



Women and children are arrested and taken into custody during the Separatists' second attempt to flee England. Detail from Panel 8: *Escape to the Low Countries Part 2*. PHOTO COURTESY PILGRIM HALL MUSEUM

The Stitchers Making History: The Plymouth Tapestry

by Dr. Cheryl Christian

Editor's Note: This is Part II of a two-part article. Part I appeared in the June 2023 issue.

“T here are so many interesting things going on in this panel,” embroiderer June House calls across to the stitchers in the adjoining room of the studio, the oldest surviving building in Plymouth, MA, the 1661 John Churchill house. “The architecture! The genre scenes!” She sits back to take in the whole of the 6-foot panel in front of her before taking another stitch. She is working one of the 20 panels of the Plymouth Tapestry, which reinterprets in stitch the events leading to and including the foundation of Plymouth Colony in 1620.

Her fellow stitchers nod agreement and call back to her from their stitching on the three panels that fit tightly into that space. “Are you lonely?” Pam Pelletier tosses out in camaraderie. “How’s the border going?” designer Elizabeth Creeden asks. She steps across the threshold to view the stitcher’s work.

“It looks really good. You’re doing fine,” she encourages her.

“There are too many people in this panel!” Mary Curley suddenly blurts out. “But it will look good!” Everyone laughs, understanding completely. The good-humored quips wing back and forth as they work.

Many people have stitched on the Plymouth Tapestry since work began in 2018, but a core group of men and women stitch regularly on the panels. The studio is open three days a week, and various members attend. Most live locally, but some regulars come from as far as Worcester, MA, 80 miles away, to stitch for the day. Others come from Cape Cod.

Each panel can accommodate six stitchers at a time, three on each side, and the room can become rather crowded. No one seems to notice. In winter, crowded conditions keep them



Panel 7: *Escape to the Low Countries: Part I*. PHOTO: C. JAMES SMITH COURTESY OF PILGRIM HALL MUSEUM

warm in more ways than one. They have established a bond through stitching and champion one another's work. Nine of the 20 panels have been completed, each one carefully and thoughtfully stitched.

Museum volunteer Kathleen Wall noted the dedication and skill of the stitchers when she had the opportunity to stitch on a panel. "I thought I would put a stitch in the tapestry," she says. "I was so intimidated by the level of talent in the room. It's not like I'm completely unskilled, but I'm not an artist. I was fascinated by the people there and all their different levels, backgrounds, and stories. That's part of the story: It's also about the people who came later who want to commemorate it and tell it in different ways. So, I did hold a needle. But I'm not sure what I did with it because my hands were shaking."

Quality, in part, is ensured by assigning specific tasks to particular individuals. This process requires more planning time than allowing anyone to stitch anywhere on a panel on a given day. Certain stitching must also be completed before subsequent stitching can begin. For example, the bodies of horses must be stitched before the manes and the tails are applied by those specializing in three-dimensional work.

Not only are the stitchers flexible in what and where they stitch, they are also

patient in their work, as the stitching can be slow and methodic. Stitching bodies is time-consuming, as the figures are first outlined then filled with tent stitch. The Wampanoag are outlined twice, the second time in a different color. It took four weeks of steady work to complete the Indigenous figures in one single panel.

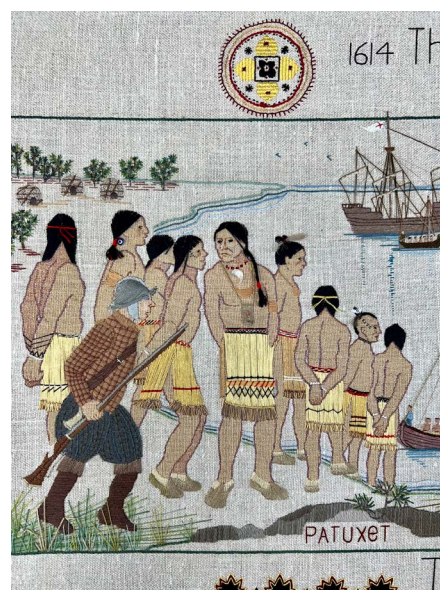
To maintain a consistent look across the panels, Creeden stitches all the faces. Because of the 2-foot height of each panel, stitchers cannot reach from the bottom to stitch something at the top. This restriction requires stitchers to stitch a figure or image upside down while seated at the top of a panel. This can make stitching difficult.

