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Reaping What They Sewed: Embroidery in Politics, Feminism, and Art

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
Honors in the Department of Visual Arts

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ABSTRACT

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The feminization of needlework under patriarchal systems of power and oppression has reinforced both long-standing feminine stereotypes and temporal sociocultural ideals. As a tool of patriarchal oppression, needlework has been used to confine women to the domestic sphere by teaching them to stay in the home, be quiet, and follow a pattern; as an educational instrument, needlework reinforced standards of women's behavior, aptitudes, and conduct. However, women for centuries have silently resisted and subverted these expectations and ideals through the very same means. Women have utilized needlework during times of crisis and collective trauma for centuries as both a practicality and means of expression. Starting in the second wave feminist movement, female artists fought for the recognition of needlework as high art, a category which the craft was explicitly excluded from since 1768 by The Royal Academy in the UK.

From altered Sampler verses of Early Modernity to stitched responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic, crisis and confinement has resulted in the employment of textile craft to disseminate information, protest, collectivize, aid society, and record history internationally. By taking a historical approach to analyze the ways in which women have employed needlework during times of social crisis internationally, we can understand the durable, practical, and precious media as a political device *and* high art.

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INTRODUCTION

Needlework is an integral and complex aspect of women's history as a tool of their education, activity of leisure, symbol of femininity, and weapon of resistance. Needlework has been used to reinforce patriarchal standards and codes of women's behavior, aptitudes, and conduct. Textile work reinforces a patriarchal oppression of women to the domestic sphere by teaching them to stay in the home, be quiet, and follow a pattern. However, women for centuries have silently resisted and subverted these expectations and ideals through the very same means.

"What is Art?" is a historically debated question within both Art History and more broadly within Philosophy by the likes of Plato, Kant, and Hegel. However, during the 20th century feminist scholars questioned the overarching disparities and displacement of women within all these definitions, systematically excluding and marginalizing women from the academic canon of fine art, through under representation and participation in museums and galleries. Founded within Marxist philosophy, these scholars argue that:

- (a) The artworks the Western artistic canon recognizes as great are dominated by male-centered perspectives and stereotypes...Moreover, the concept of genius developed historically in such a way as to exclude women artists.
- (b) The fine arts' focus on purely aesthetic, non-utilitarian value resulted in the marginalization as mere "crafts" of items of considerable aesthetic interest made and used by women for domestic practical purposes...¹

Moreover, the delineation between fine art and craft as separate spheres systematically excludes much of the creative work of women for centuries. Historically, the scope of women who had the financial, social, and independent agency to pursue the "fine arts" in a purist sense was extremely limited. As women were historically restricted from the

¹ Thomas Adajian, "The Definition of Art," ed. Edward N. Zalta, accessed February 16, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/art-definition/>.

public sphere and confined to domestic work, much of their creative efforts likewise had to be subversively channeled into their domestic labors. This can be seen in the artistry of textile crafts, such as needlework and quilting. Patriarchal dominance and power structures within the established circle of fine arts excluded female painters and sculptors while entirely excluding the domestic arts, consigning even the most intricate needle paintings to “craft.” Given the broad scope of craft, in this essay I am going to be specifically looking at needlework (considered a *textile craft*), including but not limited to embroidery, knitting, and needlepoint.

In his essay, *A Third System of the Arts?*, David Clowney explores the popular critical perspective as to why Art and craft have historically been maintained as separate spheres. Clowney states the functionality of craftwork is what ultimately separates and devalues it from Fine Art: i.e. *true* art is nonfunctional.² For this reason, craft should be excluded from Art as *true* art is solely “Art for Art’s Sake,” *Art* is based in genius and aesthetics, whereas *craft* is based in functionality and design.³

The systematic exclusion of women from Fine Art socially and culturally necessitated women to utilize craft, specifically needlework, as their artistic medium. Although not all craft is not necessarily art in this sense, I will cover examples in which women have historically utilized needlework for the purpose of Art, whether directly or subversively through otherwise “functional” canvases. Feminist scholars Rosika Parker and Griselda Pollock write on this:

By simply celebrating a separate heritage we risk losing sight of one of the most important aspects of the history of women and art, the intersection in the

² David Clowney, “A Third System of the Arts? An Exploration of Some Ideas from Larry Shiner’s *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*,” *Contemporary Aesthetics* 6 (December 21, 2008), <https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=519>.

