

# CAPTURED BY SILK THREADS

DIANNE CONOMOS

The Art of Traditional Silk Embroidery



Himotaba, Bunch of Cords



Traditionally embroidery has been practised in China for as long as four thousand years. From there the artform spread to Japan where a separate and distinctive

style of oriental embroidery developed. It first arrived in Japan with Buddhism, its forms and techniques evolving from the religious to decorative, ceremonial and fashionable, its peak achieved during the Edo period (1603 to 1868) – a time of exceptional peace and prosperity for Japan.

Japanese nobility were clothed in exquisite silks, richly embroidered with silk threads and goldwork and not only in their apparel, for embroidery featured in gift-giving protocols and many other customs. Until the Second World War, embroidery was practised only by Japanese people and was taught through a master-apprentice system of observation ('to steal the knowledge'). With post-War modernisation of Japan and the adoption of Western ways, it looked as though these unique and precious Japanese traditions might be lost.

In an audacious move to save and record Japanese embroidery and to further its practice Mr. Iwao Saito founded the Kurenai-Kai Embroidery School in the 1960s. He also wrote and published the first illustrated instruction book on Japanese Embroidery which was translated into English. There are forty-six basic techniques in this unique form of embroidery and training for needleworkers is carried out at the Kurenai-Kai School and at the Japanese Embroidery Centre in Atlanta, Georgia. On successful completion of a program of ten phases which develop one's technical skills, a needleworker graduates and is then eligible to apply for teacher accreditation.

Japanese embroidery is called *shishu* and 'the way' of embroidery is *nuido* (*nui* sewing and *do* way). 'The way' has three aspects: rationality, sensitivity and spirituality. Rationality is the achievement of skill and knowledge; sensitivity references artistry and awareness; and spirituality refers to the spiritual understanding of *shishu*, the balance and harmony when people stitch. In *nuido* – the way of embroidery – one looks for 'the echo of technique and spiritual intention, the hand as a means of ideological expression'. Traditionally embroidery is on silk fabric using silk or metal (gold or silver wrapped) threads.

DIANNE CONOMOS grew up in a family of craftspeople and her interest in embroidery was nurtured by her two grandmothers, her mother and uncle and teachers at her local high school. A recent exhibition of her work was in celebration of her 70th birthday, but Dianne's fascination with and her expertise in this very particular form of embroidery began only fifteen years ago. In that time she has embraced all aspects of this artform's cultural background and practice, including studying with noted Australian oriental embroiderer Margaret Lee in Adelaide, at Kuranai-Kai school in Togane City, Japan - to complete her final exams - and becoming in 2012 a graduate of the Japanese Embroidery Centre in Atlanta. Dianne is one of only about 600 people outside Japan studying traditional Japanese embroidery.

This is an artform with a long history and Dianne has enjoyed exploring a variety of techniques by embroidering intricate traditional designs, but she has also recently begun to explore the possibility of adapting these techniques to more modern works using her own designs.

"I use silk threads, and metal, and with very simple working tools have been able to create the pieces.

Double Cyprus Fan, 2018



Konbuin Fukusa, Treasure Ship



“The cloth used is always silk, and for some, metal has been woven with the silk for strength and a richer look. I adore the threads and fabrics which are beautiful to work with, and their finish is simply superb. I enjoy the discipline and attention to detail needed to achieve the skill that I have developed in order to perfect the techniques. A number of the embroideries have a story to tell which makes the work all the more fascinating...”

Dianne was a participant in The World Exhibition of Japanese Embroidery in 2011 in Adelaide, exhibiting two of her embroideries. She held a solo exhibition at the Australian Decorative and Fine Arts Society AGM, in 2015, and in 2018 exhibited works in the Blue Mountains Embroidery Group’s *Follow the Thread* exhibition at Braemar Gallery in the Blue Mountains, followed by a solo exhibition there in 2019.



Shell Box

Dianne has been a participant and exhibitor in the World Fractal Project for the Japanese Embroidery Centre which is ongoing. She is a member of the NSW Embroiderers’ Guild and runs small group classes.

The embroidery designs shown here are from the Kurenai-Kai School in Japan and range from traditional works to modern pieces. Some very intricate pieces have taken up to 800 hours each to complete.



Primeval Time

