

Embroidery and Textiles: A Novel Perspective on Women Artists' Art Practice

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Abstract

The manuscript focuses on the autobiographical artistic practice of women artists and feminist expression in visual art, particularly those women artists who use embroidery and textiles as mediums, techniques, processes, styles, subjects, and themes. Women artists often use a variety of unique materials and techniques to create artwork which are primarily related to them and show a feminist identity. The research explores the mediums, tools and techniques applied by women artists in their artworks and the reasons behind choosing that particular medium and methods. In addition, women artists when, where, and how these diverse creation strategies have been adopted and developed over time are examined and analysed with the help of earlier literature, articles, research papers, art exhibitions, and artworks created by women artists. This manuscript discusses the chronological development of embroidery and textiles in the context of women's art practice, the efforts and achievements of the "Feminist Art Movement" and the cause and concept of "Entangled: Threads & Making", a contemporary woman artist art exhibition at Turner. Embroidery and textiles are associated with women's art practice; women artists used embroidery, needlework, and textiles as a powerful symbolic medium of expression and resistance against the male-dominated art society. They began to use feminist expressions, forms, and materials to present their new characteristics. Women artists use embroidery, textiles and needlework as feminist traditional materials and techniques, and continue to struggle to blend them with other new contemporary mediums.

Keywords: Art, Feminism, Women, Gender, Embroidery, Textiles, Autobiographical Practice

Introduction

Embroidery is an art form that uses a needle, thread, and other medium than other a brush and paint. Various contemporary female artists have included embroidery in their paintings, especially those who want to convey a social or political message through their artwork. Art has always been a catalyst for change, and it has been used to investigate and deconstruct social boundaries. Art can deepen our understanding of social issues and serve as a means of self-representation (Read, 1937). Art generally gives freedom of expression to all artists, whether male or female, in the same

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way, art refers to the freedom of the artist to freely choose the medium in which to create art (Hagtvedt et al., 2008). A careful examination of art may show how important gender is in art. How does gender influence the form of art? What mediums and techniques do women artists apply, and why do they decide to work in this particular medium? How, when, and where did they expand their formal strategies? How does the work appear analogous in terms of color, composition, perspective, framing, shape, texture, line, and so on? Several such intriguing and vital questions arise in our minds, especially when arguing about women artists' involvement in contemporary art. Today, women artists work in and act in replication of an ecumenical environment that is culturally diverse, technologically advanced, and multifarious. Women artists have claimed exclusivity and identities through the use of diverse feminist mediums, techniques, processes, styles, and subjects.

Due to gender biases in the mainstream visual art world, women artists have faced challenges and gender discrimination. If the woman in history wanted to have a take on herself as a serious artist then, they had to de-gender her work (Art as a political act: Expression of cultural identity, self -identity and gender in the work of two Korean /Korean American women artists - ProQuest, n.d.). If it looks like an artwork made by women artists, it was immediately considered less qualified than the work of its male obverse. Therefore, the artwork intended to be gender-neutral was exclusively created by women of the time and to avoid themes involving femininity, but after the feminist art movement, women came to understand the significant personal identity. Women artists adopted feminine themes as well as art styles customarily associated with women. They often apply alternate materials and techniques inside of artwork which are related to the female gender, such as textiles, embroidery, needlework, or other mediums that have never been used by male artists before. Several contemporary women artists have adopted "embroidery and needlework" as feminist mediums or techniques. Why have women artists adopted "embroidery and needlework" as a medium of expression? Is there a connection between embroidery and feminism? How did this cultural and traditional craft practice help the feminist art movement? How and why was "embroidery and textiles" the key concept of the contemporary art exhibition "Entangled: Threads & Making" at the Turner Contemporary in Margate in 2017? Previous literature, articles, exhibition reviews, and personal analysis can help find answers to these questions.