³ For further discussion, see “2: *Creativity and Genius*” in Carolyn Korsmeyer, “Feminist Aesthetics”

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the development of an ideology of femininity, that is, a social definition of women and their role, with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft.⁴

The associated identities of an *artist* and a *craftsperson* formulated during the Renaissance also contributed to the divide between art and craft. Writers such as Giorgio Vasari also established parameters for the concept of artistic *genius*, which was exclusionary of both craft and women by definition.⁵ The stereotypical “spirit” of the artist as rebellious, genius, creative, and individualistic stands in stark contrast to the “spirit” of the craftsperson as humble and integrated within a handed-down lineage of traditions, practice, and techniques.⁶ These qualities of *artist* and *craftsperson* align with Renaissance (and later nineteenth and early twentieth century) ideals and norms of masculinity and femininity, respectively.

A major factor contributing to the hierarchy between art and needlework are surrounding systemic and patriarchy-reinforcing economic factors. The monetary value of the female laborer’s work contributes to the devaluing of needlework; women have historically been unpaid for their domestic labors, or marginally paid (even in current times) as textile workers. Even within painting, women’s paintings, such as flower paintings and miniature paintings, have historically been marginalized and significantly devalued as opposed to the work of their male contemporaries.

Throughout the 1970s’ second wave feminist movement, feminist artists such as Faith Ringgold, Judy Chicago, and Miriam Schapiro drew attention to the absence of women’s domestic arts from the world of high art by incorporating fiber, cloth, and

⁴ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7462020M/Old_Mistresses#work-details, 58.

⁵ For more on Vasari’s definition of *genius*, see 2: *Ingegno/Genius* in Douglas Biow’s “*Vasari’s Words: The ‘Lives of the Artists’ as a History of Ideas in the Italian Renaissance*”

⁶ Courtney Lee. Weida and Nanyoung Kim, “Crafting Creativity & Creating Craft,” in *Crafting Creativity & Creating Craft* (Rotterdam, NY: SensePublishers, 2014), pp. 61-76, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/union/detail.action?docID=3035002>, 63.

embroidery into their artworks.⁷ The display and installation of these artworks in galleries continues to rise today, establishing a systematic recognition of the historic exclusion of women artists within the fine arts. Amidst the internet era, many textile artists have utilized social media to establish a platform for their art independent of galleries, build international community, and monetize their works.

⁷ Estella Lauter, "Re-Enfranchising Art: Feminist Interventions in the Theory of Art," *Hypatia* 5, no. 2 (1990): pp. 91-106, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1990.tb00419.x>, 94.

CHAPTER I: Origins and Gendering of Materiality

We can come to trace the origins of needlework as an instrument of feminine suppression to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in British embroidery production. Opus Anglicanum embroidery was a technically intricate and expressive style of embroidery produced in England from approximately 900 to 1500. This style of embroidery was done on linen or velvet with silk and metal threads, adorned with pearls, jewels and beaten gold. This embroidery was considered to be of the same artistic caliber as painting and sculpture, only shifting to a “lesser art” during the Renaissance.⁸ The rise in popularity and subsequent commercial production for Opus Anglicanum embroidery resulted in the transfer in production from scattered, individual women to tightly-controlled, male-controlled guild workshops based in London. Although they were embroidering the pieces, women were often denied full-membership within the guilds, their wages being paid to their fathers/husbands.⁹

Starting in the Colonial era, women often received their early education through stitching samplers. Through embroidery, these samplers served as an educational means to teach women letters and numbers, prayers and poems, along with creating imagery of small animals, foliage, houses, and churches. In his overview of American sampler poetry from 1650-1850, historian David Stinebeck describes the generational transfer of needlework sampler designs and traditions as a “collaborative form of feminist self-expression through time.” (Stinebeck 1184) He establishes this form of feminism as a passive expression of agency through public assertion, as the samplers hung in plain view of the men that lived in or visited the home. Although much of Colonial American

⁸ Parker, Ibid. 40

⁹ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), https://openlibrary.org/books/OL7462020M/Old_Mistresses#work-details, 60.

women's education came from the Bible, the poetry of these sampler verses was often written by women to reflect family values. As samplers were used as an educational tool and site to set moral standards and codes for young women, sometimes samplers also served as the location on which the underlying conflicts with these ideologies were expressed.¹⁰ In this way, women were able to covertly and silently resist the feminine ideals pressed upon them by a patriarchal society.

