Waggas and the Art of Making Do in Australia

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THE WAGGA PROJECT

The National Wool Museum holds one of Australia's largest and most significant public collections of quilts and waggas. The collection comprises:

- 42 quilts
- 25 waggas
- 9 Expressions: The Wool Quilt Prize winners
- 2 rugs
- 2 tapestries
- 65 blankets

The Wagga Project is an ongoing passion for us. We are always on the lookout for more examples and stories to share. It might be time to look through your closets and trunks for heritage quilts and waggas. Whether treasured family heirlooms, passed from generation to generation, or new creations crafted from upcycled treasures of today - we want to know about them!

There are three ways to be part of The Wagga Project:

1. Share your quilt or wagga story on social media by using the hashtag #nationalwoolmuseum
2. Add your quilt or wagga story to the National Quilt Register at www.nationalquiltregister.com.au
3. Preserve your quilt or wagga by adding it to the nationally significant National Wool Museum Quilt and Wagga Collection. Reach out to us at nwmcollection@geelongcity.vic.gov.au

What is a wagga?

Born out of necessity, the wagga is a particular kind of utilitarian quilt made in Australia. Traditionally consisting of multiple layers of jute (burlap) bags sewn together, they may also include calico sacks, recycled clothes, fabric scraps and old blankets.

Waggas were made from recycled materials that were available to people at the time – for travellers on the land it might have been flour or wheat bags; for a family it might have been old clothing stitched together.

Why these quilts are called 'waggas' is not fully understood. It is believed that they take their name from Wagga Lily flour sacks made by the Murrumbidgee Co-operative Flour Mill. The mill began operation in 1890 and the name 'wagga rug' can be traced back to the same period (waggas are also sometimes called 'Murrumbidgee blankets'). Within a decade the mill could store more than 75,000 bags of wheat. It is presumed that the disused wheat and flour bags were often left out for people to use.

The earliest known waggas were made in the 1890s and they continued to be made into the 1950s. Over time the wagga tradition changed and developed but always embraced the make do philosophy.

[Image 1] The Murrumbidgee Co-Operative Milling Co., Ltd, 1897. The first waggas were made from disused flour sacks from this mill. Image from *Sydney Mail* 4 September 1897.

[Image 2] Simple wheat bag wagga used for a child, c1930. National Wool Museum Collection, NWM-1672

Evolution of the wagga

There are six distinct types of wagga quilts, that evolved in three stages:

Stage One

The traditional bushman's wagga, late 19th and early 20th century

1. The most basic wagga is made of corn and wheat sacks sewn together in layers.
2. The corn and wheat sacks or sometimes wool bales have been unstitched and opened, with a cloth or calico bag backing, perhaps a blanket filling and cloth top.

Stage Two

The Domestic Wagga, depression and war era

3. The covering, or top layer is made of tailor's samples, cloth swatches and suit scraps with soft flour bags as the backing and clothing or jute in the middle layer.
4. The covering, or top layer is made from re-purposed dress fabric and recycled clothing, often with great care taken to develop a kind of pattern informed by the clothing.

Stage Three

Contemporary Wagga

5. Today, eco conscious makers embrace the 'make do' and 'use up' aesthetic as a lifestyle choice in order to reduce waste and protect the environment. The contemporary wagga reflects this.
6. Quilting has become an accepted art form. Art waggas embrace this as fibre art works designed purely for beauty and aesthetics.

[Image 3] Swagman and his bike, possibly in the Serviceton area, Victoria, c1920. The wagga was an indispensable item for swagmen. Geelong Heritage Centre Collection

'The only genuine wagga'

The wagga fits into the long tradition of quilt making around the world (watch our video *The History of Quilts in Four Minutes*). The word 'quilt' is derived from the Latin *culcita* meaning a sack filled with stuffing and used as a covering for warmth. The wagga is a uniquely Australian quilt that was made by both men and women and epitomises the tradition of making do.

The name 'wagga' is widely used but they also go by many other names: wagga rugs, wagga quilts, wogga, bushman's blanket, bush rugs, bush quilts, bluey, Sydney blanket or Murrumbidgee rug.

Stemming from the failures of the 1880s property boom, the 1890s depression was the worst in Australia's history and led many people to look for thrifty ways of getting by. The wagga emerged and became a type of quilt making that continued in Australia for the next half century.