This manuscript divided into three concrete parts; the first part discusses the history, techniques, and many intriguing facts about the journey of embroidery and textiles. Each example can present answers to volumes of questions, for instance, the chronological development of embroidery, the convivial and political impact of embroidery, the core features of embroidery, and its relationships with feminism. The second part describes the overview, purpose, concept, reason, medium, and techniques of feminist strategies in the feminist art movement. The "Feminist Movement" was a significant chapter in the history of women's art in the 20th century. As feminist expressions, forms, and materials for new identities, women artists began to use embroidery, textiles, or needlework as feminist expressions, forms, and materials. The third part investigates the perception and meaning of "Entangled: Threads & Making", a contemporary art exhibition at Turner Contemporary in Margate, Kent. What categories of art are challenged in the Entangled Threads & Making exhibition? Why the curator did invites only women artists to take part in the exhibition and what were the selection criteria? Thus, the focus of this manuscript is on women

artists who are particularly influenced by embroidery, textiles, and needlework as a medium, subject, or material.

Embroidery as a Technique and Medium of Expression

Embroidery is a research topic for folklorists and art historians. Depending on the time, place, and available materials, embroidery can be a folk technique that has been widely used by many specialists. Embroidery is the cultural and social practice of decorating fabric or other materials using a needle to apply thread or yarn, especially done by women. From the earliest times to the present day, women are still confined to the roles of the household, and under the normative standards of the time, a woman working on needlework and embroidery was considered beautiful, civilized, and educated. The word embroidery is derived from the French word *broderie*, which means embellishment (Schuette & Mueller-Christensen, 1964). Embroidery is the craft of decorative materials, mainly by designating the textiles, fabrics, needles, and thread. Rudimental techniques include crochet work, needlepoint, cross-stitch embroidery, and quilting, quillwork, and feather work (Aranea & Bain, n.d.). It is believed that embroidery originated from China and the Middle East, but there is no doubt that Asia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome had excellent embroidery, as noted by historians and many reliefs and paintings of that time additionally proved that. The invention and initial development of this craft should be attributed to the Babylonians because the most famous embroidery in archaic times and Egypt emanated from Mesopotamia. The practice and popularity of embroidery began in the 13th century, and by the end of the 15th century, women had adopted and appreciated it as high art. Embroidery is known as the “craft of two hands” by the Turkish traveler Evliya Çelebi in the 17th century (Lee, 2009). Embroidery was an expressive and consequential craft in the mediaeval Islamic world. When embroidery became a symbol of high convivial status in Muslim societies, it has become a widely popular culture in lower societies. In Sweden, the first embroidery found can be traced back to the Viking era around the 9th and 10th centuries. Around 1000 AD, with the magnification of the Christian church and power of royalty, embroidery began to flourish in Europe (Klessig, 2015). Machine embroidery was developed and mass-produced in phases during the Industrial Revolution in the 18th century. The embroidery industries today use a variety of modern techniques to produce products in large quantities and at a high rate. Many reputed institutes have started various professional courses specialising in embroidery and textiles. With an exclusive opportunity, the Royal School of Needlework offers a full-time BA (Hons) degree program specializing in hand embroidery. The course can motivate women to develop women’s careers in hand embroidery and to work and design contemporary textiles utilizing your knowledge of hand embroidery practice (Degree | Royal School of Needlework | Fashion, Interiors, Textile Art, n.d.). Here in this institute, scholars can develop their embroidery skills through traditional techniques to experimental approaches to stitch, for a range of products and outcomes. Many women including the male generation are proudly adopting traditional dexterity practices as a professional practice.

Within this historical and cultural development, some influences on the practice of embroidery, with its personal identity as a craft and skill, derived from the circadian lives and status of women as a form of knowledge. Embroidery is a rich subject that viewed from some disciplinary perspectives: fabric culture, art history, social and monetary history, science, and

technology. It is often represented as an influential craft with the advantage of being used by women, as a result, financial and social interests are fulfilled. It is believed that these women practice it throughout their lives and they teach it to other women younger than themselves, so their skills and knowledge are passed on to the next generation (Mitchell, 1996). The embroidered craft can represent the dedication, skills, and personal artistic taste of women. Through embroidery, women can train their hands and eyes, be sensitive to the smallest details, refine their sense of color and master a large repertoire of motifs and composition formulas. As a result, embroidery, textiles and needlework turned into the ultimate women's art and quantification of a woman's worth. Embroidery is a part of the daily experience of women, which they weave through their past, present, and future with the help of needles and coloured threads.