Women were utilizing samplers as a means of disseminating and recording progressive feminist thought as early as the 17th century. This 17th century sampler verse from the Victoria & Albert Museum (*see Figure 1*), embroidery study collection, in colored silk on linen, is the earliest known circulation of this altered sampler poem:

When I was young I little Thought
That Wit must be so dearly bought
But Now Experience Tells me how
If I would Thrive then I must Bow
And bend unto another's will
That I might learn both art and skill
To Get my Living with My Hands
That so I might be free from Band
And My Own Dame that I may be
And free from all such slavery.
Avoid vaine pastime fle youthfull pleasure
Let moderation allways Be My measure
And so prosed unto the heavenly treasure¹¹

Later versions have been found in circulation into the early 19th century, showing that this altered verse was disseminated generationally. The poem suggests needlework as a potential path to employment for women, and that fulfillment will be found in employment.

¹⁰ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1984), 13.

¹¹ Jane Stevenson and Peter Davidson, eds., *Early Modern Women Poets (1520-1700): An Anthology* (Oxford University Press, 2001), https://books.google.com/books?id=EynvtQmeW-kC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false, 468.

The gendered divide and hierarchy between craft and fine art within social systems and structures of power was stratified during the Enlightenment. During this time, academies for Fine Arts and male students were established alongside workshops for women to learn craft arts.¹² The Royal Academy of Arts in London was established in 1769 for the elevation, cultivation, and celebration of the “Polite Arts”¹³ By 1770, two separate clauses were enacted to first exclude needlework *imitations of painting* from exhibition, and later clarified to exclude needlework as a whole, a medium through which London galleries had previously featured and recognized female needlework artists such as Mary Linwood and Mary Delany.¹⁴

Mary Linwood (1755-1845), famous for her embroidered replicas of Old Masters paintings (*see Figures 2 and 3*) was one of the most well-known needlepainters of the Victorian Era. With the institutional exclusion of needlework from the realm of High Arts, Linwood kicked off a tour in 1798 featuring over one hundred of her glazed and framed embroidered paintings at London’s Hanover Square Rooms. Although she achieved high regard from critics, their approval was still decorated with misogynist underpinnings and a condescending tone:

Every amateur of the arts should go to Miss Linwood's Exhibition at the Pantheon, where they will have an opportunity of comparing the admirable effect of Worsted, as a resemblance of painting. During the vacations at this season, young Ladies from school should be allowed to inspect these elegant and ingenious productions of the needle. With very few exceptions, they display a beautiful spectacle, and even to those who might hitherto have considered Needle-work an uninteresting object of criticism; their close similarity to pictures,

¹² Kristeller, Paul Oskar. *Renaissance Thought and the Arts: Collected Essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.

¹³ Sir Joshua Reynolds, “A DISCOURSE Delivered at the Opening of the Royal Academy, January 2nd, 1769, by the President,” in *Seven Discourses On Art*, accessed February 7, 2021, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2176/2176-h/2176-h.htm>.

¹⁴ Isabelle Baudino, “Difficult Beginning? The Early Years of the Royal Academy of Arts in London,” *Etudes Anglaises* 66, no. 3 (February 22, 2013): pp. 181-194, 188. <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00917808>.

which have ever engaged the attention of persons of taste and talents, will recommend these performances to particular observation.¹⁵

Although the critic spoke highly of Linwood's paintings, his approval is undoubtedly gendered and condescending towards Linwood and needlework as a medium of art. The critic distinguishes the *craft* of needlework from the *art* of painting in a hierarchical and dependent manner by elevating Linwood's work upon its "resemblance of painting." He also does not recognize the needle paintings as art or even as a *creation* by Linwood, but objectively as "productions of the needle." It is also important to note the gendered connotations of the critic using the adjective *ingenious* rather than simply *genius*.¹⁶

