

The Winnipeg Embroiderers' Guild Celebrates 50 Glorious Years! - by Patty Hawkins

Saturday, October 14, 2023 dawned grey and gloomy in our Canadian Prairie city, but no matter. Members of the Winnipeg Embroiderers' Guild (WEG) were all smiles and laughter as 43 members gathered at the beautiful Assiniboine Park Pavilion to celebrate our 50th Anniversary.

WEG was "born" on September 27, 1973 in response to a call by Winnipeg's then mayor, Stephen Juba, urging citizens to "start something" for Winnipeg's Centennial Year; it did not matter what you started, just start it! That motivated Leonida Leatherdale, a prominent Winnipeg embroiderer and stitching studio owner, to found a local embroidery organization – the Winnipeg Embroiderers' Guild. At the same time, Mrs. Leatherdale laid the foundation for a national embroidery society – the Embroiderers' Association of Canada (now known as EAC/ACB to include our country's French heritage). WEG and EAC/ACB thus shared common beginnings and then grew into separate, but affiliated organizations. Both groups enjoyed 50th-Anniversary celebrations this year; EAC/ACB's Annual Seminar was held right here in Winnipeg for this special occasion. And until their recent passing, two founding members of WEG – Jo Hewitt-Nickel and Shirley Tyderkie – still attended meetings regularly, and generously shared their love of needlework and expertise in stitching with those who joined our Guild over the ensuing years.

The Assiniboine Park Pavilion is located in the heart of Winnipeg's expansive Assiniboine Park, which also houses a Zoo (with a world-renowned polar bear rehabilitation centre!), the Leo Mol Sculpture Garden, and The Leaf, a spectacular conservatory turning our snowy Winters into glorious summer all year long. When planning our event, the organizers – Gail Wence (Chair), Patty Hawkins, Marjorie Morris and Linda White – wanted our anniversary to be a special, gala affair. This venue fit the bill!

Upon entering the foyer shortly after 11:00 a.m., members were welcomed by Kylea Fulton who invited them to sign the Event Register. We provided a table groaning with complimentary patterns gathered over the years; members were able to sift through and choose designs to plump up their stash. The ladies had been asked to bring a favourite piece of embroidery for display and we outdid ourselves! Exhibit tables featured a wide range of beautiful needlework: stumpwork, thread painting, canvaswork (known as "needlepoint" in the U.S.), bead embroidery, goldwork, bargello, beaded ornaments, Hardanger, cross stitch, Casalguidi, punto antico, and more. Everyone enjoyed a beverage while visiting and admiring the displays.

We then entered the gorgeous glassed-in Pavilion where nine round tables awaited. Set with beautiful linens and china and sporting lovely centre pieces created by Marjorie Morris, each chair held a brightly-coloured gift bag filled with goodies. In early Spring our committee began to solicit donations from many needlework suppliers and designers across Canada and the U.S. Of significant note were robust gifts from Coats & Clarke/Yarnspirations, Colonial Needle, Colour Complements, DMC, The Gentle Art, and, Kreinik, as well as many, many smaller individual gifts. We also received generous donations from WEG's own accomplished designers, Kathryn Drummond (Gingerbread Girl Designs) and Carolyn Mitchell (Carolyn Mitchell Designs).

A plated lunch followed featuring Caesar salad and a delicious grilled chicken breast ciabatta bun with peach chutney, brie, arugula and garlic aioli. Dessert was fun! We enjoyed a Sundae Starion groaning with chocolate and vanilla bean ice cream with chocolate fudge and caramel

sauces and a decadent assortment of toppings, and a tray of dainties – which disappeared in short order!

While enjoying our dessert and coffee/tea, our Co-President and Committee Chair, Gail Wence related a brief history of our Guild. She then acknowledged 11 members for milestone recognition of 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 40, and even two ladies with 45 years of continuous membership in the Guild: Sharon Etsell and Susanne Sulkers. Each honouree received a gift card in proportion to their years of service. The dedication these women have shown to our art, and their constant support of the Guild and its activities, is truly admirable.

Then 12 Past Presidents were recognized with three having served “double duty”. The delicious chocolate “Thank You” bars they received were hand-crafted by local chocolatier Constance Popp and, speaking as one of those Past Presidents, I can relate that they were absolutely delicious!

This brought us to our main event, Keynote Speaker Cynthia Boehm, an award-winning, Red River-based beadwork artist and designer. Growing up surrounded by creative people, Cynthia found a love and appreciation for the historic Cree-Métis beadwork and art of her home community of Norway House (in Northern Manitoba, Canada). Later on, when she discovered her grandmother’s art (which is housed in the Manitoba Museum here in Winnipeg), Cynthia was inspired to delve extensively into the historical beadwork and embroidery patterns of her Cree-Métis ancestors. These beautiful designs – produced during the fur trade in the mid- to late-19th Century – became world famous. Rendered in silk embroidery and colourful beadwork, the graphic flowers and serpentine leaves which characterize these exquisite pieces inspired Cynthia’s own creative journey.

Cynthia spent the next hour recounting for us her interesting background and artistic inspiration. She talked about some of the examples of her beautiful work which she brought with her, including the magnificent stand-alone floral beaded piece, “My Journey Home – Honouring Our Grandmothers,” which echoed the title of her presentation. Also on display and discussed by Cynthia were a selection of the materials she uses for her art. She concluded her talk by graciously answering many questions from curious Guild members.

Following an appreciative thank you to Cynthia – who received an enthusiastic round of applause – Patty Hawkins took a few moments to list and thank the many donors who helped to make this Luncheon special. We are so grateful to each contributor and we encouraged our members to support them all!

As Gail bid farewell to our members, Patty and Marjorie handed each one yet another bag full of gifts. These project bags in vibrant pink (WEG’s colour) with white, yellow and blue highlights, were specially commissioned for us and donated by Marjorie, our Event Sponsor and current Vice-President. Tucked inside each was a beautiful – and useful! – wooden pin cushion tray from Sudberry House and many more little treasures.

This celebration was a year in the planning and the organizers couldn’t be happier with the outcome of the event. WEG, which has 70+ current members, is a friendly group of wonderful women. Our gatherings are always characterized by a little business, great learning opportunities, and lots of visiting and laughter. The fact that we all share a love of needlework in all it’s forms has simply been a jumping off point for the start of many special friendships.

Following our gala Luncheon we heard lots of positive feedback from those who attended. E-mails received by the organizers included such comments as: "truly exceptional", "Bravo! It could not have been lovelier...", "... from the bottom of my heart, thank you", "It was outstanding," "Cynthia Boehm was great. Her talk was very interesting and I learned a lot...", "I'm sending you and the team...the biggest Bouquet", and "you've given us so many reasons to celebrate this Guild". But perhaps the comment that most warmed our hearts came from our own Carolyn Mitchell (sadly not able to attend as she lives in Quebec, but fully apprised of the whole affair by some who did!) when she said, "I know that Leoniada, Shirley, and Jo would be smiling to know that what they worked so hard for back 50 years ago is still going strong!"

Happy 50th Anniversary, WEG – here's to 50 more glorious years of stitching pleasure!