

National Cultural Policy submission.

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threaded my first needle when I was 2 ½ . I learnt several decades later that this did not fit into the accepted “learn-ed” wisdom on the development of fine motor skills in children, but many embroiderers would not have any problem with the idea. We stitch. It is a significant part of who we are. 70 years later and still stitching on a daily basis.

My involvement in embroidery is in the private practice of my art for my own purposes and the organisation of community interest groups in the field. I do not sell work. Based on my pre-retirement salary, even a bookmark should be worth several hundred dollars, but you might get \$6 for it, if you are lucky .The materials can cost more. I sometimes exhibit in community and embroiderers organisations’ displays and competitions.

There is a perception (although beginning to change) that if an embroiderer produces a work to a high level of excellence in both execution and design, that it is somehow not “art”, but a bad painting is, simply because it is paint. A work of “art” graces a wall, not a table. or There are still those who seem to have the general view that one is not an artist because one doesn’t paint, and little comprehension that there are artists who choose not to paint, which doesn’t mean that they can’t and that some of us actually have formal art training and art degrees. I spent 30 years teaching drawing, in the community sector and as a small part of my “real” job, not in an art college.

The spectre of being involved “only” in a “craft” looms over many textile artists, jewellers, wood workers and so on. “Craft” is the poor cousin. The work is devalued because society has traditionally devalued it, and, in part, because sectors of the arts community devalue it.

It may be easy for some to forget that many, now “hobbies” were once essential services and that they need to be kept alive

Many professional practising artists, say in textiles, derive much of their income from teaching. Somebody has to train the artists coming behind them. Teaching is an intrinsic part of their arts practice and just as well, because they may be unlikely to earn a decent living simply from the production of art.

I look on art being an original and competent work, craft as a competent work, the origins of which are taken from another source, a traditional repetitive design or from a pattern book, for example. This means, especially in embroidery, that we are sometimes artists and sometimes crafts people. It is not the perceived excellence of the work that gives it value, but the simple doing of it. The perception of “goodness” is frequently subjective, in any case.

“Art” or “the arts” are not necessarily concrete, physical things.

Art and craft groups, along with community orchestras, choirs, dramatic societies etc, serve to maintain the mental health and well-being of their members. The sense of belonging to a group of like-minded people, sharing skills, having the company and conversation outside the day-to-day is uplifting. There is ME time. Meetings are a sanctuary, a space of time of comfort outside the hum-drum.

Such organisations have introduced their communities to the arts. Attend a community concert and be inspired to book tickets for say, the Sydney Symphony, or an exhibition and then investigate the works at the Art Gallery NSW. Their existence enriches their wider communities.

They are also an important training ground for those who later move into the fields as professional artists, actors and musicians. Does one get accepted into an art college, drama school or conservatorium by not having had significant experience in the community sector?

However, many community arts organisations are struggling to survive. Meeting spaces are at a premium. A small NFP cannot afford \$30 an hour for a four-hour session. Days and times available are limited. It depends on who gets in first. A simple meeting room may not include storage, even a small cupboard, or there may not be adequate parking.

Avenues for publicity are limited and become more so. Community newspapers are being taken over by media conglomerates. Community group listings are disappearing from both physical and digital editions.

We need more support to continue to support our arts practice and our communities and the next generation of artists.

The value of community arts and crafts organisations can not be underestimated