

# HOW ABOUT?

with Louise Howland



Do you feel an affinity with places other than your own home patch? This month, Louise reflects on physical spaces, both near and far, that speak to her.

I'm incredibly fortunate to have a friend and mentor with whom I meet weekly for coffee and conversation. The conversation is easily as stimulating as the coffee, and the coffee is very good. We spoke last week about personal connectedness to places beyond those of our birth, the basis of the connections, how and why they start and what they mean to us. As is often the case, I kept thinking long after the conversation had finished.

To my detriment I'm a person who has only ever learned something when it hits me fair smack in the face. Wandering about quite aimlessly, bumping into whatever trips me up, has however led to personal awakenings and subsequent passions.

Travelling in India flung me unprepared but willing into, arguably, the world's most enormous galaxy of textiles. What started as basically awestruck gawping grew to an active involvement that has lasted, so far, more than 25 years.

A chance meeting with a doctor's wife on a Spanish ferry led to a year of living and nursing in Tangier. Embroidery flourishes there amongst the white-bricked kasbahs where steaming green-mint tea is served against a backdrop of the bluest sea touched by cliffs that are, according to legend, held up by Hercules. Threads of geometric green and blue sharpen the already crisp white

cotton of an embroidered tablecloth and napkin set, which affords me a connection to Morocco and myriad experiences on a daily basis.

Of course, links may develop third-hand; one of my favourites began through the wonder-filled travels of my mother. Cruising through Belarus and the Ukraine, she felt privileged to visit women stitching and selling their superb examples of regional needlework.

Mum noted the variations from region to region. She delighted in seeing many styles first-hand, such as the ancient technique of 'nuznka', a form of needleweaving in which laid threads are worked from the reverse of the fabric, creating striking and clear silhouettes of the main motifs.

Expressing concern for the then 50 per cent of Ukrainians living below the poverty line, one of the ways she chose to help was through purchasing as much as possible. She was always one for bringing home a suitcase of treasures – the wall-hanging depicting a Russian church with six onion-bulb domes (apparently the number of domes normally matches the number of altars), connects us to the women and the country of which Mum speaks. The delicate dolls, reminiscent of Marinsky dancers, not to mention the samovar and cover (mother and step-father could never be accused of shirking the exotic), links her home to the women



with whom she developed a genuine and heartfelt rapport.

Some of our deepest connections naturally lie very close to home. My drive to work weaves through deep grey ironbark bush growing from carpets of early blooming golden-tipped wirilda wattles swathed – when we're extra fortunate – in damp silver mist. Mother Nature's a sensation in velvets and tufted silks, appliquéd with organza and stitched in gossamer. (And long may the people of central Victoria and beyond stand together to protect her from marauding property developers and roadmakers).

Until next month,

*Louise*