During the Victorian Era, eternal, stereotypical associations with femininity came to be synonymous with those of embroidery; at the same time, embroidery has been used to educate and reinforce temporal ideals of femininity for centuries. Victorian ideals of femininity were shaped by the same values associated with needlework, the ideal being dutiful, pious, wageless, and modest. For example, when the male Reverend T. James criticized and mocked the scale, detail, and robust blooms of the cabbage rose in *Church Work for Ladies*, this common motif was quickly replaced by the Tudor rose.¹⁷

It is also important to note the prevalence of embroidery within the other prominent Victorian feminine art form: the novel. Within Victorian novels, embroidery serves as a symbol of feminine moral, social, and behavioral codes and expectations, as presented and enforced by patriarchal systems and power structures. Charlotte Bronte, for example, employs embroidery as a medium through which to explore the contradictions

¹⁵ World and Fashionable Advertiser in Hedquist, Valerie in "How a lost painting endured: Gainsborough's Woodman, Macklin's Poets' Gallery, and Miss Linwood's needle painting." *Southeastern College Art Conference Review* 16, no. 3.

https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A367076932/AONE?u=nysl_ca_unionc&sid=AONE&xid=f6d9acb5 (and Note: (54.) World and Fashionable Advertiser, 30 June 1787.)

¹⁶ See footnote 5

¹⁷ Ibid. 32, 34.

within femininity and presented ideals thereof; in her works, embroidery and femininity are employed to explore opposing themes of self defense and self denial, along with establishing solitary female spaces and also announcing female subservience and availability.¹⁸ Bronte's 1849 novel, *Shirley*, centralizes this relationship:

"Rose, did you bring your sampler with you, as I told you?"
"Yes, mother."
"Sit down, and do a line of marking."
Rose sat down promptly, and wrought according to orders. After a busy pause of ten minutes, her mother asked, "Do you think yourself oppressed now—a victim?"
"No, mother."
"Yet, as far as I understood your tirade, it was a protest against all womanly and domestic employment."
*"You misunderstood it, mother. I should be sorry not to learn to sew. You do right to teach me, and to make me work."*¹⁹

In this example, Rose Yorke's initial rejection of embroidery reflects her rejections of Victorian standards for women. The young adult wishes to travel and adventure, standing in opposition to the expectation of women to stay confined to the home. Although her character never outright rejects women's domestic work, she does state that life must consist of more for women.

The changing relationship of namesake Shirley Keeldar's adherence to Victorian ideals of femininity is also synonymous with her relationship to embroidery in the novel. Initially, Shirley has no time for embroidery, as an independent non-sexual woman with agency. However, once Shirley acknowledges her love for Louis Moore, she takes up embroidery and the device becomes entrenched with her femininity:

*"I was near enough to count the stitches of her work, and to discern the eye of her needle"*²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid, 165.

¹⁹ Charlotte Brontë, in *Shirley* (T. Nelson & Sons), accessed February 17, 2021, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30486/30486-h/30486-h.htm>, 352.

²⁰ Charlotte Brontë, in *Shirley*, 550.

The character Madame Defarge in Charles Dickens' 1859 novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, (see Figure 4) knits a registry of those to be killed in the revolution constantly in the background throughout the novel. As other women join Madame Defarge in her work, knitting becomes a central image symbolizing the Revolution.²¹ Their needlework not only established their place as active members of the Revolution, but served as a subversive means for the women to have a political voice.

This motif was more than a symbol; seemingly subordinate women have been utilizing embroidery and knitting as a means to code messages, disseminate information, and protest during times of civil unrest for centuries. From the Suffragettes of the United States and Britain, to Chilean arpilleras during a military dictatorship, to the Greenham Women's Peace Camp of the late 1980s, women have reappropriated embroidery as a tool of establishing a public political voice despite its domestic implications. Throughout the 20th century, needlework was employed as a uniquely feminine and subversive mode of collectivization, expression, and action within a variety of cultures and contexts.