In 1906 a correspondent to *The Bulletin* detailed a 'wagga recipe' used by those in bush:

> *I'll leave it to any jury of bushmen that this is the only genuine "Wagga rug". Take three wheat or corn sacks and sew them together with a packing-needle and twine, side to side. Nothing more is needed, and if they be ripped up the rug loses its most valuable asset—weight. I have seen them made thus in camps all over Australia … They are generally made in the beginning of winter and discarded … Made this way, they are just the right length and width for a single bunk, and I know nothing that defies cold and frost like them. I put in a winter in Gippsland with the aid of one, so I ought to know.*

Many years later in 1861, in their list of 'shearing terms' the *Western Herald* in Bourke, NSW, noted that the wagga was simply a 'covering made from three wheat bags stitched together'.

[Image 4] Percy Perkins' green wheat bag wagga, c1940. National Wool Museum Collection, nwm-1680

The wagga appears in many works of literature. Both Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson refer to the wagga. In Lawson's short story 'The Darling River', he tells of an itinerant worker travelling by boat on the Darling:

> *We slept, or tried to sleep, that night on the ridge of two wool bales laid with the narrow sides up, having been obliged to get ashore and fight six rounds with a shearer for the privilege of roosting there. The live cinders from the firebox went up the chimney all night, and fell in showers on deck. Every now and again a spark would burn through the "Wagga rug" of a sleeping shearer, and he'd wake suddenly and get up and curse.*

Lawson wrote other stories describing children sleeping in cots made from old gin crates and sleeping beneath waggas. More recently the wagga appeared in Kate Grenville's novel *The Idea of Perfection* (1999). 'Coralie's old wagga looked endearing. It was easy to imagine getting in under it, feeling the warmth of all those old socks and woolly singlets' (p.498).

Waggas were not something you could buy in a shop; they were handmade by inventive and thrifty people. In 1927 one migrant from England learnt this the hard way. While travelling by boat to Australia, he was told by another passenger that a wagga was the most important thing he needed on his bush travels. During his first week in Melbourne he traipsed from shop to shop asking to buy a wagga. He later learned that a wagga is something that you make yourself.

'well known in most parts of Australia'

At the onset of the 1930s depression, the wagga emerged as a necessity in regional Australia. As one writer in the *Queenslander* newspaper declared, 'The wagga rugs … are well known in most parts of Australia'. Over time it's fabrication evolved. As one user described, the wagga was still made out of sacks sown together but they 'were often covered with other material, usually a floral design, and were used on beds in the homes of early settlers, especially selectors, whose incomes were not great enough to buy the ordinary blankets'.

Domestic waggas became a common feature of many homes. The waggas that survive in collections, such as those in the National Wool Museum, reveal not only how families had to make do but also tell personal family histories. *The Child's Cot Cover Insert* from 1929 in the National Wool Museum's collection was made by Jean Hepner's grandmother from used woollen garments at the onset of the depression. The garments were hand stitched on to an old woollen blanket. The quilt was used by at least

five of the seven children in the family. It had assorted covers that were replaced when needed. In later years, it was also used by Hepner's grandchildren.

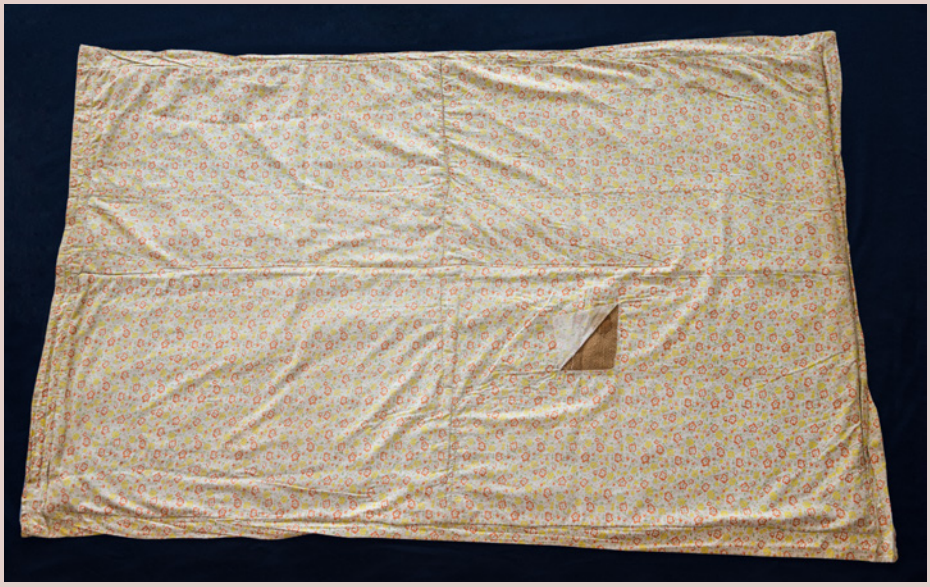
[Image 5] Child's cot cover insert, c1929. Made by Jean Hepner's grandmother. National Wool Museum Collection, NWM-101

