

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Simeran Maxwell, Associate Curator of Australian Art at the National Gallery of Australia, to discuss the NGA's exhibition, A Century of Quilts, which is on at the NGA through 25 August. Why don't we start with the centerpiece of the show, the 1841 Rajah quilt?

SM: I would describe it as one of our most famous Australian textiles, and it was made by a group of women convicts who were being deported from England to Tasmania in 1841. And they made it onboard to present to the Lieutenant Governor of Tasmania's wife, Lady Jane Franklin, as a testament of their worth as people, which these days seems to go without saying that people have worth, but in those days your whole existence could be tainted by a wrongdoing that meant you were a convict. It's quite amazing, given that the conditions that they were working under were pretty extreme onboard - rocking boat, no electricity, no running water, all of that jazz, and it was done in a very short period and is really, really a beautiful, beautiful work.

AT: I mean it's also worth noting how much control the people in power would have had over these women, so I can definitely see the advantages to making a good first impression if at all possible.

SM: Absolutely, and that's really the reason why it survived. So the idea of women making things onboard, whether it be quilts or clothing or other items that they often sold at the various ports that they stopped at, or potentially at their destination, is known and documented. However, the items themselves have not been kept, so this was kept because it was a commemorative quilt, and because it was this gift to Lady Jane Franklin. So she supported a much broader group of women that were very invested in how prisoners were treated generally, prison reform generally, particularly in women's prison reform and the ongoing care of convict women. So they provided the materials, the movement was led by a woman called Elizabeth Fry. She was English, and she was a Quaker, so she took a lot of the materials from Quaker manufacturing industry, and they would have given her offcuts and sort of end of bolts and those sort of things. And then they were presented to the prisoners as they boarded the ship with threads and needles, and then it was up to them what they did with it.

However, while we have the end product, in this case, we don't have any documentary evidence about who, how, why. I mean, the why is obvious. They were trying to make a very good impression on someone that could potentially have a lot of positive impact on their life in Australia. And so there was a woman on board who was a free traveler called Kazia Hayter, and she was an acolyte of Elizabeth Fry. So the story has sort of developed that she kind of instigated and brought the group. And again, there was 179 women onboard, 179 women didn't participate in the quilt. But when you have a large group of people in confinement, people break into groups. So potentially there was the quilting group. There was again, variation in the skill of the women in that group. Some were really highly skilled, and also clearly somebody was literate because there is an inscription, and not all of the prisoners would have been literate. So we know that whoever did that was a very highly skilled needle worker, and literate, and did a beautiful job. There are other seams that're a little bit loose or a little bit tight, not maybe up to par, obviously still very impressive given the conditions. If you look at the work, it's a reflection of

women supporting women, of women's strength and endurance and desire to be seen for not what they've done, but what they could be.

Also, obviously, it's a reflection of British colonialism, both in Australia, but then also if you look at the material, the prints in the material, because the British printing industry was having this massive boom during industrialization. And so printing processes were rapidly changing, and they could print designs instead of having to have those designs woven into the fabric, which is obviously a time saver. And if you look at all of the different patterns, and there's over 3000 pieces in the quilt, you actually see a cross-section of other countries that the British Empire had colonized. So you have West African designs, you have South Asian designs, you have Southeast Asian designs. So yeah, I think it's a very interesting historical document in a number of ways, notwithstanding that it was made by women.

AT: And we'll get into the textiles association with women and what that means for it as an art form. You've already mentioned that, a lot of these weren't saved because they weren't seen as artworks, they were seen as useful craftworks. But could you paint us a picture of what the quilt looks like?

SM: Everyone who walks into the gallery space, and it's the first thing that you see because it's sort of the center of the exhibition, is really taken back by the size of it. And it is one of the reasons why we don't get it out so much. I mean, there's a number of reasons. Obviously, it's not like we're trying to hide it from the world. Absolutely not. We'd have it out all the time if we could. But the sheer scale of it, it is three and a half meters by three and a half meters. So the base fabric of the edges and the center of the quilt is like an off-white color. And then along in the center is a process called broidery purse, where one material, a pattern is cut out of it. In this case, there's florals and there's birds, and then they are appliqued onto the base fabric using really beautiful embroidery stitches around the edge to create the design. So that's the center of the work.

