

COOTS - Story by Pamela McGeorge

COOTS - Stands for Central Otago Outside The Square



Coots are usually to be seen fossicking among reeds in watery places. But there is another breed of the same name, small in number and highly individualistic by nature. Their habitat is Central Otago, the heartland of the South Island of New Zealand. Their plumage varies greatly but they are distinguished by a passion for textiles, a desire to experiment with new techniques and a compulsion to work outside the square. They are usually to be seen fossicking among fabrics or furiously fabricating fantasies from fibre.

Restricted to thirteen in number, COOTS is a group of fabric/fibre artists who live in a variety of small towns scattered over a sparsely populated region. We all work as individuals but meet in each other's homes every two months to share ideas and techniques, and to expose our latest work for critique and comment. Everyone then goes home in a fever of inspiration and spends the next few weeks trialling new ideas.

The group first formed about seven years ago when several of the foundation members, who were conventional patchworkers, decided it was time to forsake traditional patterns and strike out into new territory. Inevitably some of the original members have moved on but the aim is always to include people with a wide range of skills.

Several members are keen felt-makers, two or three are enthusiastic embroiderers, one specialises in fabricating books from hand-made paper or fabric, another is a former couturier dress-maker and all of us dye our own fabrics from time to time. Several members have recently acquired embellishing machines, and at each meeting now, we wait in anticipation to see what new ideas they have evolved.

Always ready to learn from visiting fabric tutors, our members frequently attend workshops throughout New Zealand and occasionally overseas. Jeanette Gillies, former president of NANSZQ (National Association of NZ Quilters), won an award in the USA with her quilt *Kowhai Tree* which was the product of a workshop given by American Ruth McDowell. It was subsequently chosen to feature on a New Zealand stamp.

One year we conducted a highly successful workshop which effectively lasted for twelve months. In January we each made the front and back covers of a book to fit with a chosen theme or title. In the following months the accumulating pages were passed around as every member fabricated a page for each book. At our Christmas meeting we all reclaimed our completed books and great was the excitement in seeing what other members had created for us. Several months later, the books formed the nucleus of an exhibition at a local speciality shop.

Occasional exhibitions give a huge boost to our confidence and recently COOTS displayed work in conjunction with the biennial autumn Festival of Colour in Wanaka, a town set beside a glorious lake at the foot of the Southern Alps of New Zealand. Entitled *wRAPt*, this was a collection of two years' work, inspired by a workshop where everyone engaged in a wrapping session and the momentum flowed from there.