

Surrounded by History

The Rajah quilt was made by convict women on HMS Rajah while on route from Woolwich England to Hobart Australia in 1841. It was pieced on cotton sheeting and embroidered or sewn with cotton and silk thread. It was either appliquéd, embroidered and pieced together by hand.

It was made by a group of around 29 of the 179 women prisoners on board the convict ship, who had received small bundles of sewing supplies from the British Ladies Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners ([www/britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)). This society was associated with the Quaker religion, particularly known through the prison reformer Elizabeth Fry who help found it. In England the association provided fabric so female prisoners could learn patchwork, needlework and knitting which opened prospects when they were released so they could gain employment. It promoted rehabilitation rather than the use of punishment. (www.mylearning.org)

The quilt's 2815 pieces demonstrate a cross section of British Industrial textile production of the time including the patterns, printing techniques and design influences. It is unknown which specific women contributed to the quilt, but it was felt there were quite a variation in their skills. Among the women on board 15 listed their occupations as dressmakers, sewers or needle workers (booklet at the exhibition). Small bloodstains can be seen on some of the cloth, most likely from the pricked fingers of the lesser skilled workers. Sweat stains are evident as well, possibly due to the crowded hot conditions they endured while on board and undertaking their needlework.

It is currently on display in Canberra. I had to see it. As I entered the area the quilt was on display, I was stunned at the size of it. It is over 3 metres square (126"). I was surprised at the variety and types of fabric used, there were such lovely colours and designs. I sat on a seat that had been placed in front of that display and absorbed the enormity of what I was viewing. The beauty of the whole piece whilst imagining the pain, heartache and love that accompanied the crafting of each block. Did each stitch give hope, help develop friendships, enhance skills or was it a process to help overcome despair knowing they would never see their homeland again. Would people in years to come wonder why each block was made the way it was, or who stitched it and why they were on the ship? What was their crime, age and family situation? Had they broken the law trying to survive?

The quilt was presented to the wife of the Lieutenant Governor of Van Dieman's land Lady Jane Franklin after the ship docked, as tangible evidence of the cooperative work that could be achieved under difficult circumstances. It was sent back to Britain to Elizabeth Fry (year unknown). It was forgotten about until it was rediscovered in an attic in Scotland in 1989. The quilt was returned to Australia and is now held in the National Gallery of Australian (gift of Les Holdings and the Australian Textile Fund 1989). Research shows other quilts were made by convicts, but this is the only documented quilt made by convicts that still survives.

The Rajah quilt was the key focus of an exhibition called "A Century of Quilts". Other quilts on display ranged from a possum skin cloak designed and made by First Nation artists from 1840 to more modern quilts made by various quilters between 1840 - 1940.

What a privilege to see this work of art in person. I felt humbled I'd had the opportunity as it is kept locked away and only displayed occasionally to ensure it is preserved for many more years. My hope is this quilt is seen by many in the future, to show some of the history of quilts and how they can span generations and demonstrate the skills and textiles of each era.

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