And then around that is also appliqued a daisy kind of pattern, reasonably large pieces, 10, 15 centimeter petals. Again, that's been done with really fine needlework. And then you get to the outer layers or sections, and that becomes a patchwork. So it was made with a paper piecing technique, which is a very popular technique in the 19th century. And essentially for those people who don't know quilting, you take a small square of or whatever shape of fabric, and then you cut the paper, and it's usually old magazines, we have a work in the show, which is unfinished, and it shows that even ticket stubs for like the theater were used, anything that was lying around. I've been informed by the textile conservators that actually brown paper was used in the Rajah quilt. So presumably the women onboard were supplied with it because they wouldn't have had magazines and ticket stubs lying around the ship. A shape would be cut out repeatedly, so it will all be the same size. And then the material would be folded over the paper, and then it would have a basting stitch, which is a very loose stitch, which would keep the fabric wrapped around the paper. And then with a beautiful stitch, those triangles in the case of the Rajah quilt would all be joined together. The beautiful thing about this section of the Rajah quilt is where you see that real diversity of printing. So there is so many, I don't know the number off the top of my head, but there are so many different patterns within the Rajah quilt. So you can

just stare at it for hours looking for different patterns that, you've got some that are clearly taken from like mock lace. If you know your international textiles, that's more Indonesian or that sort of Japanese or that's Indian, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and then of course, West Africa features in a lot of them. So that section is beautiful. And then you have what looks a little bit like a flounce around the very edge. And it's again white. And then it has similar to one of the inner layers, the floral daisy pattern blocked all around the edge. And while it looks like a flounce, and our conservators have done a really beautiful job at creating a lovely sort of even wave so you can see the daisies and the waves in the material don't interrupt it. It would have intended to be flat, but it was just that the sheer size of the work, they would never have been able to have it lying flat in their "workspace," the bowels of a ship. And then on the bottom, got more broidery purse. And again, it's a combination of those floral pieces, appliqued with embroidery edges. And then in the center, you have an inscription to Lady Jane Franklin, which essentially says that this is an offering from the women on board to sort of prove and demonstrate their worth. And we thank her in advance for anything that she can do for us in the future.

AT: And so I'm curious from a sort of museum management standpoint, because if it's three and a half by three and a half, that's about twice my height.

SM: When I say quilt, and when we, when we say quilt, and when we're talking about this exhibition, there is a variation in what is contemporarily known as a quilt, which is three layers of fabric with a sort of the middle layer being a sort of batting fabric, and then you pierce all three layers. So that's what a quilt is these days. In times of old, "quilt" was a more generalized term, which basically made the pacing of fabric. So the Rajah quilt is a single layer. It doesn't have even, quite a lot of the works in the show have a backing. So you don't see all of the messy seams and what have you. In three months on board the HMS Rajah, they didn't have time to do a backing. And they probably didn't have the material as well to be, to be absolutely fair. So while it is interesting to look at from a historical and what have you, the front is where all of the, the jazz happens, that's where it's really exciting. And we do have to, another reason we don't get it out a lot is because we can't, so most of the quilts in the show, we've had almost vertical on the wall. There's a slight tilt, but it's almost vertical. With the Rajah, we have to be a lot more tilted. There was endless, endless discussions between our design department and our conservation department about the angle of the quilt. And they kept saying, "Sims, you want to come to these meetings?" And I'm like, "I can offer nothing." I'm not building the infrastructure to put it on. And I don't want it to get wrecked. So I'm not going to say, "I don't know, put it upright." Like, that would be just stupid. So I attended a few meetings and nodded sagely, but in the end, it wasn't my call. So what the combined teams have done is create this trolley, a big metal trolley that the board on which the fabric is attached. And there is Velcro, of all the great innovations of NASA. Velcro at the top and a Velcro in the middle, which kind of carries a bit of the gravity weight. And then it was really amazing to watch the conservators put it out. So they laid it out flat on the backing board and then got it in place and then very, very carefully put - you know the pins that entomologists use, like that's so thin for sticking in flies and butterflies and what have you. So they used just a few of them in discreet places where necessary. Then it was stood up and then they saw how it sort of fell or hung. And then they did it again. They just do a little bit of

zhuzhing. And then they say, "Sim, do you like it? Is there anything you want to change?" Because obviously once it goes in the showcase, that's it. And then it was wheeled into the showcase. And again, the showcase is this really thick purpose-built thing that has lighting inside so that we can get that light on it, which, so everything in the show has got low light because textiles require it. But the Rajah quilt has even lower light. It's quite exciting watching, watching works go up. I've always said that it is much more expensive to buy a painting than a textile. But it is a lot more hard work to care for that textile and to put it on display. It requires an army of people. But it is exciting to watch happen.