The Efforts and Achievements of Feminist Art Movement

The feminist art movement, which officially commenced in the 1960s, refers to the efforts and achievements of feminists who made art reflecting the lives and experiences of women. The feminist art movement began with the conception that women's experiences should be expressed through art, where they were before completely ignored. The issues and problems that feminist artists have fought for have been around for many centuries, but it was only until the 1960s that they were genuinely accepted. In the 1970s, women artists began to establish their own spaces where they could work independently from the male community, and conclusively, the "Women in the Arts Foundation" was created in 1971. One of the most prominent early activists in the movement, Judy Chicago, founded the Feminist Arts Project at Cal State Fresno in 1971 (Meagher, 2011). In 1972, Judy Chicago engendered Womanhouse with Miriam Shapiro at the California Institute of the Arts, which also had a feminist art programme (Jina Kim, 2018). Women's arts organisations began to represent female artists in galleries and museums. American feminist artists held protests in New York in front of renowned museums such as the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art; demands were made to increase the percentage of collections of works by women artists in museums and eventually succeeded. Many noted art critics wrote essays on the activities of the feminist art movement that focused on the under-representation of women in the arts.

Why have there been no great women artists? Linda Nochlin's significant essay was published in 1971 (Gouma-Peterson & Mathews, 1987). Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin engendered artists' identities: From 1550 to 1950, they were involved in the exhibition of the works of women artists of that time. The curator, Linda Nochlin explained their goals very punctiliously. "The purpose of the exhibition was to show that women have participated significantly in Western art, and to establish at the same time, that there is no perceptible difference in style, subject or technique between the male and the female artist...no mysterious essence of femininity." She also spoke about how various difficult circumstances prevented women artists from reaching the fame and glory of their equally talented male artists.

What exactly is feminist art and the Feminist Movement? For some, the goal of the feminist movement was simple: let women have liberation, freedom of self-expression, equal opportunity, and control over their lives. Art historians and theorists always debate whether feminist art is a phase in art history, a movement, or a huge alteration in ways of engendering art or expressing

art. Some have compared it with feminist art. Feminist art cannot be described as a style of art, but it can be called a way of making art. It has always been a prominent question in the art field (Langer, 1991). Feminist art declared that meaning and experience are valuable in form; postmodernism repudiated the rigid form and style of modern art. This queried whether according to historical Western theories, however, men actually represented universalism. Artists expressed conceptions of gender, identity, and form. Women artists increasingly accepted new mediums or styles of representation of art; they used performance art, video, and other artistic expressions that are important in postmodernism. During the era of Reigns in the 1980s in America, feminist artists drew their inspiration from psychoanalysis and postmodern theory. Contemporary artists such as Tracy Emin, Cindy Sherman, British artist Tracy Emin, and American artist Cindy Sherman continued to develop and raise feminist art to new heights in the 1990s. The women artists began to use various symbolic mediums and concepts cognate to feminism, such as dirty sheets, condoms, blood-stained apparel, and other objects depicting dejection, not only for its grand emotional impact but additionally for its innovative use of the material (Harper, 1985). Since the beginning of the feminist art movement, women artists have started using traditional female craft practices such as weaving, hand-paper making and clay, using these traditional women's craft practices while presenting their resistance against the male-dominated art world. These artists placed craft practices at the heart of early feminist pedagogy, and they declared craft as a legitimate art form, identically similar to those promoted in the Eurocentric canon. Feminists seek to reveal women's life experiences through craft and its relationship to everyday cycles of life, and to revive them as what they perceive as the woman-centric language of this art practice. During the feminist movement and after that movement, women artists began to use feminist expressions, forms, and materials to give women artists a new identity. Women artists embraced not only feminist traditional materials, but also the contemporary medium. Due to all these processes and experiments, today we get to see another new form of contemporary art and its expression.