²¹ Barbara Black, "A Sisterhood of Rage and Beauty: Dickens' Rosa Dartle, Miss Wade, and Madame Defarge." *Dickens Studies Annual* 26 (1998): 91-106. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44372502>, 98.

CHAPTER II: Embroidery in Early Feminism

At the turn of the 20th century, the women's suffrage movement utilized needlework to communicate their goals and demands in both the United States and in Great Britain. Banners were embroidered with not only the suffragists' political aims, but were also utilized as a medium to record information, identify local groups, and commemorate important women within the movements. By embroidering fabric banners as opposed to printing on paper or cardboard, these objects of protest become elevated; while it makes these objects more precious and time-consuming to create, it also makes them more durable and long-lasting. Disguised as embroidery groups, suffragists would often hold large gatherings in which they would embroider these banners collectively, while discussing their larger political aims and plans of action. The juxtaposition of these objects as simultaneous historical artifact and work of art is a motif that is picked up again by the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

In Great Britain, the Women's Suffrage Movement utilized the Victorian-established connection of embroidery and femininity to their advantage. They did not attempt to "disentangle" the two, but rather used this to change ideas and stereotypes associated with embroidery and femininity. By embroidering banners rather than printing signage, suffragettes were able to feminize the devices of their political protest; using embroidery as a means to disseminate their political goals and bringing their objects onto the streets (as embroidered works usually remained in the home), suffragettes reinvented a practice which traditionally re-enforced women's confinement to the domestic sphere. Bringing objects of the private, domestic sphere into public spaces, these women rejected their current sociocultural status as passive domestic helpmeets,

establishing a public and political voice. They attempted to rebrand embroidery as a signifier of strength and action, rather than weakness and passivity. Their banners celebrated female historical figures (such as Marie Curie with the word “RECTITUDE”) and featured slogans such as ASK WITH COURAGE; DARE TO BE FREE; COURAGE, CONSISTENCY, SUCCESS; and ALLIANCE AND DEFIANCE.²²

Banners were not the only item embroidered; British suffragists also embroidered table napkins to commemorate their rallies and events. *Figure 5* shows a table napkin printed and embroidered to commemorate the Votes For Women Great Demonstration at Hyde Park on June 21st, 1908. The center of the printed portion features a map outlining the path of the march and the locations where speeches took place. Around this is a timetable of the events and speeches of the day, surrounded by portraits of the leaders and those who gave speeches. The floral embroidered portion around the printed section is done in the colors of the Women’s Social and Political Union, purple and green, who was the organizing group behind the demonstration. *Figure 6* shows a handkerchief from a 1913 rally in Hyde Park, organized by the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies. This handkerchief is also a combination of print and embroidery, containing the program of the two-day event with the surrounding floral embroidery featuring the colors of the NUWSS, red and green.

As a means of subversion, women who were incarcerated as a result of suffrage activities embroidered with available materials in order to communicate (as they were not permitted to speak to one another) and record their experiences (*see Figure 7*). These woven records would come to serve as historical artifacts documenting their specific

²² Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1984), 198.

locations within prisons, abuses suffered, and details/outcomes of their resistances, such as hunger strikes.²³

The suffragette movement within the United States also utilized embroidery to both convey political messages on banners and as a means of recording the groups and individuals marching and their reasons for doing so.²⁴ *Figure 8* shows Jeanette Tillotson Acklen holding the banner she marched behind during the Tennessee campaign for women's suffrage (*see Figure 9*). Ms. Acklen's husband was notably a U.S.

Representative and strong supporter of the suffrage movement. The golden yellow used for the banner was one of the symbolic colors (the other being white) established by the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Yellow roses were adopted as a symbol of the movement, anti-suffragists toting the red rose as symbolism of their adversary. In Tennessee, the final state needed to ratify national women's suffrage, this symbol was even worn by the members of the legislature in the form of lapels on voting day.²⁵

The use of embroidery within the suffragette movement influenced the systematic instruction on embroidery in the early 20th century. The Glasgow Society of Lady Artists was founded in 1882 at the Glasgow School of Art in order to promote the elevation of the female-dominated craft and decorative arts to the level of the male-oriented fine arts.²⁶ Many teachers and students of the school were actively involved in the suffragette movement. In response to the manner of utilization of embroidery by suffragists, instructors at the Glasgow School of Art overhauled methods of embroidery teaching,

²³ Eileen Wheeler, *The Political Stitch: Voicing Resistance in a Suffrage Textile* (Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings, 2012), 7.