AT: And I think you touched on this earlier that textiles are just inherently much more fragile and delicate, especially over time when we don't necessarily know how it was stored, because this is a 180-plus-year-old, multiple pieces of fabric. And especially when you consider the weight.

SM: Yes, it's a heavy lady. The beauty actually of the Rajah, even though it is incredibly fragile and incredibly light-sensitive and incredibly large, is that because it was a commemorative quilt, it was never intended to go on someone's bed. It wasn't made to decorate a table. It wasn't made to hang in a child's bedroom. It was made as this sort of offering. So with that, it was then folded up and put somewhere and not used. So it didn't see the light of day. It never got washed. Thank god. And we simply don't know, there is a period between when it arrived in Tasmania. And it was possibly only in Tasmania for a short amount of time because there is, again, it's an assumption, we have no documentation on this currently, that it would have returned to England with the Franklins when when they returned to England. They didn't stay in Australia for a hugely long time after that. And then somehow it ended up with a family in Scotland, in Edinburgh. We know from around the 1930s that a pair of sisters owned it. And from their descendants is where we acquired the work. And again, it wasn't displayed in their home, they just owned it. And so because of that, it's in so much better condition than it could have been because of the material that it was that it was made from.

Whereas other works in the show were definitely made to be used because it's this idea that, just because you have to have a blanket on the bed or because you have a blank wall and if paintings are expensive now, they still were expensive back in the day. And people who lived remotely wouldn't have even necessarily, even if they had the money, would they have had the opportunity to acquire these sort of things? And women, if they're stuck in a home all day, they want to live in a beautiful environment like we do. So, they make do and they make. But with that means that there is people are not thinking about, "oh, I won't make it out of silk and rayon because those are two materials that won't last the test of time." "I won't hang it above the fireplace that smokes because that'll infiltrate the fabric." Or particularly with our quilts made in the 1920s, which in Australia we refer to as waggas. They're also known as utility quilts or depression quilts. And they were made for necessity. These people were poor. Australia can be bloody cold in the winter time. And so they needed warmth for their bedding. And when old rugs, men's clothing, particularly suits and what have you, would wear out and no longer wearable, they would be cut up. And the holey section would be discarded. And the section that's still good would be all joined together. They would then stuff with other old fabric and clothing that they had lying around and then they would go on people's beds. And they would be used. So you

can see the conservators are really good at what they do, so good at what they do. But they're not miracle workers. You can't roll back time. If something's been used and worn and what have you, then it's used and worn. And we're just lucky with the Rajah that it wasn't used and worn. So while there are patches, like there's some blood stains, which would have been from the women who made it. Because even in the comfort of my living room with electric lights and heating and access to a toilet, I do occasionally prick my fingers when I'm doing a little bit of needlework. So women who had particularly less experience with needlework would have pricked their fingers. And blood would, of course, end up on the quilt, but that's built into the history of the quilt as well. So we're not trying to get rid of those stains. There's also around the inscription, which is an area of the quilt that, whoever did that particular part would have been holding the quilt for a really long time because it would have been quite laborious. There's brown stains and people assume like maybe a tea stain or something because it does have that sort of look to it. But actually, that's the oils from the woman's skin, which have leached out. And over time, it will just continue to darken in color. But again, that's part of the history of the making of the quilt. So I think the making for a quilt or a textile, the making is far more entwined in the final product than in some other mediums that we have. That's not to say all because there's obviously wood carving and stuff, which is very physical. And you do see that in a similar way, but it is interesting to note those things that we're not trying to get rid of.

AT: Now, the pedant in me is very strong. And I have to point out that the exhibition is called A Century of Quilts. But you've actually got more than a century's worth of quilts represented.

