Introduction

*From Here to Eternity* presents a diverse range of tapestries from the Exhibition Collection of the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in Melbourne. The majority of work undertaken by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop is for public spaces and invariably monumental in scale. Their Exhibition Collection however, where they work in collaboration with contemporary Australian artists, provides a flexible approach to scale and subject, and often pushes the boundaries of the medium, in turn extending the skills of the Workshop's weavers. Collaboration is an essential component of the Workshop's ethos, and this exhibition testifies to the success of the collaborative ventures undertaken by the Workshop over a twenty-year period.

Artists include Davida Allen, G. W. Bot, Eugene Carchesio, Jon Cattapan, Graham Fransella, Roger Kemp, David Larwill, Alun Leach-Jones, Reg Mombassa, Jimmy Pike and Arlene Textaqueen.

A Short History of Tapestry

Tapestries have been created for hundreds of years by diverse cultures. Both the ancient Egyptians and the Incas would bury their dead in tapestry woven clothing and important buildings of the Greek Empire proudly displayed tapestry wall hangings. The medium reached its peak during the Middle Ages when tapestries were utilised both for decoration and for protection against cold winds. Kings and nobles would roll their tapestries up and carry them as they travelled from castle to castle. They also adorned cathedrals and large churches. Mastery of the tapestry medium was achieved by the French during Medieval times. Paris was the centre of production but soon other European cities followed. Medieval weavers extracted dyes from plants and insects and their imagery consisted of Biblical stories, myths, and scenes of peasants working and nobles hunting. A great example of the craftsmanship of the time is the famous Lady and the Unicorn tapestries. They are said to represent the different senses of taste, hearing, sight, smell, touch and love.

An important development in the history of tapestries was the invention of the Jacquard mechanical loom in 1804. It processed perforated cards, like the ones found in pianolas, which fed the coloured yarns to the shuttle. It enabled tapestries to be produced faster and more efficiently therefore making them accessible to a wider market. The mechanics of the Jacquard loom re still the basis of the looms used for producing tapestries today. Modern tapestry weaving also owes much to the Arts and Crafts Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Headed by William Morris in England many older crafts such as tapestry weaving were revived in a reaction against the widespread industrialisation of the time.

Technique

The tapestry process starts with the artist creating an initial design known as the cartoon. The tapestry is interpreted from the cartoon in a collaborative process between artist and weaver. The weaver is the person who operates the loom (the machinery that produces the tapestry). The weaving process begins with a loose grid of parallel twine threads (the warp) which run vertically from the top of the loom frame to the bottom. A full scale version of the cartoon is transferred in black ink onto the warp. From here the weaving process begins. Coloured threads wrapped around bobbins are run horizontally via an over and under process through the vertical warp threads. This is known as wefting. A large tapestry can take several months to complete, depending on the number of colours and complexity of the design. Several tests are made by the weavers in the form of small samples to ensure that the colour is accurate and keeps with the artist's original design. As the image grows the tapestry is wound down onto a roller at the base of the loom, remaining out of sight until the process is completed. Once the tapestry is finished it is unfurled and cut off the loom.
**Collaboration**

Collaboration refers to a group of people working together to achieve a single goal. Collaboration can be traced throughout art history, from Renaissance times where apprentice artists would work under the instruction of masters to complete single paintings and sculptures (which were most often attributed solely to the master) to more modern day examples such as the production of public artworks which are designed by the artist but executed by expert craftspeople.

The process of making a tapestry relies on a collaborative process between the artist; whom creates the design for the tapestry and the weaver; who works the machinery to create the tapestry. Most often there are a team of weavers that work on one tapestry under the instruction of the head weaver. In some cases the artist may also be the weaver. You will note in the exhibition From Here to Eternity, the weavers are acknowledged along with the artist.

**The Art/Craft Debate**

The debate over what constitutes art, and what constitutes craft has raged for over a century. Much of the debate centres around value judgements: is one more culturally important therefore more valuable than the other. Dictionary definitions indicate that the production of art is an expression of creativity and ideas through a medium such as painting, while craft is the skill of making things by hand.

However up until the 18th century art and craft were entwined in everyday cultural life. Painting acted as a way of recording important people and events along with promoting and displaying religious devotion. Handmade ceramics such as cups and plates were used for everyday food consumption. The Industrial Revolution changed this as it brought with it machines that could mass produce everyday items cheaply and efficiently. The Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th and early 20th century promoted a return to individually hand crafted items such as textiles, ceramics and furniture.

Since this time the boundaries between art and craft have been unclear. Questions that continue to be debated up until this day include:

+ Is the production of art centred around ideas and craft centred around skills of production?
+ If we can produce things mechanically, do we need to make them by hand? If so, why?
+ Is an artist someone who has an inborn talent and a craftsperson someone who has learnt skills?
+ Is art more culturally important or of higher cultural value than craft?
+ Do art and craft coexist and inform one and other?
+ How does design relate to art and craft?
ACTIVITIES

Making

Contemporary Australian artists such as Fiona Hall and Aseem Pereira shred aluminium cans into long threads which are then be woven or knitted into artworks. Drawing on these ideas, students gather a variety of recycled materials and research and experiment different ways of manipulating them such as weaving, knitting, crocheting and knotting.

Appraising

+ Colour is a dominant element in this exhibition. Drawing on your understanding of the process of tapestry weaving, explain why you think the Victorian Tapestry Workshop has chosen artists’ work with this common element.
+ Consider the history of the tapestry medium. What are the differences between the subjects in contemporary tapestry and tapestry produced throughout history?
+ Explain the process of contemporary tapestry making from concept stage through to completion.

References

Further Reading
From Here to Eternity: Contemporary Tapestries from the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, 2007.
Victorian Tapestry Workshop.

Online Resources
Reg Mombassa http://www.regmombassa.com/
Arlene Textaqueen http://www.textaqueen.com/

Tours

Free guided tours of From Here to Eternity with Curator (Public Programs) are available for all age groups and interests. Tours must be booked in advance. Phone 07 3138 5370 or email artmuseum@qut.edu.au to make your booking.

INFORMATION

Education Kit produced by Maree Purnell & Megan Williams
The curriculum links for Years 11-12 included in this resource have been developed from curriculum documents Assessment and Reporting Framework for The Arts, focusing on learning and assessment around the Essential Learnings and Standards for Visual Art and Media (© The State of Queensland, Queensland Studies Authority, 2007) Senior Syllabus: Visual Art (© The State of Queensland, Queensland Studies Authority, 2007).

From Here to Eternity: Contemporary Tapestries from the Victorian Tapestry Workshop
11 June - 2 August 2009
FREE ENTRY

QUT Art Museum
2 George Street (next to City Botanic Gardens)
Brisbane Q 4000
07 3138 5370
artmuseum@qut.com

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Presented by The Victorian Tapestry Workshop, Melbourne

OPENING HOURS
Tuesday - Friday 10am - 5pm
Wednesday 10am - 8pm
Saturday and Sunday 12pm-4pm