

The Art of

ANNEMIEKE MEIN

Wildlife Artist in Textiles

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To my husband, Phillip, for supporting my artistic development with patience, encouragement and love, while remaining my best friend and advisor. And to our two children, Joanne and Peter

Illustrations on preliminary pages: Endpapers: No. 13, *Dragonflies*, detail Page i: No. 54, *Dance of the Mayflies*, detail Page ii: No. 42, *Freedom*, detail Page vi: sampler for No. 40, *Early Birds*

Front cover:

No. 24, Pink Emperor Gum Moth II, detail

Back cover:

No. 57, Lewin Honeyeater Nestlings I, detail

Page 158:

No. 57, Lewin Honeyeater Nestlings I, detail

Opposite:

No. 56, Frog Down Under, detail

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FOREWORD

Years ago my father made the comment, 'All great art is the combination of rare skill plus imagination', a comment I never forgot. Good craftsmanship is relatively common, but real imagination is scarce indeed. To know Annemieke is to be conscious of a rare imaginative gift that pervades everything she does. The first time I went to a dinner party at the Meins' and experienced her exquisite cooking, I also found that each guest had their place marked with a Blue Gum leaf on which names were sewn in flowing script.

I first heard of Annemieke's work through my daughter, who had been invited to the Meins' while she was working at the Sale hospital. She couldn't stop talking about Annemieke's work when she returned home. The Mein family duly came out for a barbecue lunch, while I was building my studio at Longford over Easter 1979. I expected to have much in common with another wildlife artist, but, within minutes of our first meeting, it was the discovery that we both had a lifelong interest in invertebrates that made the occasion so memorable.

Much of the wildlife art I see is repetitious: nearly all of it is confined to vertebrates and flowers, with lots of 'birds on twigs'. While not wishing to denigrate the many excellent artists working in this field, much of their art-seems to say to the viewer, 'I am copied from a photograph or a museum specimen: I am dead!'. The world of invertebrates is largely ignored, even though invertebrates represent 90 per cent of all animals. Many people regard anything with more than four legs as something to be feared, or killed on sight.

Annemieke's contribution to wildlife art is therefore important. In portraying insects so much larger than life, she has opened a window on the world that surrounds us, a world that is beautiful, fascinating and mostly unseen. The love and understanding that shine through her work are based on long hours of observation and study. Countless insects have been reared in her studio, their life cycles observed and documented with beautiful drawings.

Sauflies is a typical example. Annemieke has described in the text only one aspect of all the

observation and documentation that preceded her work. She has told me about some of the other things she learnt – how the larvae communicate with each other by tapping the stems and leaves with the tips of their abdomens as they disperse from their daytime clusters to feed on gum tips at night. Throughout the night they keep in touch by this means, finally changing the tempo when it is time to regroup into clusters as dawn approaches. She also noted that the larvae appear to need moist soil before they can burrow down to make their underground cocoons. From a biological point of view, this probably explains how climate can limit their breeding.

Annemieke's work is not confined to insects. The same meticulous observation and detailed drawing precedes all her work, whether it be birds, frogs, barnacles or anything else. In 1979 she had already taken work in textiles in a new and innovative direction. She had demonstrated that textiles could be used as an exciting sculptural medium. Those familiar with her work thought of her only as an artist, but because she was working in textiles, she always ran the risk of being lumped together with other craftworkers. I was delighted when she accepted the commission to make six bas-relief bronzes for the Wall of Fame in the new Sale pedestrian mall. This firmly established her reputation as an artist and sculptor. Since then she has gone from strength to strength as she explores and develops new techniques in her use of textiles and fabric paints.

Underpinning all her work is a rare standard of craftsmanship. Annemieke would qualify as an artist of note for the quality of her drawing alone. The dozens of exquisite drawings that are part of the groundwork for all her major pieces are gems in their own right. All her important works are preceded by carefully drawn cartoons, in which all the tonal values are rigorously assessed, including the shadows cast by relief sections.

