim Hall ran sessions for the public to stitch. She knew Creeden and Janice Card, a key stitcher who assists Creeden in her work with the group.

Creeden knows the strengths of all the stitchers. She directs them accordingly, assigning them to specific areas in which they excel or can grow, and assists them in the stitching. "She's the architect," embroiderer Jim Smith stated. "I just paint by numbers. Elizabeth says, 'Okay, this is what I want you to do.' She's wonderful. Because she does select a place in the panels where people can be successful."



Photo courtesy Pilgrim Hall Museum

Details of Panel 4, Intellectual Roots of Protestantism, showing above, John Calvin's face (all faces are worked by Creeden), and below, scribe bent over manuscript, an embellishment of actual illuminated velum pages created by a calligrapher



Photo courtesy Pilgrim Hall Museum

While Creeden has designed the panels and drawn up the illustrations that are printed onto the fabric, the stitchers bring their own knowledge to bear on how the individual elements will be stitched. “It’s a group effort,” asserted Murray. “It’s not just one person teaching. Everybody’s teaching everybody else. Even the newbies. If they know how to do something, and somebody else comes along and wants to do that, the newby will teach.”

The group has established a camaraderie grounded in their dedication to the goals of the project. “I think of the importance of this many years from now, and I just feel very honored to be part of a project of this magnitude,” stated Murray. Members are quick to honor each other’s work. Smith complemented Murray’s work: “She is an incredible stitcher. She can make things look like nobody else.”

Work progresses according to the schedules and the task of each stitcher, to ensure the consistency of the stitching and honor the work of the individual. There are times when someone has been at work on an element, but then must to



Detail of Henry VIII from Panel 4, *Intellectual Roots of Protestantism*



Working out the details of Henry VIII from Panel 4, *Intellectual Roots of Protestantism*

wait to complete it until an abutting element has to be done first, and by someone who has already begun that portion of the work. Or, a group of people collaborate on one element; three stitchers worked on Henry VIII, for example. A person who is waiting to complete an element often moves to another area of the panel or to another panel altogether. “When we get a full group in here, it’s often jumping chairs,” Creeden said.

But the stitching isn’t always smooth sailing. “I come here twice a week,” Smith said. “You see progress. You see frustration. You see pieces being pulled out.” The fur on Henry VIII’s clothing is a case in point. Worked in chenille, it began to fray at the slightest touch. The thread was backed out, and everything else on the panel was worked first, and

the chenille applied last. “These are the decisions you make as you go along,” Creeden commented.

Attention to the time period is also crucial. Orange carrots were stitched in a basket. Food historian Paula Marcoux advised that there were no orange carrots at the time; so, new carrots, period-correct white ones replaced them. She had worked on the reproduction of the Mayflower, and understood the knots that were used, so she worked the rigging. A building was planned for a landscape of Leyden, where the Separatists lived for a time.

It was discovered that both the print reference and the building itself were of a later period, so Creeden reworked the drawing.

While most details are drawn on the panels, some are not, such as the hair on certain individuals, the mane of a horse, the leaves on a tree, and birds winging in the air. These details are to be added and embroidered by the stitchers.

Creeden makes notes of each of these details and keeps files of the research and progress of each element in the work. “She has cataloged everything on every panel,” Murray observed. That includes embellishments. Murray contributed jewels from her daughter’s prom outfit for the chain for Henry VIII’s cape. A tiny illuminated manuscript was created on vellum by a calligrapher and was added to the panel depicting a scribe on the panel exploring the dissemination of knowledge that helped lead to the Separatist movement.



Detail of Tudor house on Panel 6, *The Separatists*

Originally, plans had been made for the public stitch on the project, but it became quickly apparent after several public sessions that the panels would not be completed in a timely manner. The logistics just weren’t favorable; the Plymouth Tapestry is just too large of a project. A stitcher would show people how to do a stitch on a sample panel, and then they would put in a few stitches on a designed panel. The stitchers spent most of their time teaching people how to stitch rather than working on the panels.

Instead, Pilgrim Hall has a title panel available in the exhibition, and people are invited to stitch on it when it is being supervised by someone on the stitching team.

The current pandemic has had its way with the project, which began in 2016. The group of embroiderers had been stitching until March 13, 2020, the day that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts shut down. “We lost the entire year,” Curtain stated. The team could not meet to work on the tapestry, given the close quarters the embroiderers must work at a panel.

Just the same, work continued in a fashion. Creeden stitches every face and was able to continue with that work as well as getting ahead on drawing the designs for four more panels. Indeed, the stitchers had been about to catch up with the designs.

Prior to the shutdown, Creeden had cut four completed panels from their frames. Pilgrim Hall had just transported them to the museum just before lockdown was declared. Another phase of the project could begin: the conservation and mounting of the panels and their display in the museum. During the months of quarantine, conservators Kathryn Tarleton and Charlotte Hamlin of ConText, conserved and mounted the four panels.



Detail of ship on panel focusing on the Crusades

Photo courtesy Pilgrim Hall Museum

Photo by C. James Smith. Courtesy Pilgrim Hall Museum

The Plymouth Tapestry differs from a number of recent embroidered museum-backed projects, such as the Plymouth Jacket stitched at Plimoth Patuxet. The size and number of panels as well as the materials and stitching differ from previous works. “We’re learning a lot about large embroideries,” Curtain commented. The released panels show some light buckling in open areas of the canvas. “We don’t want that to be distracting to people viewing the panels.” Going forward, the panels will be backed with linen rather than the batiste previously used. Positioning them facing natural light also helps soften the shadowing.

