

The Society for the Prevention of Unfinished Needlepoint (SPUN)

BY JUNE RUSSELL-CHAMBERLIN



Photo by Andrea Nuñez

Photo by Monica Breen

Society for the Prevention of Unfinished Needlepoint Kiosk, 2012. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA. Volunteer members and SPUN founder Mary Smull educate the public about unfinished needlepoint, provide needlepoint instruction, and solicit for new members. Inset: Mary Smull

Mary Smull can tell when a stitcher called it quits—when, for whatever reason, they set down the project and never placed another stitch on the canvas.

“You never know what happened, but somebody got to a breaking point,” said Mary, a fiber art teacher and artist in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and founder of the Society for the Preven-

tion of Unfinished Needlepoint (SPUN). “I’ve had that experience as an artist. For whatever reason the project’s not capturing your interest anymore.”

To preserve that moment when the stitcher quit stitching a canvas, since 2009 Mary and SPUN volunteers have finished needlepointing more than 40 canvases using only white thread. The

portion of the design stitched by the original owner remains clearly visible. “I wanted to do some sort of intervention, and decided to preserve that moment in time when something shifted in what [the stitchers] were thinking about their work.”

The member-funded organization, she explained, is based on the belief that



Blue Boy: completed by the artist in 2008 using only white yarn, 14" x 20"

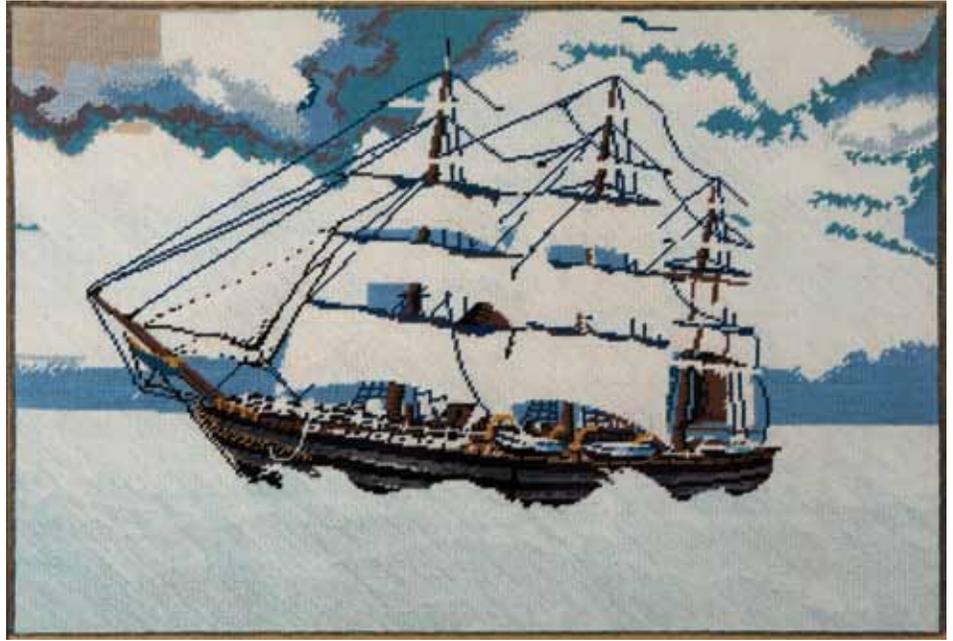
"needlepoint projects are entitled to be fully completed and must be protected from ending up in the purgatory of a perennially incomplete state." Mary is determined to eliminate the worldwide phenomenon of unfinished needlepoint.

SPUN's story began five years ago, when Mary was a graduate student in the Fiber Department at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. She'd decided to needlepoint a memory from her childhood: the color bars that stretched across television screens when the day's broadcast had not yet begun. "I wanted to do the color bars because I remember that sense of anticipation on Saturday morning, waiting for the broadcast to begin," Mary said. "Now there is never a time when there isn't something on."

She'd chosen needlepoint, because each stitch resembled a pixel. Needlepoint also reminded Mary of her grandmother's needlepointing. "Needlepoint has a different approach to image building," Mary explained. "So I was looking at different sources for needlepoint. I would browse eBay and say, 'Oh, I want this needlepoint kit,' and buy it, only to find that it was partially done.

"I thought that was so odd," she said. "I was fascinated by that, and started buying a lot of unfinished needlepoint on eBay. That's how I started collecting them."

Today SPUN's collection of unfinished needlepoint contains nearly 100



Ship: completed by the artist in 2009 using only white yarn, 30" x 19"

canvases. Memberships, donations and proceeds from shirt and tote bag sales help fund white thread and the rescue of abandoned canvases. Finished canvases are archivally prepared, framed and exhibited in museums, at ANG events and other venues. Images of these pieces are presented at SPUN's website at <www.unfinishedneedlepoint.org> and are accompanied by stories about the unfinished work. The website also provides a forum for the more than 50 members to share images and stories of their unfinished projects.

