Quilt - HMP Wandsworth Quilt

Object: Quilt

Place of origin: London (made)

Date: 2010 (made)

Artist/Maker: HMP Wandsworth (makers)

Materials and Techniques: Pieced, appliqued and embroidered cotton and linen

Credit Line: Acquired with the support of the Friends of the V&A

Museum number: T.27-2010

Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

This quilt was created by the all-male quilting group of Wandsworth prison. It was commissioned by the V&A in collaboration with Fine Cell Work, a registered charity that teaches embroidery, patchwork and quilting to inmates. Hand pieced over paper, each hexagon has been designed by an inmate and presents an aspect of contemporary prison life. The design is based on the floor plan of Wandsworth Prison and some of the cottons and wools are the same colour and weave as those used for the inmates' uniforms.

The emphasis of the collaboration has been on creative expression, personal reflection and community, centred on the art of bringing the participants together to stitch. Many of the hexagons demonstrate a clear conversation with both the history of the British prison system and contemporary discourses on authority. In one, a fingerprint is surrounded by borders of DNA, suggesting issues relating to the identification of criminals and the control of personal freedom. Other hexagons directly engage with the action of the probation board, the intricate subculture of prison life and the tools of the stitcher. The diversity of these designs demonstrates the continuing appeal of the needle as a tool of both subversion and salvation.

Fine Cell Work responds to the philanthropic model set up by its founder, Lady Anne Tree. Volunteers work with small groups of inmates teaching embroidery, patchwork, quilting and various other needlework skills. Each prisoner associated with the charity carries out his or her needlework whilst confined to his or her cell.

Descriptive line

Quilt, 'HMP Wandsworth Quilt', pieced, appliqued and embroidered cotton and linen, designed and made by the inmates of HMP Wandsworth, England, 2010.

Physical description

Hand-pieced, -appliqued and -embroidered cotton and linen quilt, with some applique details in wool. The design is based on the floor plan of HMP Wandsworth, and uses tessellating hexagons to represent the panoptican design of the wings. The cottons and linens used for the hexagons are of the same colour and weave as those used for the inmates' uniforms, and include calico, recycled denim cotton, recycled wool and wool mixture suiting fabrics. The hexagons have been hand embellished with applique and embroidery, including chain, stem and back stitch, before being worked all over in kantha stitch and hand-pieced over paper into the wider design. The floor plan design has then been applied to a plain linen ground, with further linen figures fused to the ground and outline quilted in running stitch. Edged with a hand-embroidered cotton calico border in the design of a brick wall. Lined with a screen printed linen by 'Brixton Print Works' showing anonymous male figures. Quilted all over in a linear design and outline quilted around the hexagon patches, squares and triangles. The threads used include polyester, cotton and wool. Wadded with polyester fibre.

Dimensions

Height: 195 cm, Width: 260 cm, Weight: 4.28 kg

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Object history note

Historical significance: There is a longstanding association between creativity and confinement. Several quilts are now in public collections which serve as acts of remembrance, while also revealing the realities of war, internment and the prison cell. These include the Changi Quilts, made by the women and children interned in Singapore during the Second World War, and 'The Rajah Quilt'; the only known transportation quilt in a public collection. All testify to the way in which stitching has long performed an important function in situations of adversity, occupying the hand and the mind during long periods of incarceration, while also providing a skills base for those involved.

Historical context note

The quilt has been created in collaboration with Fine Cell Work: a registered charity that teaches needlework to prison inmates. In 2010, the charity operated in around 27 prisons. The charity works to a philanthropic model set up by its founder, Lady Ann Tree. Volunteers work with small groups of inmates (around 11 or 12), teaching embroidery, patchwork and various other needlework skills. Each prisoner associated with
the charity carries out his or her needlework while confined to his or her cell. In 2010, the charity ran two quilting groups, both in all-male prisons; HMP Bullingdon and HMP Wandsworth. This quilt has been designed and stitched by the inmates of HMP Wandsworth.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1165208/hmp-wandsworth-quilt-quilt-hmp-wandsworth/