For artists who work on flat surfaces, producing convincing perspective drawings of the abstract patterns on the bodies of animals or the wings of insects is difficult enough. It is much more difficult to judge the right amount of distortion or foreshortening needed to enhance a

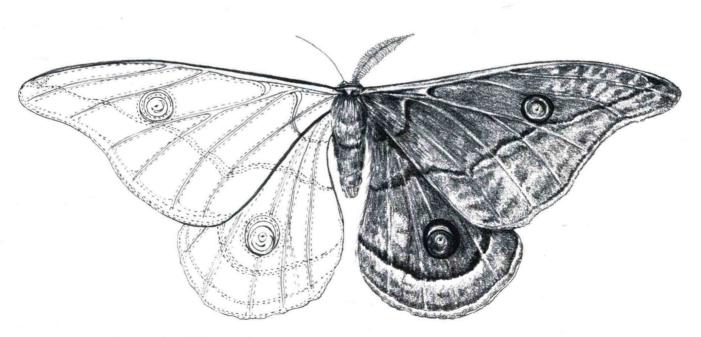
three-dimensional illusion, particularly when some of the surface is in partial relief and has some perspective in its own right that will vary with the viewing angle. I have watched Annemieke when she has been working on this problem and have seen how many times she has made individual elements, tried them in place, altered or remade them, until she was satisfied that they looked right. The finished work gives no hint of the effort required to achieve the effect. Similarly, the misplacement by a millimetre or one degree of even the smallest item in a large work can spoil the balance of the design. Annemieke spends hours getting it exactly right, using paper cutouts as models. She checks the placement of each part by viewing the work on the wall, on the floor, and in a mirror, until she is absolutely certain that the final effect is what she wanted to achieve.

I am sure that those who are not themselves

artists seldom appreciate how difficult it is to produce a balanced and satisfying work of art. These days many artists pay little attention to the lasting quality or compatibility of the materials they use — their work will not survive long. Annemieke goes to quite extraordinary lengths to ensure that her work will last. All the materials and colours she uses are exposed to full sunlight for long periods to ensure that they are durable and will—not fade. She consults a leading conservator of art to ensure that nothing has been overlooked.

Annemieke is the most thorough and meticulous craftsman I have met. It is her craftsmanship that is the foundation for her artistry. She is also the only woman to whom I can present a branch covered in hairy caterpillars and know that it will be well received.

Charles McCubbin



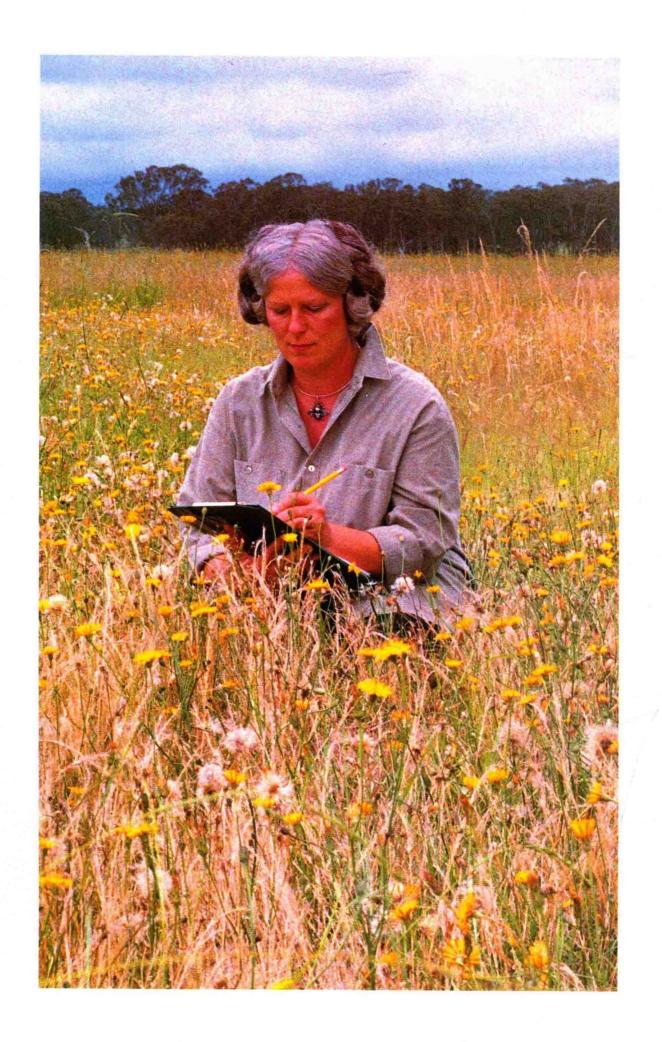
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PROFILE

