The Library’s beloved ‘OZ?’ tapestry takes its name from the modern-day slang term for Australia, the land and its people, and showcases ‘pop’ artist Martin Sharp's bold and contemporary design, set against the verses of Bernard O’Dowd's sonnet ‘Australia’ (1900).

**Gift of the tapestry**

The OZ? tapestry was commissioned and donated to the State Library of NSW by Jim and Janette Bain in 1988. The tapestry is now hanging in the State Library's Governor Marie Bashir Reading Room (on Lower Ground 2).

**The Artist**

Martin Sharp (1942-2013) was born in Sydney and is best known for his activity across many artistic fields. Sharp regarded his design for the OZ? tapestry as one of his finest works and his production notes about the tapestry are held in the collection of the Mitchell Library. When asked about the impetus behind his design for the tapestry, Sharp thought long and hard. For the artist, the 'Australia' sonnet was not only a poem celebrating Federation and the beginning of a new century but also presented a true prophecy of the future. It asks if Australia will simply repeat the mistakes and injustices of the world, or if the creation of a new nation will usher in a new future for humanity. Sharp responded on a deep level to O'Dowd's poem. In conceiving his design for the OZ? tapestry, the artist dissected each verse word-by-word which revealed ever-widening layers of symbolism.

**The Poet**

Bernard O'Dowd (1866-1953) was born in Beaufort Victoria and died in Melbourne. His early working life was
spent as an assistant librarian in the Supreme Court Library (Vic.) and later as a parliamentary draftsman (1913-1935). In 1934, he refused a knighthood for services to literature strongly believing that Australia need to free itself from any sense of colonial subservience and older ways of thought. He also felt that poetry should serve a purpose, with the poet leading the way rather than trailing the progress of civilisation.

The Sonnet

The OZ? tapestry illustrates O'Dowd's prize-winning sonnet ‘Australia’ which he wrote for a poetry competition run by the Bulletin magazine in 1900, and is his most famous work. A sonnet (literally a 'little song') is poem of 14 lines that follows a set structure and rhyme scheme and traditionally reflects upon a single sentiment, with a clarification or 'turn' of thought in its concluding lines. O'Dowd's sonnet skilfully combines images of the sheer age of Australia with images and thoughts about its newness, its position in the world and potentialities for a fresh start. ‘Australia’ is also quoted on the 1988 Bicentennial Rotunda at Centennial Park in Sydney.

What is it about

The OZ? tapestry asks the question ‘What constitutes Australia?’ which is posed by both the poet and the artist. Bernard O'Dowd's poem asks a series of questions which frame the tapestry while Martin Sharp has interpreted O'Dowd's questions visually, sometimes with irony, and sometimes in outright amusement. The poet's florid early 20th century metaphor is set against the artist's stark primary-coloured symbols which allow the spectator to take delight in its visual splendour while pondering both the queries and responses - Is this really Australia? and, if so, which version - the artist's or the poet's? The questions are there for all to see but the answers remain with each and every person who stops to contemplate the 'OZ?' tapestry.

Like a palimpsest – a surface written on twice – the tapestry's motifs are superimposed upon each other, inviting the viewer to look deeper and deeper into its imagery. Familiar Sydney icons – the Opera house, the Bridge and Luna Park – are the ‘new demesne for mammon to infest’, while a group of less dominant motifs – Uluru, a dingo and a yellow ochre handprint – make subtle reference to Australia’s first peoples, unique animals and landscape. The ‘cenotaphs of species dead elsewhere’ are portrayed by the large fish in the sky, perhaps indicative of ancient indigenous rock art while the tall masted ships sail into the harbour. Sharp's Southern Cross is placed at the centre of the design surrounded by bursting fireworks referencing Sydney’s world-renowned New Year’s Eve celebrations. The Southern Cross appears again on the pylons of the Harbour Bridge and the artist also commemorates the tragic deaths in the 1979 Luna Park fire.

How it came about

Although the poet, Bernard O'Dowd, and the artist, Martin Sharp, were crucial to the conception and design of the OZ? tapestry, the initial impetus for the commissioning of this stunning textile artwork for the foyer of the State Library of NSW's new Macquarie Street wing came from Andrew Andersons, the Assistant Government Architect working on the project. The architect asked the artist to produce a suitable design. Sharp came up with a concept later that night after searching for a copy of O'Dowd’s poem. He then created a poster collage of his idea, cut out of coloured paper, which he took to a meeting with the architect who like the clean bright images in the design. Sharp's collage was the only sketch ever done of the design, and it was also used by the weavers at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop to create the final work.

Where it was made

The Victorian Tapestry Workshop (VTW) is the only workshop of its kind in Australia and one of a few in the world dedicated to the production of hand-woven tapestries of high artistic quality and technical excellence for public and private commissions. It was set up as a non-profit company by the Victorian State Government in 1976, to support the production of woven tapestries made using the same techniques employed in Europe since the 15th century, in a local workshop by local artists using Australian wool. By the late 1980s, 52 tapestries had been completed by the workshop and hung in a diverse range of places, both public, corporate and international, with the tapestries created by the VTW's skilled weavers becoming renowned for their vibrancy, technical accomplishment and inventive interpretation. To date the workshop has completed over 500 tapestry commissions.
The Library’s OZ? tapestry took six months to weave using 250 kilos of Australian wool, adding cotton for the clouds, and measuring 3 metres wide by 6 metres long. The tapestry was made by the high-warp technique whereby weaving begins at the lower edge and progresses a metre at a time, with the completed section rolled onto the lower roller of the loom, before the next section of warp threads is released from the upper loom in preparation for weaving.

Four young weavers took on the challenge of turning Martin Sharp’s design into an art object. The main consideration for the weavers was the technical challenge presented by the translation of Sharp’s collage into tapestry and to replicate the colours of the original artwork. The yarn was dyed onsite by a specialist dyer who worked with a palette of over 370 colours. And colour played a substantial part in the creation of the tapestry – with the weavers blending up to 15 strands of different shades of wool to achieve a required tone. Other challenges lay in keeping the yellow border outline straight and achieving the lettering on the border, an integral part of the art work:

… We rarely understand the significant contribution made by the weavers to the power of a finished tapestry. While the artist wrestles with the overall conception, colour and tonal balance, it is the weavers who make the artist’s conception for a tapestry into reality.

Margot Riley, Curator, Research & Discovery

References

H. Anderson, Australia to ‘OZ?’: the making of the tapestry, Red Rooster Press, Maryborough (Vic.), 1996.

Australian Tapestry Workshop, South Melbourne, Victoria. [3]

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