Feminist artists often adopted alternative materials that were associated with the female gender to engender their work, such as textiles, or other mediums occasionally used by male artists such as performance and video. Although historical painting and sculpture were known to be art used by male artists, these arts were rarely used by women in history. By expressing themselves through these non-traditional meanings, women sought to expand the definition of fine art and include a wider variety of artistic perspectives. Miriam Shapiro coined the phrase *femmage* to describe work that combined fabrics and other textiles. Guerrilla Girls, an American art activist group, has worn gorilla masks in public and used facts, humor, and outrageous visuals to expose gender and ethnic bias as well as expose the ascendance of males in politics, art, film, and pop culture. Barbara Kruger used photographic prints, videos, metals, textiles, magazines, and other materials to engender drawings, collages, and other oeuvres, her work confronts the potency of mass media (Leng, 2020). Sarah Lucas is a contemporary British artist known for her kinesthetic photographs, performances, sculpture, and other experimental works. Lucas has perpetuated the use of everyday materials to generate crude and often inflammatory comments on humor, visual puns, and sexuality, death, and gender. Louise Joséphine Bourgeois examined themes around sexuality, confinement, and the female body. The feminist art movement isn't over yet. Within contemporary art, there are many women artists whose works are inspired by feminist

conceptions and materials. Joe Hesketh's artworks included dynamic verbal expressions about the human condition and about her experience as a woman in the male-dominated art world. Joe's statement, "The whole world is very male-dominated, yes, I am a feminist, I don't understand women who aren't. Women naturally support each other, or at least I'd like to think so, and in this male-dominated world, we need to stick together, use humour to highlight the ridiculous and ridiculousness that this is still going on in this day and age, so the impact on my work is huge (Joe Hesketh, Artist | Contemporary Art for Sale | Rise Art, n.d.)." Alexandra Gallagher, Kirsten Lilford, Delphine LeBourgeois, and Nina Beier's *Fatigues* are multidisciplinary artists who explore notions of feminism, sexuality, and identity with the use of various techniques and forms, such as collage, street art, prints, photography, and painting. Female artists are combining traditional and contemporary influences to give their subjects a subtle yet prominent identity.

Cause and Concept of Entangled: Threads & Making

"Entangled: Threads & Making" is a vital exhibition of sculptures, installations, tapestries, textiles, and jewellery, from the early twentieth century to the present day. This exhibition was held at Turner Contemporary in Margate, Kent, from 28th January to 7th May 2017. More than 40 international women artists participated in this exhibition, which expanded the possibilities of embroidery, needlework, weaving, sewing, and wood carving, which often included unexpected materials such as plants, fabrics, hair, and bird quills. The exhibition gathered artists from different generations and cultures who explore a diverse range of materials and techniques, challenge established categories of craft, design, and fine arts, and appertain a fascination with the handmade and the processes of engendering itself. This significant exhibition was curated by writer and critic Karen Wright, with Turner Contemporary (Racz, 2017). Wright has great experience with women's art practice, especially women artists who have used traditional techniques or mediums such as embroidery and textiles to create art. Wright has become curious about the diverse methodologies of engendering art; she visited the studios of several women artists and provided fascinating details of the artist's work process, such as Anni Albers and Hannah Ryggen, Ann Cathrin November Høibo, Caroline Achaintre, and Kiki Smith, as a component of her conventional 'In the Studio' column for "The Independent Newspaper". Several artists or artist pairs were included, such as thirty from Europe, seven from Iceland and Norway, eight from the UK, and four each from France and Germany. A further eight artists emanated from the USA, three from South America, two from North Africa, and one from Japan (Entangled: Threads and Making – Textile Forum Blog, n.d.). It was an impressive and conceptual art exhibition, which presented exquisite craftsmanship, rather than a simple textile exhibition. Numerous of the featured artists were newcomers from the Venice Biennial, The Documenta in the Castle, and other great art biennials, so the discovery remained very proximate to the fine arts scene.