The artwork of Annemieke Mein is unique. She combines fabric, paint and sewing threads to produce works that are realistically accurate but that also breathe with life and action, and are emotionally breathtaking for the observer.

Annemieke's art is difficult to categorise. Textile work has traditionally been 'craft', but Annemieke has moved it into the world of 'art'. As one writer has noted:

The line between art and craft is being bent and breached these days, but there are only a few practitioners who can make it disappear completely.

The astonishing work of Annemieke transcends these and a few other categories besides. Embroidered and painted relief tapestries and fabric sculptures also erase the distinction between naturalistic and impressionistic portrayal.

Black and white photos cannot hope to do this work justice. In situ, one is first startled by her amazing mimicry of nature. A furry moth on brown bark, for instance, both invites and repels the tentative touch of those who are squeamish around insects. A strand of kelp hung with mussels is so real that one is tempted to throw it back into the water.

Having recovered from an intoxicated admiration of this virtuosity, you then begin to appreciate the artistic decisions which raise these works above sober actuality. They sing with her love of nature. They are magnifications [of] and heightened insights [into] nature . . . Annemieke Mein does not anthropomorphise her subjects or clothe them in whimsy. Her vision manifests itself in decisions to magnify a subject and subtly stylise it; in composition, in painterly renderings of the things which surround or lie beyond the focal point.

Textile paints are used in conjunction with complex machine and hand stitching, to create effects which are sometimes astonishingly like watercolours, sometimes like impressionistic oils. Black or sepia stitching is used like the most delicate pen work. In some works the distinction between painterly and sculptural rendering is also erased. (John Clare, Sydney Morning Herald, 31 May 1984)

Annemieke was the first textile artist to be accepted as a member of both the Wildlife Art Society of Australasia and the Australian Guild of Realist Artists. In 1988 she had similar works touring Australia in both art and craft exhibitions. The sculpture Mussels and Kelp travelled

with the Bicentennial exhibition 'The Face of Australia', and the sculpture *Barnacles* was included in the Ararat Gallery's 4th Biennial Exhibition of Fibre and Textiles. She remains the only textile artist to be featured in *Australian Artist* (March 1987).

Annemieke's work has come into being with a special combination of uncommon abilities and circumstances. She has superb drawing skills, together with a highly developed sense of colour, and a feeling for composition and light and shade. These would have been sufficient for her to have become an accomplished artist in painting or sketching, but they have been combined with a love for, and a knowledge of, the properties of textiles, sewing skills, and an intense interest in the natural world around her. Her ability to observe, experiment and learn; her clever organisation of her limited time, housework and family life; her systematic storage of fabrics; and her freedom in the early years from having to produce work for a quick sale have all contributed to the quality of her work.

Annemieke was born in Haarlem, Holland, in 1944 when Germany still occupied Holland. She and her parents became Australian citizens in 1956. They migrated to Australia in 1951 when she was seven, leaving behind food shortages, rationing and the general chaos of war-torn Europe. In Holland she had spent much time with her mother's parents and felt very sad to leave them. She never saw them again.

A difficult transition period followed. There was a traumatic and protracted journey to Australia. After a short stay in the Bathurst migrant camp, the family moved to Bowral, NSW, then to Brighton in Melbourne, Victoria.