SM: The original idea for the show was to showcase the National Gallery's collection of the historical Australian quilts. And I feel very strongly as a white person, that while obviously we have this beautiful collection of colonial quilts, that white women were not the first people to consider the quilting as a medium in Australia, and that First Nations peoples' quilting practices go back a lot longer. Unfortunately, when the exhibition was decided, it was like, this is collection only, no budget for any loans, which is entirely fair enough. It was also done very, very quickly in the scheme of how exhibition development goes.

AT: Well, that's what I was just wondering because my understanding is that it can be like two years or more from when they first decide, "okay, this is what we're going to do" to when it actually goes up. So how long was the turnaround there?

SM: We're talking, oh, just shy of a year? Yeah, yeah. It was a lot of pressure on particularly the conservation department, because they're the ones that have to, I can pick a work and say "that's beautiful," which I did. But I always do it in consultation with them. I'm not going to be like, "well, we're rebuilding this one from the ground up and you've got a week." There was obviously consultation and they love the works. So they're like, "oh, this one's never been out before. Maybe we could do something with this." So that was a really great experience working with the team. But you can't invent works in the collection that don't exist. So we have no historical Aboriginal quilts. So when colonization occurred, everybody in the south-eastern part of Australia would have owned an animal skin cloak. And these were important for both ceremonial

practice, but also just daily life. And there are now only six in the world left and only two of those are in Australian collections, which I think again speaks a little bit to colonization. So I knew I couldn't invent something we didn't have. Also, they are incredibly fragile. And we were also working with a very small space. So the ones that are remaining in Australia, there's two in the collection of the Melbourne Museum, they're adult quilts. So they're very large. But then I started conferring with my First Nations colleagues. I worked with Tina Baum on the show. And she was like, "what about the women who have revived the tradition of quilt-making in Australia?" And I, absolutely. And I knew a little about it, but diving really into it, the interesting thing is that the two artists that I've included, Treaahna Hamm and Lee Darroch, were both the part of a group of four or five women who visited the Melbourne Museum as printmakers with an invitation from the Australian Print Workshop in Melbourne to view various works in the collection of the Melbourne Museum. And then to go back to the Australian Print Workshop and to make prints in sort of response. And when this group of women saw the two quilts, they just, that was it. Not that was the end of printmaking for them, but they were just like, we need, it's a pact. It's, now we're going to do something about this. And so they initially recreated the two quilts that they, cloaks that they had seen. They did consultation with elders, community elders. And then they expanded and their practice then began to incorporate their own totems and country from the various regions that they were from, again, in consultation with elders who were also, taught them about how the the original cloaks were made. So we have one child's cloak and then we have three prints by Lee, which are made at Print Workshop in Melbourne. And they show how when a child is born, the cloak is started. And it's made with just a just a few pelts from predominantly possum, but they used other animals as well. And then as the child grew into an adult, they would add more pelts and more designs. So there's not always a cohesive overall design. It's often different to mark different points in that person's life. The quilts became very personal because of that. It wasn't just colonization that, I mean it eradicated the practice of making them. But the quilts themselves were often buried with the owner of the quilt because they spoke to that individual. Having said that, when white people came to Australia, they also realized it's bloody cold. So the cloaks became very popular trade items with the Indigenous people. And presumably that's how the four that are overseas got to be overseas.

AT: Well, I will admit, when you mentioned, there's only six left in existence and the majority of them are not in the country, it did make me wonder about provenance issues, because particularly when we're getting into colonization and Indigenous people's cultural objects, a lot of it was just outright stolen, which I know makes it very problematic from an ethics standpoint, when you're trying to share history, but you know that those objects were most likely stolen.

