

Thread is her paint, a needle her brush



Stitch, tuck and sew, Betty MacGregor embroiders the finishing touches on a traditional pattern. The award-winning coat from the Mississauga Juried Art Show hangs in the background. (Staff photo by Rob Beintema)

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By ALANA PERKINS

Embroidery is a serious art form and Betty MacGregor has dedicated the last eight years proving this contention.

As a student of embroidery at Sheridan College, MacGregor mastered her craft and continued to progress from decorative pictures and knick-knacks to wearable art fashioned in the form of hand-painted vests, coats and bags.

McLaughlin Gallery in Ottawa, Oakville Centennial Gallery, the Mississauga Juried Art Show and 'Surfacing' — by the National Juried Show — have displayed MacGregor's unique, rainbow-colored clothing. The Robin Road resident reached a prestigious plateau in her career when the Massey Collection accepted an award-winning silk evening coat as an addition to its 900 collectibles.

After numerous awards and gallery shows, MacGregor is dismayed by people's low opinion of embroidery.

"It's considered nothing more than a feminine pastime. If the art is not done with oils, it is not considered an art form. It's a terrible struggle," says MacGregor. "I tell people what I do and that I am a textile artist. They suddenly get this glazed look on their faces."

Society's casual dress has discouraged the use of fancy embroidery on clothing, but MacGregor is confident Nancy Reagan's style will bring back elegance. People are beginning to treat some embroidery with respect and they realize there is some value when they start collecting fabrics says MacGregor.

Combining the techniques of quilting, embroidery and hand painting is unusual and

presents a sizeable challenge to sewing enthusiasts.

"Most people are afraid to experiment so they stick to a kit," says MacGregor. "Besides, designing your own patterns requires a lot of decision making and people are also reluctant to do that. All the decisions are made when you buy a kit."

MacGregor's non-traditional art makes her an unlikely candidate for the Bradley House summer series of craft demonstrations but to her surprise she was asked. Despite a sensation of being "in the wrong place", MacGregor will set up a colorful display Aug. 9 and demonstrate some embroidery during the museum hours. Visitors can bring along problems they are experiencing with needlework and MacGregor will direct interested people to the embroidery instruction available in Mississauga.

MacGregor feels lucky not to have to depend upon her craft as a source of income. Those forced to rely on it as a living usually teach and conduct workshops.

"You never get paid for the work and the hours you put into a piece," says MacGregor. "People think an article is expensive but they should consider all the time that went into it."

Surfacing '81 has accepted three pieces for the show in the Toronto Dominion Centre and MacGregor continues to sell her work through the Canadian Craft Guild and her home. The basement floor has been converted to accommodate racks of artwork and room has been made for a sewing area. Pieces of lustrous silk lay scattered upon her work table at all times, waiting for MacGregor's magic touch with a needle and thread.