In 1931, the Bathurst Relief Society put out a number of advertisements in the *National Advocate* 'appeal[ing] to residents who have sacks suitable for making wagga blankets for the distressed Bathurst community'. Through the depression of the 1930s and the war efforts of the 1940s the wagga continued to be used around Australia.

As late as 1951, as Sydney and Melbourne prepared for winter power failures, retail stores sold out of blankets and sheets, the wagga returned again to warm the nation. Newspapers around Australia reported, 'some people are going back to the old "Wagga blanket" - hessian fluffed out to make it softer and enclosed between sheets of printed material'.

In 1951 *New Idea*, a magazine widely read in Australian homes, reported on the value of the wagga:

> *With the price of wool soaring to such heights it seems that many Australian families will not be able to buy woollen blankets, therefore they will be forced to seek substitutes, possibly wagga rugs or Murrumbidgee blankets. Both the wagga rugs and the Murrumbidgee blankets are purely Australian commodities, and while they were, in the first place, the inventions of bushmen, it was the women of the outback who converted them from crude bush blankets to blankets fit to be seen in use in any home.*



[Image 6] Domestic wagga, 1945. This wagga was made by Mrs Faulkner of Bendigo for her father in his later years when a hot water bottle was considered too dangerous and a blanket was not warm enough. Notice the jute lining. National Wool Museum Collection NWM-1667

The upcycling of materials for use in quilt making is as ongoing tradition. Another wagga from the National Wool Museum's collection is a coverlet made by Rene Densham for Chris Neyland when he was born in 1953. It was created from scraps of woollen fabric and from clothing used in the family. It was used in Chris' cot or pram when he was an infant. Lois Densham, who donated the quilt, can remember the dark green fabric coming from a jacket she once wore and the deep blue pieces from a skirt worn by Rene, her mother. Lois also remembers her mother being 'a better piano player than a cook or a sewer'. According to her, the quilt was 'made in the tradition of making do from a family who knew how'.

[Image 7] Child's coverlet, 1953. This coverlet was made by Rene Densham for Chris Neyland when he was born in 1953. The quilt was created from scraps of woollen fabric and from clothing used in the family. National Wool Museum Collection, NWM-1673

[Image 8] Children dragging carts filled with reclaimed timber at the Woolloomooloo wharves during the Great Depression, 1932. Fairfax Archive of Glass Plate Negatives, National Library of Australia Collection

Contemporary waggas

Recent explorations by quilters have revived the wagga tradition. Barbara Mellor's *By Wagga Design* (2017), which received the *Expressions: Wool Quilt Prize* (2019), is an example of the wagga tradition living on in quilting circles. Mellor sourced fabrics from a variety of places, some from her personal collection, while others were given to her. She purchased a woollen three-piece suit from a local op shop and incorporated it into the design. Another notable feature of the quilt is the patch labelled 'Parkside'. It was cut from a blanket she purchased at a garage sale of a property that had been the 'Parkside' caravan park in the 1960s. The filling of the wagga includes the rest of the Parkside blanket.

The wagga exemplifies the resourcefulness of Australians bred on a diet of harsh uncertainty from drought, fire, flood and war, which has nurtured a folk heritage of 'making something out of nothing'. The first half of the twentieth century was a time when, regardless of economic circumstance, almost everyone practiced thrift during times of deprivation. The wagga is a uniquely Australian creation that embodies the practice of making do. People made waggas to keep themselves warm and they made them from just about any textile they could find.

Our past practices of making – whether waggas or other upcycled creations – pave the ground for many of the emerging trends in the contemporary maker movement. Today, the art of making do continues to thrive.

[Image 10] By Wagga Design, 2017, by Barbara Mellor. National Wool Museum Collection, NWM-7893.

[Image 9] Green & pink wagga filled with jute bags, c1930. This wagga was once described by early collectors as the 'world's worst wagga'. Today, it is considered one of the most significant waggas in the National Wool Museum's extensive collection. National Wool Museum Collection NWM-6593

Further Reading

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