SM: Yeah, it does become problematic. And when I say, popular trade item, what is trade? You can't say that all items that end up in a different culture's hands were stolen from them because different cultures do trade, like, this is a historic thing. However, when you reflect on Australian First Nations history, white Australian First Nations history, there's a strong undercurrent there that is not in favor of the First Nations community. And I don't know enough about it. I certainly can't speak to it, but I'm just really thrilled to include work by contemporary artists who are reviving cultural practice and can speak to it themselves. So we have invited Treaahna to come

and do a workshop at the gallery and to do it in conversation where we can start to really unpack and explore these things because as a white woman, I wanted to demonstrate to, because this has been a very popular show, especially with women and maybe a slightly older demographic who are seeing works for the first time. I'm not saying this is the first quilt show, but in Canberra, it is. And they're seeing works that they have more of a connection to, that this is not something that's like gatekept and there's obstacles in the way and people speak about it in this highfalutin way that makes it, causes a disjunction between the viewer and the work of art. These are things that they can feel a connection to, and I wanted those white women to see, and there's a lot of interest in that connection because I have also hung a possum skin rug near Treahna and Lee's work, and this is made by colonial women, but the heritage and the lineage is completely clear, that they saw what the Aboriginal people in Tasmania particularly, because that's where this work is from, had made and went, "we can do that." And they did, and then they became very famous for these rugs and blankets, and they were exhibited all across the world at various world fairs. Again, not just possums, but also platypus. Treahna's example is actually made out of New Zealand possums because possums are a protected species in Australia because they're natives. In a cruel twist of irony, the white women would often then "teach" quilting, and I'm using inverted commas there, back to First Nations children that had been stolen from their parents. So that and people also need to just be aware of that, that there is a reason why these techniques were not continued and why people like Treahna Hamm and Lee Darroch and others have had to revive a tradition, why it's disappeared.

AT: I've had a couple conversations recently where we were talking about really issues of consent, and so the idea of having two modern-day artists who are actively involved in like collaborating on this and participating, rather than someone who is long gone, we don't even know their name, and we don't know exactly how this item came into the collection. It feels much more respectful and more honest, I think.

SM: Well, I mean, should we have owned a historical quilt, the timeline that I outlined just before, in the putting together the show, would have not enabled the proper consultation to have occurred, because as a national institution, which is attempting in every way we currently can, to put First Nations first, is that consultation would need to have taken place, and a lot of research and undertaking. Whereas I obviously reached out to both Treahna and Lee to let them know that this is what I wanted to do. I told them where the work would be going and in relation to what other works were around it. So, for example, the possum rug, and then the Rajah quilt, these are both different symbols of white colonization of Australia, and I just wanted to know whether they would be comfortable with that. And so, it's not just, yes, that they have agency by being alive, but they also need to have agency about how that story is told, and what associations people like me are drawing by putting them within proximity to other works. So, yeah, it worked out in my favor, because they were very happy with what I've done, and it'll be wonderful to meet Treahna. And we have other folks in the collection, like we have another small one, which is currently traveling in the Know My Name exhibition, which is just going around Australia. We always try and have examples of both our historic textiles and First Nations textiles up in our Australian galleries. After this show, we may have run out for a little

while while they rest, but so we're always in consultation, but it was just really nice to be able to include it in this particular show and demonstrate those lineages.

AT: And so, you mentioned Know My Name, which is a larger initiative at the NGA that celebrates the work of women artists to enhance understanding of their contribution to Australia's cultural life. And I find textiles particularly interesting in this context, because textiles have often been seen more as craft than high art, not least because of that strong association between women and textiles, but also the utility over just visual appreciation. And we see things like at Bauhaus, Anni Albers and Otti Berger, women were only allowed to work in textiles. They weren't allowed to work in other mediums. And so...

SM: Well, they did work in some of the mediums, but did any men work in textiles? You do have female photographers and sculptures, but I'm so pleased that Anni did textiles, because what the work that she did in textiles is amazing.

AT: Oh yeah, they smashed it.