Karen Wright, Curator, explained: "When we first set out to create Entangled: Threads & Making, over 3 years ago, I was initially overwhelmed by how many artists wanted to take part in the show. It gave the idea of currency at a time when little had been done in investigating this area, both in terms of gender, but also in terms of materials. For me, the show was an opportunity to re-evaluate the political status of women in the marketplace, as well as the way that they use materials and express their concerns (Day et al., 2018)." According to Sarah Martin, Head of

Exhibitions at Turner Contemporary: "Entangled: Threads & Making, it promises to be a prosperous exhibition with various series of artists. Several new artworks have been made and are still being made for the exhibition, and the positioning of these in conversation with each other, and with 20th-century pioneers, will create new and fascinating parallels. While they all have 'making' in common, they explore it in entirely different ways (Day et al., 2018)." Victoria Pomery OBE, Director of Turner Contemporary, states in the preface of the catalogue for the "Entangled: Threads & Making" exhibition that "Women have played an essential role in the creation of artworks for centuries and yet, so often, their work has been regarded as of less significance than that of men. The history of art has often made them invisible (Turner Contemporary presents "Entangled: Threads and Making" | Wallpaper*, n.d.). The method by which women artists were selected for this art exhibition was that the exhibition organisers adopted the concept of presenting works fixated on only textiles or embroidery materials and techniques. The good thing was that they were interested in artists who worked with textiles-cognate materials and who were not very renowned in the art market. Museum director Victoria Pomery said that when the first list of candidates was drawn up, it included only women, and after, this became a selection principle. "Women are very aggressively engaged in the use of materials, in particular textiles and threads." When she first started working with the critic, curator, and writer Karen Wright on this project, Pomery didn't intend to feature only women in this proposed exhibition, but, as their research conceptualized, they came up with a new amazing idea that only women could participate in this exhibition, which made this exhibition even more important. The artworks included in this exhibition were, unsurprisingly, very different from each other and were all participated in by international women artists working in mainly diverse techniques, from embroidery, weaving, and sewing, to other hand-made processes. Karen Wright inscribed the essay in the exhibition catalogue about the concept and highlights how this was a very timely exhibition, considering that women's rights around the world are under constant threat. The exhibition targeted making and content, in integration with more preponderant labor-in-depth and meditative techniques. With regard to conventional techniques, weaving and embroidery were felicitously represented.

The curator included women artists from older and the younger generations, such as Hannah Ryggen, Anni Albers, Maureen Hodge, Kiki Smith, Mona Hatoum, Regine Bogat, Ann Cathryn November Høibo, and Arna Óttarsdóttir. Their artworks were included as pioneers of 20th-century textiles, fashion, and handicraft practices. The exhibition explored the impact of the older generation on younger generations of artists who incorporate similar materials and processes into their work (Black, n.d.). Weavers Albers and Ryggen, who elevated tapestry to the level of contemporary fine art, must be displayed alongside contemporary artists who are constantly rediscovering the medium. German artist Christiane Löhr engendered delicate sculptures composed of seeds, tree blossoms, and plant matter. Samara Scott presented site-specific work in the lift, exploring the colours of Turner, through the use of various novel and unusual materials. Löhr produced new work made from a column of locally sourced horsehair. Sonia Gomes's artwork was inspired by her own Brazilian traditions of indigenous cultures. She used colorful, abstract sculptures made by binding different fabrics around the wire. This exhibition additionally included a series of Hesse's frangible forms in cheesecloth from 1969 alongside Hiller's Painting Blocks. Both Eva Hesse and Susan Hiller used the language of minimal

and conceptual art for handmade sculptures. Artist Ursula Von Rydingsgard created a large commissioned sculpture; artists used thick thread or reams of material. Artists such as Geta Brătescu, Maria Roosen, Rivane Neuenschwander, Ghada Amer, Tatiana Trouvé, Sidal Paaske, and Anna Ray used embroidered works, most of them probably hand-made. The large-format sculptures or the large commissioned installations artworks were done by Kashif Nadim Chaudry, Anna Ray, and Paola Anziché.

