



The Separatists are arrested. Detail from Panel 7, *Escape to the Low Countries: Part 1* ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF PILGRIM HALL MUSEUM UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED

History in the Making: The Plymouth Tapestry

by Dr. Cheryl Christian

The Plymouth Tapestry embroiderers continue to stitch history as newly completed panels go on display.

Editor's Note: This is Part I of a two-part article. Part II will appear in the September issue. For additional information about this project, see the September 2021 issue of Needle Arts. That article is also online at egausa.org/needle-arts-magazine/making-history-about-history-the-plymouth-tapestry.

“**L**ook,” the young woman said, pointing to the fine stitching. “How did they do that?”

Her friend leaned in for a closer look at the Plymouth Tapestry panel, and they discussed the subtle coloring of the

shimmering moon and the glow in the windows. They marveled at the dedication of the stitchers, then took in the whole of the panel in the exhibition hall.

“Stunning,” one said. The other nodded.

Historical, even historic, work continues in the creation of the Plymouth Tapestry, an embroidery that recasts our understanding of Plymouth Colony and the centuries of events that led to its foundation in 1620. As Pilgrim Hall Museum in Plymouth, MA, is making history about history, tapestry viewers are revising their own understanding of the events that took place.

Visitors to the museum thrill to see completed panels. “We engage them with the type of history we are doing,” explains Dr. Donna Curtin, executive director of the museum. History is a process of learning, of discovery, and is constantly being revised in light of new findings and views from multiple perspectives. Seeking out diverse voices leads to a more comprehensive analysis of past events. Pilgrim Hall Museum, the oldest continually operating museum in the United States, is reexamining history on several fronts, including the histories of Indigenous people, women, and young girls. “We seek to broaden our understanding of history,” Curtin says.

The tapestry retells the history of the colony by foregrounding Wampanoag history as well as English history. “Indigenous history, which was once ignored, is really important to how we now understand the history of Plymouth,” Curtin states. “We try to bring that in, and we see it as such a benefit. People respond to it. We tell people we want to look at how history is told through different lenses. If we ask different questions, we learn different things. Isn’t it exciting?”

The viewers, in turn, have come to understand history differently and embrace that change. They, too, are asking questions when they study the panels. Viewers respond to the immediacy of the embroidery, its tactile nature, and the accessible artistry of the design. Curtin observes that the tapestry “opens the door for them to think about some of the history being reflected.” Curtin continues:

The mastery, the technical quality and the beauty are the hook that engage them. It’s wonderful to see. It’s almost like a magnet. They’ll start to approach the tapestry, and they don’t always understand that it’s stitching. Then, they realize that what they are seeing are tiny stitches, and they’ll start to put their noses right up against the display case. And the ones that have any sense of needlework then begin to see particular elements and features. They’ll look at the fine quality and detail and then step back. “What is this trying to tell me?” they ask. For example, if they are looking at the magnificent rendering of Henry VIII after Hans Holbein’s portrait, when they step back, they’ll take in the whole, and see the renditions of Jan Hus, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. They’ll say, “Oh, my gosh. This is the history of the Protestant Reformation. The panel is communicating some key aspects of that great historical shift in religion and belief.”

Authentic representation

From the start, the creators of the tapestry faced a great challenge: How do you represent a culture that isn’t your own? “It’s a non-Indigenous group that’s creating and making this artwork,” Curtin explains. To address this challenge, Aquinnah Wampanoag advisor Linda Coombs has been an integral part of the tapestry’s historical team. Coombs also chairs the museum’s Wampanoag Advisory Council, which includes representatives from all Wampanoag tribal nations and reviews the organization’s full scope of activities.

“There are different ways of knowing things,” Curtin says. “We want to connect with local Indigenous groups. Other voices are represented at the table as well. That part of it is exciting to me, and I feel we are in a really good place.”

A related challenge focused on authenticity. “How do we deal with these meaningful histories that are difficult for people to think about?” Curtin asked. Both subject matter and display require great care and sensitivity.

Panel 11, *The Great Dying*, is a case in point. The panel illustrates the devastation caused by the diseases Europeans brought to the North American shore. Entire Wampanoag villages died. To convey the deep loss and appropriately represent, in stitch, the people and the villages, the advice and approval of the Wampanoag were crucial at every step. Once the design was approved, Coombs, who is also a designer and maker of Indigenous craft, took the first stitch.



Linda Coombs, left, head of the Wampanoag Advisory Board, takes the first stitches on Panel 11, *The Great Dying*, as designer Elizabeth Creeden assists her.