Working in an historic building poses its own set of problems. Pilgrim Hall does not have modern lighting system, but they will shade the windows to filter the light. Display cases well beyond the height and length of the panels house the work. They are museum UV-screen filtered cases, so there is not an issue with the natural light because we’ve got the UV application.

At the time of this writing, Pilgrim Hall is exhibiting four panels in the historic Steinway Memorial Library, with its tall ceilings and rare manuscripts and books. The room provides an appropriate setting for the panels. Rather than towering large and overwhelming visitors, the panels appear modest and invite the viewer for a closer look, for lingering, and for a subtle, but intimate, and perhaps life-changing experience for the viewer. The panels work on multiple levels, among them as an interpretation of history, as fine art, as graphic narrative, as story-telling event, as a cultural experience, and lead to personal engagement and increased understanding and appreciation.

The panels on display at the time of this writing focus on Wampanoag beginnings, Moshup the Giant, the intellectual roots of Protestantism, and the gathering of Separatists in villages in England. While the panels are not being worked in chronological order set out in the master plan, each of these panels depicts the earlier time period, and each stands on its own as a significant concept or series of events in the Plymouth story.

Pilgrim Hall will switch out panels as they are completed, and once all are completed, they will rotate, with some always being on display. The last panel might be completed in 2023. After all twenty panels are completed, the museum will publish a catalog detailing each panel and providing an overview of the project and the process. Currently, a brochure briefly describing the displayed panels is available as a guide to viewers once they step inside the library.

The pandemic has impacted museum goers and tapestry stitchers alike. Having gone through the pandemic, viewers respond to the panels in a profound way, gaining a deeper understanding of the colony and Native Americans. Those who actualize the events in stitch were delighted to return to stitching in May, perhaps with a new sense of purpose. “I’m delighted we are back stitching,” said Murphy. “To me, this was the first sense of normalcy. I can’t even express how happy I am to be back.”

For those of us who now will, through their work, to view the tapestry, be it in person, online, or through a catalog, we are happy they are back as well. ■



Dr. Donna Curtain, third from left, discusses a panel with onlookers



Follow the development of the tapestry at [www.facebook.com/StitchingEpicHistory](https://www.facebook.com/StitchingEpicHistory), [www.instagram.com/plymouth\\_tapestry\\_stitchers](https://www.instagram.com/plymouth_tapestry_stitchers), and [pilgrimhall.org/plymouth-tapestry-project.htm](http://pilgrimhall.org/plymouth-tapestry-project.htm).

## That's History

The Plymouth tapestry embodies the mission of Pilgrim Hall and the Plymouth Society. It rewrites history by foregrounding the history of the Wampanoag, rather than privileging the history of the English emigrants to Massachusetts soil. By interweaving the two threads of history, the creators of the tapestry allow viewers to fathom the complexity of events surrounding the establishment of the second permanent English colony in North America.

It accomplishes its goal through both content and form. Not only is the history depicted in the tapestry more inclusive and more comprehensive, it shows the story through narrative and visual constructs, making the history more readily accessible and immediate to the viewer. Rather than focusing on history solely as a written account, it *shows* history and renders it personal. Viewers can relate to depictions of people in a way that can't be accomplished through reading alone. Just the same, the tapestry is not presented as complete in and of itself. It *informs* our thinking as it encourages further exploration, reflection, study, reading, and examination of artifacts triangulate ways of knowing.

History is a construct written and rewritten at a specific moment in time according to the gaze and agenda of those who write it, and it changes accordingly. Imagine how differently history would have been written had Hitler won World War II. Frightening indeed. Story telling through visuals brings to mind a time centuries ago when many were not literate, but were instructed through public paintings and sculpture presented by a sponsoring agency. Diversity in thinking was curtailed. That the tapestry is being stitched now reveals our desire to be inclusive and to embrace all cultures. In learning about others, we learn more about ourselves.

In this age when history is increasingly devalued by those who legislate school curriculum, the tapestry takes on even more importance as a way for children, and adults as well, to access history. History is not merely dates and facts; it is the story of hearts and minds. Children take to narrative early as a means of learning, and visuals figure prominently in their world. Graphic novels have become increasingly popular, uniting story-telling and visuals. Add history in the mix for content, as in the tapestry, and accessibility is increased. The people one would read about are brought to life. As such, the tapestry can have greater reach than a history textbook.

Showing the story in stitch in epic proportions directly reflects diversity as well. Many have had a voice in shaping the content, coming together to discuss the events, advising the designer, or sending her books and documents that inform her presentation. And there are the many who have had a hand the embroidery, the community of embroiderers, actualizing the scenes, discussing, and interpreting in stitch the designs before them.

For us as embroiderers, while we may not have had the opportunity to take a stitch in the tapestry, we are part of that community. We can see ourselves in the embroidery, as the heirs to the history, in the people depicting the story, and in the creation of the artifact that will itself become a part of history.



**CORRECTION:**

On page 46 of the June 2021 issue, the region director for the Mid-Eastern Region should be Jean Hubsch.

Wishing you joy in your stitching,

*Cheryl Christian*

**CHERYL CHRISTIAN**

Editor, *Needle Arts*

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Photo by Donna Curtain. Courtesy Pilgrim Hall Museum

The editor stitching on Panel 1, *Beginnings* in 2018.