Annemieke was thrust into a State primary school unable to speak English. Her parents worked long hours to get established. An only child, Annemieke had many hours to herself but she put them to good use. She was fascinated by the plants, insects, birds and animals in Australia, so different from those in Holland. As a New Australian, she took nothing for granted. In those pre-television days, and with no brothers or sisters to share her time, beetles, birds, spiders



Annemieke at eight, with her first sewing machine.

and other inhabitants of the Australian landscape became her friends. She studied and sketched them.

Later, when her parents could afford a car, then a boat, the family went fishing and holidaying; again Annemieke amused herself by delving into the Australian landscape and collecting specimens, some of which she still has. She has always been an avid collector. She has collections of shells, stamps and hatpins, tins of buttons, lots of pressed wildflowers and leaves, butterflies, insects, feathers, nests and rocks.

Annemieke's mother is a skilled dressmaker, with a good sense of colour and a flair for interior design. Annemieke either learnt or inherited these skills too. Her father is an advanced dental technician. Annemieke spent time working in his dental laboratory and followed his example of high standards in the precise manufacture and finish of dentures, plates and metalwork. He also demonstrated artistic skills in manufacturing prostheses such as artificial eyes, noses and ears requiring careful texture and colour matching, and later in some bronze sculptures of his family.

Annemieke attended Brighton State School, Mitcham State School, and Nunawading High School. She continued to sketch and draw during this time and took art as a subject in her Matriculation year. Not surprisingly, she was a star pupil and her art teacher encouraged her to become a secondary art and craft teacher herself. She started

training at the Melbourne State College. However, she was unable to accept the abstract art that was in vogue at that time and she left after only three months.

Annemieke then pursued a nursing career, training at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, graduating in 1967. She subsequently trained in coronary care nursing and theatre nursing. Nursing enhanced her interest in biology and has helped her overcome any squeamishness she might have felt in her collection and dissection of specimens.

Annemieke and I met at the Royal Melbourne Hospital and were married in 1968. We moved to Sale in 1971 with our six-month-old daughter, Joanne. Our son, Peter, was born in 1972. For some years Annemieke was fully occupied with two small children and the demands heaped on her as the wife of a country general practitioner. But when she decided she wanted to return to nursing, she found that the policy at the local hospital was not to employ the wives of visiting medical staff. So she threw herself into a large number of crafts in a search for a meaningful and satisfying outlet for her creativity. She dabbled in painting and drawing. We still have many pieces from her year or so of doing pottery. Her macramé used to hang all over the house. She made gift cards, lace, and then lace pictures. She also made pictures out of bird feathers, and later out of bark. Knitting and crochet, spinning and weaving, clay modelling and papier-mâché, leatherwork, jewellery-making, paper-making, découpage, patchwork quilting, felting, dressmaking, etching, and restoration of old furniture were all experienced and mastered. Her flair for interior design was put into the house and into some friends' houses. Perhaps it was her experience with hand embroidery (ranging from traditional cross stitch to crewel embroidery), and fabric collage work, that led later to machine embroidery.

She was expert at this myriad of crafts and her work was widely sought after for craft exhibitions. It seemed, however, that these crafts did not satisfy her artistic creativity, unlike her textile pictures and sculptures.

Annemieke started to experiment with textile pictures in 1977. She would now regard those first works as very primitive. Some of them were copies of other designs, or simple drawings translated into textiles. It was during 1978 that she really started designing wildlife pictures herself, and then executing them in textiles.

She achieved national recognition in 1978, winning the inaugural Family Circle/Coats Patons Craft Award. From many thousands of entries in every conceivable type of craft throughout Australia, the judges selected Annemieke's *Coastal Banksia*. First prize was a trip to New York, but more important than winning this was the formal



Annemieke at work on Fantail Rhapsody.

recognition of her artistic achievement, spurring Annemieke on to produce more work.

At that time she established the work pattern that she still keeps. The housework is finished by the time the children go to school, then she goes into the studio upstairs for hours of concentrated artwork. Motherly duties take over again after school, but often she manages a few hours after the evening meal for tying off threads, or preparing for the next day's sewing.