A conference was also organised during the art exhibition to discuss the problems and research related to this issue. The core objective of this conference was to identify the creative use of embroidery and textiles in art by women artists. How textiles can be optically discerned as a piece of magnificently designed fabric, as contributing to the elongated field of textile art, or as being appropriate for particular work. Fabric is a universal material that we dote on and understand, yet we disregard it and sometimes dismiss it as (im)material (Millar, 2018). The organiser of the symposium invited presentations from a variety of practices and expertise, showing the importance of particular materials and materials in art viewed from a historical and contemporary perspective. Participating speakers were Dr. Catherine Harper (Keynote), Karen Wright (curator of *Entangled*), Freddie Robins, Dr. Maxine Bristow, Dr. Beverly Ayling-Smith, Dr. Catherine Dormer, and Shelly Goldsmith.

Freddie Robins discussed her practice with curators Day+Gluckman in the context of textiles, feminism, heritage, and art practice. She used a few examples from her artwork and these artworks considered how her career and practice have developed as an artist working with textiles with a feminist voice. "Specialty as a Medium (UN) Materials Agency - Productive Uncertainty of Matter/Materials", Dr. Maxine Bristow considered some debates brought up by *Entangled: Threads and Making* and through her recent doctoral research. Dr. Beverly Ayling-Smith explains the materiality of the bedsheet: it acts as a silent witness to countless natural processes in our life. She referenced the work of artist Ewa Kuryluk, who used bedsheets in her work. Dr. Catherine Dormer's presentation took as its point of departure the event, the visit, and the legacy, told through the voice of the seamstress, the traveller, and the storyteller. The manuscript was based on the legacy of Annie Albers, who claimed that all weaving traces back to "the phenomenon of a thread", together with Walter Benjamin's narrator or craftsman, and that they repeated, fragmented, joined and embellished the story of the fabric. Shelly Goldsmith verbalized about her perpetual practice in which she explored and revealed perceived recollection and experience imbued in worn attire, concretely through the recent piece of work, *Łódź Blouse Trilogy*. The work associated with the *Łódź Blouse Trilogy* addresses the use of textiles, clothes, and clothing as a rich landscape for expression; a vehicle to explore and communicate complex ideas within a fine art context; and seeks to present knowledge and provoke thought on a variety of levels, ranging from craft skills to contemporary scientific and psychological thinking (Millar, 2018). This contemporary art exhibition and conference was based on the use of textiles and embroidery for expression in the fine arts and the identity of women in the art world. So far, these are mainly older, well-known names in the textile arts, as well as young, unknown artists associated with the art scene who have used textile materials.

Conclusion

When we look at embroidery and textiles, it can remind us of time, history and culture, but it can also shape the feelings and thoughts of women, which is incredible. This study explored and examined personal autobiographical practices, characteristics and feminist positions based on the specific techniques and materials used by women artists. The statistics of the past few decades have confirmed that there was no gender equality in the art world; women artists faced challenges to their individual identity in the field of visual art. They were systematically excluded, ignored, or erased from the history of art. A few were exhibited in art galleries or museums. Following the Industrial Revolution and the feminist movement, women artists focused on feminist expressions, forms, and materials such as embroidery and textiles. Today's women artists are working in a wide range of culturally diverse, multidisciplinary, and technologically advanced mediums and are establishing the highest contributions to groundbreaking experimental artworks with the aid of needlework, textiles, and embroidery as their significant medium of expression. Nowadays, many art institutes and curators are trying to break these low-level traditional patterns of exploitation of women artists and give women artists equal opportunities as male artists. Embroidery and textiles are learned from generation to generation, but it can be adopted as a part of official academic learning as fine arts in an academic context, it can also become a strong medium and form of self-expression.

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Dhaneshwar Shah is a prominent artist and a PhD candidate in the Department of Art Theory, School of Art & Design, Wuhan University of Technology, China. His research examines the use of traditional mediums and techniques by Asian contemporary artists for diverse types of identity.

He has been exploring this phenomenon from different perspectives in both his research and practices.