Working a tiny tent stitch for faces can also be troublesome. To improve conditions while stitching upside down, Creeden uses a dental inspection mirror with a long handle to see how a face will look to the viewer right side up.

As the stitchers stitch, an image can change or become refined. "Even with the faces drawn and printed, the thread positioning changes them. Each face becomes unique," Creeden comments. Ideas spring from the stitching as well, and experiments are conducted. For example, one Wampanoag wears a bear-claw pendant in several of the panels. Creeden thought to use a cat's



When she has to work from the top of a panel, designer Elizabeth Creeden uses a dental inspection mirror to ensure the quality of her work. PHOTO: C. JAMES SMITH



Tisquantum, wearing the cat's claw necklace, is kidnapped by Thomas Hunt in detail from Panel 9: *King James I, Early Voyages, Wampanoag Capture*.

PHOTO COURTESY PILGRIM HALL MUSEUM



At times, stitchers work the underside of a panel. Elizabeth Creeden, left, and Anne Gibson fix a tangle in the thread.

PHOTO: C. JAMES SMITH

claw. She filled it with glue to prevent crumbling. A fine hole drilled in the claw allows stitchers to suspend it from the Wampanoag's neck.

"I cannot figure another way," Creeden notes when talking about the idea. "But I have enough claws to mess up. And any time I hear my cat Jenny scratching, I run to see if she has left us another claw. Now, when you're drawing the scene, you would never think there was going to be a cat's claw." Necessity prompts innovation.

Stitchers are also assigned certain tasks based on their interests. Jim Smith keeps beehives, so it was fitting that he stitched the bees that are symbolic of the Separatists being stung by betrayal.

Stitchers' interests figure in other ways as well. Their pets become models for the dogs and cats included on various panels. These stitched animals provide viewers with points of entrance into the panels, promoting a personal engagement with the events and the people depicted in the tapestry. A bit of fur stitched in also lends a measure of authenticity to an animal's portrayal.

Creeden references fine artists as she designs the panels, and the stitchers learn from these references. For example, in Panel 11: *The Great Dying*, Moshup, the giant Wampanoag protector, reminds the Wampanoag that he warned

them that the newly-arrived people would harm them. He is set in clouds reminiscent of a Gustav Doré engraving of *Dante's Purgatory*.

The names of the artists who helped to inspire a panel's depiction or color palette are stitched at the panel's base. The names of the stitchers who worked a panel are also acknowledged at the bottom of the panel, for they are the artists who actualized the panel.

The stitchers have not only gained in their knowledge of history, fine art, and embroidery, they have grown as artists as well. Working on the tapestry and with Creeden as designer, many say they have developed an artistic eye that carries over and enriches their daily lives. Creeden has observed that they are more keenly aware of nature. They note the different colors of green in a blade of grass, the range of colors in water, and the nuances of the changing colors of the seasons. This keen perception is evident in their stitching.

One high point for the group has been Panel 7: *Escape to the Low Countries: Part I*. Affectionately referred to as The Night Panel, it illustrates three moonlit scenes. The left depicts the Separatists being watched as they meet in Scrooby Manor at night. They decide to emigrate to Holland as they are constantly under surveillance. The

center shows their ships in the moonlight as they attempt to flee England. The right illustrates the ship's master betraying them to the magistrate. Their possessions were taken at the dock, and they were marched as a spectacle through Boston, Lincolnshire, to the prison, another building exquisitely lit from within.



Tisquantum, right, advises Capt. Thomas Dermer in Newfoundland; detail from Panel 9: *Tisquantum's Story*.

PHOTO COURTESY PILGRIM HALL MUSEUM

“The Night Panel was special because we were using the colors in James Whistler’s *Nocturnes* and referring to Griswold Atkinson’s night panels. We matched up and pulled their colors,” Creeden says. The yellows glow from the buildings and the moon and are set against blues. Both colors travel throughout the panel, conveying line and shape. “That’s the one we are proud of,” Creeden states. “We created light. The thought of it and the ability to create it was exciting. And it worked.”

Other high points revolve around completing complex figures, such as Henry VIII and King James. “Both of these renditions are stunning in their achievement, with exquisite details,” Creeden comments. “So, there are treasured moments of achievement.”

Work on the tapestry is not always smooth sailing. “There are high moments,” Creeden notes. “You go high, then you start plugging again. You go up and down with what’s going on in the stitchers’ lives.”