Ships carrying hopeful Separatists at night in detail from Panel 7, *Escape to the Low Countries: Part I*

The approval of the panel's design in 2022 was a significant milestone. "*The Great Dying* depicts such a meaningful historical event in Wampanoag history," Curtin points out. "The tremendous and devastating mortality that occurred really changed the dynamic of colonization in this area. Their population was severely impacted, and then these new people arrived. It's a painful and emotional subject." The careful design process and ongoing stitching ensure the story is told and illustrated with sensitivity and deep respect.

Display considerations

The display of the panels in the exhibition hall requires thoughtful planning as well. For example, some of the text on the panels derives from primary sources, such as Governor William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*, which presents the English point of view of Native peoples. With such inherently biased sources, the museum staff now recognizes they can't be put up on the wall unmediated. Some viewers might grasp the bias in the content; others, however, would not. Wall text warns viewers about the biased nature of these sources.

Viewers have been responsive to inclusive materials and through the museum's comment-card station, have requested more of them. "That kind of engagement comes from sitting at the table and trying to figure out how we present the history of the region," Curtin says. "Being able to have a conversation and partnership with people from the Indigenous community is invaluable. It's critical to the Wampanoag that their history be understood, and we can't understand early Plymouth without it."

All in the details

The complexity in each Plymouth Tapestry panel enriches the viewing. Thoughtful planning, design, and execution highlight ideas, communicate important messages, and engage the viewer in a personal, aesthetic, and intellectual experience that reading alone cannot accomplish. Designer Elizabeth Creeden works on multiple levels to conceive and actualize the design. The process is all-encompassing and fluid. The historical narrative provides the structure, but the details enrich the content.

The basic design process for each panel begins with specifying the events to be depicted or the concept expressed. After meeting with Curtin, historians, and Wampanoag advisers to determine the focus of a given panel, Creeden translates the ideas into visuals, then takes her designs to the reviewers who approve them or request changes. After the final full-scale rendering is approved, Creeden takes it to wallpaper designer David Berman, who sees to it that the design is properly transferred to the linen ground. They work together, and the process is so fine that rarely is the design off by even a thread on the linen.

While this is the basic procedure, Creeden's design process is far more complicated, layered, and multi-focused. Charged to tell an inclusive story through the needlework, Creeden determines how to illustrate the story in a manner appropriate to the period and faithful to the Wampanoag, yet accessible to the viewer. Once the committee has set the focus for a given panel, Creeden closely examines the primary sources, then conducts her own extensive research to render the designs.

Ideas for supporting elements develop as she works. She consults experts who can help her answer specific questions or select a drawing from several options she has rendered. She juggles a wealth of ideas and information and brings them all together to both strengthen the message conveyed in the panel and interconnect the whole of the tapestry.

For example, in October 2021, Creeden was working on the design of Panel 13, *Tisquantum's Return*, which focuses on Tisquantum's return to his village in 1619 after being kidnapped by explorer Thomas Hunt in 1614, spending five years in Europe, and working as an agent for trade in the Americas. Tisquantum, also known as Squanto, served as an interpreter and guide for the Pilgrim settlers at Plymouth in the 1620s.

Upon his return, Tisquantum discovered his Patuxet village completely destroyed, the people ravaged by diseases brought by the Europeans and the empty wetus (domed homes with a stick-and-branch frame covered with tree bark or mats woven from grass or weeds) in disrepair.

In depicting the Wampanoag, Creeden works closely with Coombs to determine content and rendering. The primary sources state that the returnees found skeletons; the skeletons were rendered. Creeden made several sketches of Tisquantum and sought advice from Coombs for which sketch would best communicate his reaction to this great loss.

Through the stitching of the woods and wetus, this panel is connected to other panels focusing on the Wampanoag. The panel also shows Watson Hill, which overlooks the devastated village in Panel 11, *The Great Dying*. In Panel 13, *Tisquantum's Return*, the woods are thicker, and brush was added to show how the village had become overgrown with vegetation. A collapsed wetu conveys the destruction, connecting the panel

to the Great Dying in Panel 11 and contrasting with the living village in Panel 1, *Beginnings*, thereby carrying throughout the tapestry the importance of the village to Wampanoag life. In the lower right on Panel 13, a sailor asks Captain Thomas Dermer, who had brought Tisquantum to New England as an interpreter to promote trade, "Why are we here? What's going on?" These questions echo the questions the panel's viewers will also be asking.

From research to rendering

Questions on how to render content visually often prompts Creeden's research. Panel 14, *Mayflower Voyage*, features the ship's crossing in late 1620. "The question I started with is: Why did it take them so long to get across the ocean?" Creeden reports. She knew that the leaking *Speedwell* had to return to Dartmouth and then to Plymouth for repairs, and she could show that. But she felt that wasn't the complete answer for the lengthy voyage. Ships sailed to Newfoundland to trade but did not take so long to cross. One book on Plymouth Colony provided some clues; the rest simply avoided the trip over. No print source addressed her specific question, so she had to use a different means to derive an answer.