THE STORIES BEHIND THE PROJECTS

"Needlepoint projects, like other handcrafted projects, remain unfinished for a variety of reasons," Mary said. "It's a real range. Sometimes I know something tragic happened, when you see a beautifully executed piece and it has just stopped. That's when you know someone died," she said.

Sometimes stitchers might feel they've made too many mistakes on a project and lose enthusiasm for the project, Mary theorized. Other projects are barely touched, as if the stitcher started it and decided needlepoint was not for them. "Sometimes pieces are halfway there and you wonder, why did they stop? I have three versions of Thomas Gainsboroughs' *Blue Boy*," she said. "It was really popular, but not popular enough to finish."

Some of Mary's own artistic cre-

ations have gone unfinished. "I just hit this place where I asked, 'Why am I doing this?'" she recalled. "It was just an act of will to finish. So I simply let it go, and I would imagine that is what happened to some of these projects. Somebody got to a certain point and lost interest."

EASING THE GUILT

"Sharing stories can help assuage the guilt stitchers often feel over unfinished projects," Mary said. "My grandmother would always try to give me a project that she had started but never finished," she said. "At 97 [years old] it is still bothering her; she is still feeling guilty that she hasn't finished it."

Mary has finished one canvas on which her grandmother had stitched only about a needleful. By finishing it, she said, "I feel that maybe I was able to alleviate that guilty feeling my grandmother had, and maybe I'm doing that for people in an anonymous way. It's a really small gesture, as far as charity goes. I do think of it that way. I'm honoring that person's attempt when I finish their work."

Failing to finish a project does not equal failure, Mary stressed. Neither does making mistakes. "Seeing the skill level at ANG, there is no way that you learn that without going through the process of failure. That's how you figure out how to make great work," she said. "Anyone making textile projects knows



Mary showing a young stitcher the basics of needlepoint

there are things that don't work out, and that's okay. That's the process of learning any craft."

Focusing on finishing a project ignores the importance—and pleasure—of the process. "I want to see the idea I have in my head become real in the world," Mary said. "I love the process of making it. Art is in the process."

"Needlepointers don't stitch just because they want the finished object, but because they enjoy it. They love the process," she explained. "That's what I get out of needlepoint, too, and by focusing on unfinished work I am bringing to the forefront the enjoyment of the process. Making it is more fun than having it."

Mary said she'd be pleased if other people rescued and finished abandoned canvases, too. "It's also a reminder of how many people are out there trying to continue the handmade process," she added. "I think there is a fear: what if you start something and can't finish? What SPUN does is say, 'Go ahead and try; someone will honor it.'"

That fear is derived from our goal-oriented society, Mary said. She explained that people accomplish great things when they have goals, but considering only the end product can increase the fear of failure. "Whenever you try to learn something, even if it doesn't work out, it's not wasting your time," she said. "It's exactly what you needed to learn. I'm not afraid that not finishing something means I've failed. Sometimes it means you've tried something and you've realized there is another direction for you."

THE FUTURE OF SPUN

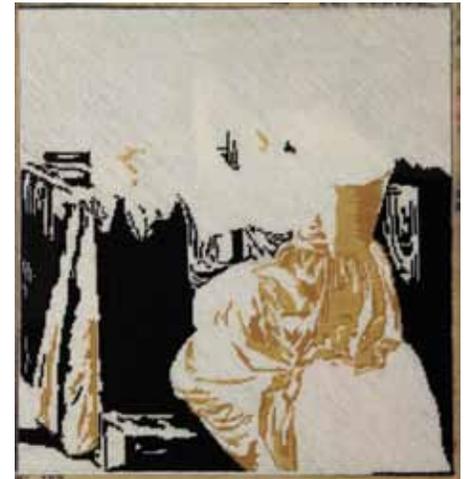
SPUN's collection of needlework includes nearly 100 pieces spanning more than 40 years. It's approaching archive status, Mary observed, providing a record of the styles, techniques and materials used in needlepoint during that period. Her goal is to have the collection acquired by a museum.

"With SPUN the idea is that there could be some lightheartedness around the fact that sometimes things don't work out like you planned," Mary said. "But this archive, someday, is going to be part of the history of our time. I realized this is a society that is archiving needlepoint for the next era, so it doesn't get lost."

Though museums have expressed interest in SPUN's collection, no museum has offered yet to provide the collection with a permanent home. For now it will remain in Mary's studio.

In the meantime, Mary hopes to find more funding for SPUN so that she can improve the organization's online presence and make it easier for members to upload photographs of unfinished needlework. She'll also keep stitching, finishing abandoned needlework. "The society's goal is to no longer be needed, so that each piece is complete—which of course is never going to happen!" Mary laughed.

As for the colored bars project that sparked her initial interest in needlepoint, that project has been finished into a pillow, Mary said. "That one piece led me into the world of needlepoint, and I had no idea how fascinating I was going to find that." 



Lute Player: completed by the artist in 2011 using only white yarn, 20" x 21"



Lion: completed by the artist in 2008 using only white yarn, 10½" x 12"



Girl: when completed, most of the figure's skin except for the eyes, forehead, and neck, and some of the background will be completed with white yarn

Photo by Aaron Ijler for Greenhouse Media