Everyone on the team is close, and they look out for one another. After being unable to meet for a year during COVID, they returned to work, and were overjoyed to be back stitching. Going through the pandemic experience seems to have brought them closer. Work on the tapestry has slowed a bit as stitchers take time out for weddings or funerals. A number of people also have had health issues. “It felt like my family,” Creeden admits, noting the illnesses and the trials individuals have faced.

However, the camaraderie of the group gets everyone through difficult moments. “There are times when I have sleepless nights thinking and worrying about the project,” Creeden confides. “I get up in the morning and think, How can I get through the day? And everybody piles in. Pretty soon, there’s talking and laughing. Five o’clock has come, and I went through the day, and I was fine. And I knew I was going to sleep great that night.”

The work of the designer and an eclectic group of stitchers brings an unparalleled artistry to the tapestry and underscores its purpose. The Plymouth Tapestry promotes cultural awareness of the multiple perspectives on Plymouth Colony, helping us to learn from the past and apply greater wisdom to move forward in a thoughtful and considerate manner. Through its artistry and the dedication of its stitchers, the tapestry has the power to move the viewer, engender new understandings, and affect change. ■

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



Plymouth Tapestry stitchers take a moment for a photo. From left are Kris Gaskin, Susan Iadonisi, Carol McGraw, Elizabeth Creeden, Mary Ann Carter, and Anne Gibson. PHOTO: C. JAMES SMITH



Stitchers observe safety protocols as they work on a panel. PHOTO: C. JAMES SMITH

THE PLYMOUTH TAPESTRY NEEDS YOUR HELP!

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

THE TROUBLE WITH STITCH: CONSERVATION, TENSION, AND CONSISTENCY

One ongoing challenge to the production of large needlework panels is looking to their future at the same time they are being created. “How do we ensure that it can be presented and preserved over time?” Dr. Donna Curtin, executive director of the Pilgrim Hall Museum in Plymouth, MA, has asked. “If we take care of the tapestry, it’s going to last a lot longer. So, that will be our goal, to try to protect and preserve these artifacts for their long-term viewability.” As the project progresses, the group is learning what will facilitate conservation.

One key issue was to understand how stitching affects large swaths of linen on the panels. Preliminary mounting of the first four panels left areas in the panels where the linen sagged. The more they studied the panels, the more the conservators could trace problems with the tension. Each panel had a different amount of thread coverage, but a pattern emerged: Open areas of linen tended to sag more than stitched areas did.

They solved this problem in subsequent panels by filling open areas of linen with stitch. Even a small amount of stitching addresses tension issues. For example, in Panel 7: *Escape to the Low Countries: Part I*, tiny little vees of thread showing the birds’ movement across the sky filled an open field of linen, balancing the tension across the panel.

Text stitched on the panels created another issue. While the museum wants to have enough text for viewers to recognize what is happening in the panels, the consistency of the stitching across the panels proved problematic. Designer Elizabeth Creeden developed two fonts to create the two voices; one for the Wampanoag and another for the Separatists. Because the fonts are designed with straight, thin backstitches, it’s difficult to maintain consistency across the letters when stitched by different hands. It’s clear, for example, when a stitch is out of place on a plain linen ground, especially given that there is no other stitching to distract the viewer.

The solution to that problem has been threefold: less text on the panels, more reliance on wall labels and other forms of media, and one stitcher to stitch all of the lettering on one border of a given panel. “It comes down to the fact that every word matters,” says Curtin. “We are making certain that we don’t get too text-heavy. On certain panels, it’s difficult. We really have to strip away and get to the bare essentials. A lot of additional information will be in the wall labels.”

Working all of the text on one border can be tedious for the stitcher, who will neither be able to stitch in different areas nor work different stitches, but at least two can keep each other company, one on the top border and the other on the bottom. This way, the consistent look of the text across the panel will be maintained.

—C.C.



An overhead camera observes Mary Curley at work stitching the scene of Tisquantum advising Capt. Thomas Dermer in Newfoundland, a scene from Panel 9: *Tisquantum's Story*. PHOTO COURTESY PILGRIM HALL MUSEUM



Paula Marcoux works on a panel while designer Elizabeth Creeden’s claw-giving cat, Jenny, rests on a shelf. PHOTO: C. JAMES SMITH