Her first major exhibition was 'Invited Gippsland Craftsmen' at the Sale Regional Arts Centre in 1979. She exhibited about eighteen works, and the public response was incredible. Her work evoked a strong emotional response and many people were moved to tears. They returned with their husbands or wives, their children, their workmates and their friends. The question put by an artist friend, 'Why do you work in textiles, which take so long, when you can paint and draw so well?' was answered. Perhaps people's familiarity with textiles and sewing in clothing, curtains and bedding enabled them to relate to the works more easily than they could to paint. Perhaps Annemieke's larger-than-life portrayals of her subjects, or the three-dimensional studies, or the textural effects of the fabric were important. Whatever the reasons, her reputation was established.

She has had exhibitions at the Sale Regional Arts Centre every year since 1979. The Director there until last year, Mrs Gwen Webb, has been an important and encouraging influence on Annemieke. Mrs Webb is also intensely interested in Gippsland's natural environment, and in educating the community about its importance. Mrs Webb recognised the public appeal of Annemieke's work, and since then the Sale Regional Arts Centre has acquired a large number of her textiles. Some have been continuously on display since 1979. Mrs Webb also encouraged Annemieke to make audiovisual aids in the form of synchronised slide films of several works - Superb Blue Wrens, Grasshoppers, Frogs and Small Works in Textile. These are widely used - at the Sale Regional Arts Centre, at other exhibitions, and for education in schools and colleges. They show the way a textile picture or sculpture is created from start to finish. Annemieke does not believe in keeping any so-called 'trade secrets' from others, and encourages students to try her techniques. She regularly holds teaching workshops, and Schmeling Art Video Australia has made a commercial video on her work methods.

Annemieke met Charles McCubbin in 1979. He moved from Melbourne to the Sale area shortly afterwards. As a naturalist and as an artist he has been of immense help to her. He is a mine of information on Australian wildlife, especially insects, and willingly shares his knowledge, some

of which is not yet recorded in books. In the early days of Annemieke's career, his encouragement and approval of her work gave her great incentive to continue. It was also the start of a close and enduring friendship.

Annemieke was given a Husqvarna Class 20 sewing machine for her eighteenth birthday by her parents. This was the machine that she used on her early pieces and it was particularly suited to the 'free-sewing' technique she developed. Husqvarna have been very supportive of Annemieke, and have supplied later-model sewing machines for her own use, and also sewing machines for the students in her workshops. In 1982, with Husqvarna, she exhibited and demonstrated at the Swedish Trade Fair at Centrepoint in Sydney, and was presented to King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden.

In 1980 Annemieke exhibited *Frogs* in 'Australian Crafts 1980', the Centenary Celebration Exhibition at the Meat Market Craft Centre in Melbourne, and it won the inaugural Hoechst Textile Award. As with Husqvarna, she has enjoyed a very happy relationship with Hoechst Australia Ltd. She uses their pigments in fabric paint, they have twice reported her work in their *Hoechst Report*, and they have helped with the costs involved in printing catalogues for her exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1981, and the Woolloomooloo Gallery in 1984.

Perhaps the most important exhibition Annemieke has staged was at the National Gallery of Victoria for their Department of Education Services. Called 'Environmental Textiles', it was officially opened by Dr Eric Westbrook on 14 October 1981. Annemieke further developed the ideas that she had started using at her exhibitions in Sale. Not only were there finished works on display, but there was a large amount of supporting educational material as well - initial sketches, working designs and layouts, colour plans, threads and fabrics used, and notes on her techniques. There were synchronised slide films showing how the works were made, mounted specimens, and a catalogue for schoolchildren to improve their observation and knowledge of the flora and fauna portrayed.

The National Gallery exhibition ran for six weeks and was a resounding success. Enormous numbers of people saw it. The response was a magnified version of the response to her Sale exhibitions but from a more sophisticated audience. There was a flood of letters of congratulations from an admiring public. Since then, many of these admirers have travelled hundreds of kilometres, often in busloads, to view her exhibitions in Sale.

Another important exhibition was the 'Annemieke Mein Retrospect 1979–1984', which co-