The digging began. Creeden contacted the Massachusetts Maritime Academy (MMA), and graduate Eric Burgess supplied the answer. In the 17th century, sailors could measure latitude, but not longitude. Without this ability, a navigator measured as best he could the direction and speed of the ship, its drift, the distance covered, and the speed of the ocean current, and so determine the distance traveled.

For unknown reasons, *Mayflower* Captain Christopher Jones sailed across the Atlantic on a northern route without stopping. Others who took a northern route for fishing or trade would stop at Iceland and Greenland and would not be traveling that route in December. Indeed, many ships departing from Europe sailed south to the Canary Islands, crossed the mid-Atlantic, then sailed north with the Gulf Stream up the coast of the Americas. "I didn't know any of that before," Creeden says.

If a ship follows a north Atlantic route, it sails *against* the ocean currents. Burgess pointed out the approximate position where *Mayflower* encountered the bad storms. When the ship encountered a storm, it was thrown back three days. Burgess was able to date every stage of the ship's progress going across the ocean. Creeden has included this information on the stitched map, derived from a reproduction 17th-century map located by Nathaniel Partain, also an MMA graduate.



Designer Elizabeth Creeden PHOTO: C. JAMES SMITH



King James I hears the protests of the Separatists on Panel 5, *King James, Early Voyages, Wampanoag Capture*. He tightly controlled printing and rejected their request to emigrate to Holland, fearing what they would print overseas. So concerned was he that he threatened that should Holland harbor the Separatists, England would not support the nation against its enemies.

The question answered, Creeden wondered how to represent *Mayflower's* erratic voyage on a map.

People often offer what they know or supply books with period- and subject-appropriate information. Stitcher Ann Gibson, a cartographer, loaned Creeden several books on cartography that show how maps illustrate concepts.

"They're dated," Creeden said when speaking of the books' content, "but they do give me information on how to present the information on maps."

After drawing the map for the panel, Creeden secured Burgess' approval.

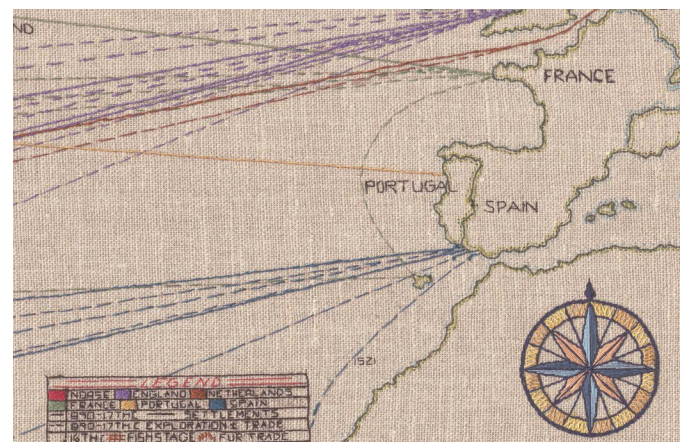
Research extends to every detail of the design to ensure authenticity. Panel 9, *Tisquantum's Story*, shows John Slany, a merchant, with the kidnapped Native Americans pouring over maps in his study in London. (see page 31) Creeden referenced John Smith's 1616 map of New England. She consulted joiner Peter Follansbee, who reproduces 17th-century furniture, to verify that the table she drew was faithful to the period. Attention to details, even as small as these, helps to ensure the historic accuracy of the designs.

James Smith, a stitcher on the project, summarizes in awe the depth of Creeden's research: "How many designers would go this far?"

Many design elements factor into the illustrations. The main scenes illustrate a set of related events focusing on one concept, and the text from primary sources helps to explain the scenes. Details support the content and message by contributing additional information or commenting on the

scene. Maps, with compass roses and small graphics, locate events. Stitched cartouches, which some viewers initially perceive as line drawings, include small scenes. Legends identify city buildings or features on maps. Repeated elements tie panels together. For example, a howling wolf appears as the omen of great trials ahead for the English. A raven foreshadows great sorrow for the Wampanoag.

"Honestly, you could take any one panel of the Plymouth Tapestry, and you could connect it to so many threads of history that could be illustrated in different ways," Curtin notes on Creeden's design. "What are we going to turn our magnifying glass on? Let's look at this little detail here, and let's pull the story out a little bit further. There is so much



Detail of Panel 5, *King James, Early Voyages, Wampanoag Capture*, the map that delineates early European contact with native populations in the Americas through fishing and trade, beginning in the 1480s.