SM: Of course they smashed it. They were just inherently creative people, but it's that a man wouldn't want to work in textiles, is that converse thing. Because to just correlate it back to the quilt show, none of the women in the exhibition, apart from the contemporary artists, and one woman called Margaret Weir, considered themselves artists. That's not the purpose for which they were constructing these works. However, Margaret Weir was an artist. She went to the National Gallery School in Melbourne. She learned painting. She then taught watercolor painting from her home in Parkhill in Melbourne. However, her words, not mine, she considered her work in needlework, quilting what have you, "hobby." That was a hobby. Her other work, she was an artist. So the patriarchy works in such insidious ways that it convinces the woman to make those differentiations. She's working in a different scope to, obviously, Anni Albers, but it is very interesting to note how women themselves would segregate different things. If you were trying to break into that structure of art where, you've got your pyramid and painting's at the top, and even then, types of painting are structured. And she was a watercolorist, and that's a little bit "girly," inverted to commas again, for those people who can't see me. But, it is those ideas of what a woman could achieve versus what a man could achieve, or would even want to participate in it. And I think those ideas are quite interesting to unpack, and it doesn't take away from the work that Anni did at the Bauhaus or other people did at the Bauhaus, but it's interesting to reflect on those structures. And how one hopes there would be differences these days, but I live in a bubble within a bubble within a bubble, and I work in a bubble. So the strides that we're trying to make with the Know My Name campaign, so it started with an exhibition that turned into a double exhibition, and then a touring show, and then, we are really concentrating on furthering the cause of women artists. And it's not just Australian women artists, it's across our whole collection, and then also bringing forward their stories and their work like in A Century of Quilts. We've got our final week of the Emily Kame Kngwarreye exhibition - again, another wonderful woman artist, who, again, started her career in textiles, before having, actually, a fairly short career in paintings. She did a lot of them, but it was over a very short period of time, but



yeah, she started working in batik printing, and they're just absolutely beautiful works, but again, when people think of somebody like her, she is so famous within Australia, and I would say internationally as well, people don't know about her batiks and her textile works, and that's, I think, an indictment on the way that still textiles are considered, and I'm very interested in the way that contemporary artists, particularly women, feminist women, but also queer artists, use textiles in their work. They re-imagine quilting and embroidery, and what ideas they're sort of playing with there, and what they're reflecting on. And, you know, I'd like to do A Century of Quilts: Part Two, which looks at what has happened in that space, because the '60s and the '70s in Australia was a real boom in terms of, well actually, internationally as well, you look at Judy Chicago and whatever. They were looking at and twisting the narrative on those traditional feminine spaces versus dead white males.

AT: Yeah, I think we're getting into, like, when we touch on arts and crafts, it also makes me think of high art and low art, where people are trying to draw this distinction between what is good and what is to be disrespected, and I find that those are always the people who don't like it when you point out that Shakespeare was low art in his time.

SM: No, exactly. I was speaking to, so we have a youth council at the gallery, and they're from all over Australia, and so I was presenting the show, and we had this wonderful discussion afterwards, but one of the, and was a masculine-presenting person, said, he was questioning these ideas of, like, what artists are contemporarily referencing these works? But he said, "real artists" when he referred to contemporary artists, and I said, "I have to stop you there, these women are artists. This is the point of the show, we're giving them a name, and we're giving them a history, and just because they didn't go to art school doesn't mean they're not artists." And we are shifting away from that narrative, which is when a lot of these works were acquired. I mean, they were acquired by a national institution, so there was this idea of the artistic relevance, but there was this categorisation still within that of, high art, as you say, versus folk art, and folk art has this more homely and domestic, and not quite there, and a bit rough around the edges, and with that, although it wouldn't be said as blatantly as that, the sort of lesser-ness of it, and so in pitching this show, I'm just dispensing with that altogether. We're not going to talk about it, because that's not how we consider these works today. The only reason we don't have them up all the time, and we do have did Sid Nolan's Ned Kelly series and Jackson Pollock's Blue Poles, is because they're oil and canvases that can withstand constant light and dust and the whole nine yards. Whereas textiles are just inherently more fragile, and we can't do anything about that, and we do want to obviously have as long of a life of these things as physically possible.

I don't know whether in my lifetime we will convince young people who then become medium-aged people, who then become old people, to just consider everything the same, and that's not to diminish the nuance, because everything is nuance. And you want to platform this thing without disrupting nuance, because nuance is part of being human, and it's the beauty of why things are different, why, when you look at possum skin cloaks in the British Museum, for example, and you wonder as a trade item, whether it really is, versus you see an Indian trade cloth, for example, in an Indonesian collection, or anywhere else, and you go, "oh yeah, that's a

trade cloth that was made, not for the home market, that was made because they knew the Indonesians preferred a discolor palette,” or, you know, whatever the case may be. It's that nuance that you can't paint everything the same, but you can also acknowledge that art is art.

AT: A Century of Quilts is on display at the National Gallery of Art in Canberra until 25 August 2024. Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast, and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.