Plymouth Tapestry stitchers Mary Curley, left, and Brian Whitfield at work on Panel 9: *Tisquantum's Story*.

packed into each scene.” This careful planning in thought and design results in a rich experience for the viewer, who comes away with a more comprehensive understanding of history.

On another level, artistic traditions and fine artists inform the rendering of the panels in both design and color. The idea

and the model for the overall format for the tapestry stems from the Bayeux Tapestry. The main scenes are worked large in the middle of the panel, while top and bottom are filled with text and additional images. The types of stitches, including the Bayeux stitch, are those used in the Bayeux Tapestry.

The look and feel of each panel also reference fine art. Whenever Creeden is trying to solve a problem, she turns to fine art or period paintings to solve the problem. For example, a scene in Panel 8, *Escape to the Low Countries: Part 2*, is faithful to Bayeux Tapestry scenes with armored men on foot and on horseback. In the Plymouth Tapestry, the men give chase to the Separatists and capture the women during the Separatists’ second attempt to flee. Creeden and the project stitchers matched the stitches and colors in the Bayeux Tapestry. The composition varies slightly, and the clothing and armor are also updated to reflect what was worn in the 17th century. To capture the reflection of light on the armor, Creeden referred to Rembrandt’s handling of reflection.

The work continues. As of May 2023, Creeden has designed 12 of the 20 panels, and eight have been completed. Curtin estimates that the stitching will be complete in two years.

“I can’t wait for the scenes of Leiden,” she says, referring to the city in Holland. The Separatists made an early attempt at emigration to Leiden, a place where they hoped they would be free to worship. Like many of the panels focusing on the Separatists, it will provide background to their particular story and tie it into contemporary experience.



Stitching armored men on horseback and foot soldiers capturing women in detail from Panel 8, *Escape to the Low Countries: Part 2*.



Elizabeth Creeden carefully researched architectural elements, maps, and furniture to produce this scene in merchant John Slany's study, rendered in Panel 9: *Tisquantum's Story*.
PHOTO: C. JAMES SMITH

Part II of this article will focus on the stitchers, the stitching, and conservation.

THE PLYMOUTH TAPESTRY NEEDS YOUR HELP!

To donate funds to the project, go to the Pilgrim Hall Museum webpage, <https://pilgrimhall.org/plymouth-tapestry-project.htm>; e-mail the development office at development@pilgrimhall.org, or call (508) 746-1620, extension 3.

"They must leave all that was familiar, learn a new language, and find a new living," wrote Governor Bradford, and this text is included on Panel 7, *Escape to the Low Countries, Part 1*, which illustrates the decision to leave England. The Separatists moved from a plain country village, illustrated in earlier panels, to a beautiful, cosmopolitan setting.

"They just couldn't fit in there," Curtin explains. "It's important for us to understand that this story has many nuances. Immigration isn't a simple story. This group of people had many different motives and reasons for why they moved from place to place. They were trying to take into account those things that impacted their lives and determine what was best for their families. There's a resonance between current issues and basic American experiences."

For viewers, the tapestry is all-absorbing. And as with rereading a book, every time viewers return to the tapestry, they will bring newly accumulated knowledge and experience to the viewing and will see new things in the tapestry and develop new understandings. As Curtin states, "You could look at the needlework and leave it at that. The design is appealing." However, its artistry touches the viewer in a personal, visceral way. Today, as visuals command our attention and influence our perception of the world, the tapestry can deliver a message with an immediacy that can be felt.

"The tapestry is wonderful because it gives you some of the deeper roots of what both the Wampanoag and English had experienced," Curtin says. "It gives you this visual you are not going to forget going forward. Viewers will observe 'That

Protestant Reformation did mean something. It wasn't just a chapter in a book that I read in sixth grade. It actually affected people's lives. And the Great Dying had a tremendous impact on the Wampanoag when they met the Pilgrims a few years later.' Viewers are going to have a vivid depiction of what that meant on a human, a personal level."

The tapestry is Pilgrim Hall Museum's legacy to future generations. "It's going to be lasting," Curtin says. "What will be interesting is 100 years from now, when people look back. In Plymouth we'll say, 'Oh, the 500th anniversary. What went on?' We'll look back to see what people did. A lot of recent history will have happened ephemerally, and it's not going to be well-documented. We won't have the same technology. Will we understand it? We'll have little scattered pieces of it. But we'll have this creation. And it will be interesting to see what *we* can't see." ■

DR. CHERYL CHRISTIAN was editor of *Needle Arts* for more than 14 years. Now editor emerita, she continues to teach, lecture, and exhibit her work.

VIEWING THE PANELS

The panels on exhibition rotate. Visit Pilgrim Hall Museum at 75 Court Street, Plymouth, MA, Wednesdays through Sundays, 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information, visit PilgrimHall.org.