²⁴ Tactics 5

²⁵ Mary Skinner, "A Look Back at Tennessee's War of the Roses," Nashville Attractions (Tennessee State Museum, June 2019), <https://tnmuseum.org/Stories/posts/a-look-back-at-tennessees-war-of-the-roses>.

²⁶ "Glasgow Girls," accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/glossary-terms/glasgow-girls>.

encouraging students to develop their own designs and patterns as opposed to following traditional imagery. This progressive stance toward embroidery extended in their ideologies toward early education, advocating at the 1928 annual conference for the National Union of Women Teachers that an egalitarian approach be taken toward the instruction of young pupils, teaching young boys domestic subjects such as needlework and cooking, and teaching young girls woodwork. Despite these efforts, popular culture continued to glamourize and promote the leisure market, which propagated embroidery as a means for individual women to “manifest feminine qualities” in an individualistic manner as an expression of their identities and personalities.²⁷ Whereas during Victorian times, embroidery was synonymous with a universal self-less ideal of femininity, during the twentieth century embroidery was promoted to embody the feminine *ideas of the individual*.

The United States saw a marketed revival of Colonial Era moral values propagated through photography which presented a colonial aesthetic as the visual and moral embodiment of “the good life.” In her essay, *Spinning Wheels, Samplers, and the Modern Priscilla The Images and Paradoxes of Colonial Revival Needlework*, Design Historian Beverly Gordon addresses the marketed needlework within the American Colonial Revival movement, arguing its weaponization to promote anti-feminist moral and social ideologies:

The entrepreneurs were in effect selling a two-dimensional version of the tableaux-like kitchen and were thus perpetuating the stereotypes of the nineteenth century; theirs, however, were more charged, reverent images.²⁸

²⁷ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1984), 202.

²⁸ Beverly Gordon, “Spinning Wheels, Samplers, and the Modern Priscilla: The Images and Paradoxes of Colonial Revival Needlework,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 33, no. 2/3 (1998): pp. 163-194, <https://doi.org/10.1086/496744>, 168.

At the same time suffragists were protesting and women were fighting to enter the industrial workforce the colonial revival movement was promoting its antiquated antithesis; the feminine ideal of the passive, domestic, ephemeral embroiderer was marketed to women through the dissemination of imagery representing the idealized colonial interior and woman in magazines and other print media. This ideal was also promoted in the Arts within the Pictorialist movement of photography by artists such as Clarence Hudson White. (*see Figure 10*)

Modern artist Hannah Höch utilized embroidery in her artistic practice to push back against these sentiments. A member of the Berlin Dada movement, Höch was most notable as a pioneer of collage art, specifically her photomontages in which she would arrange and layer fragments from magazines into disturbing, anamorphic forms. In 1918, Höch published a manifesto entitled “On Embroidery” which directly addressed women to take embroidery seriously as an integral part of their history, and as their art:

Embroidery is very closely related to painting. It is constantly changing with every new style each epoch brings. It is an art and ought to be treated like one... you, craftswomen, modern women, who feel that your spirit is in your work, who are determined to lay claim to your rights (economic and moral), who believe your feet are firmly planted in reality, at least Y-O-U should know that your embroidery work is a documentation of your own era.²⁹

In this manifesto, Höch encouraged women to implement the design principles of Modernist art and aesthetic into their embroidery practice, breaking free of the traditional standard patterns and imagery of “florals, baskets, birds, and spirals,” which in her opinion was a major contributing factor to the lack of artistic seriousness taken toward

²⁹ Maria Makela, “Grotesque Bodies: Weimar-Era Medicine and the Photomontages of Hannah Höch,” in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. Frances S Connelley (Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 193-219, 197.

embroidery.³⁰ In this way, Höch not only called for the evolution of embroidery, but for the political and social evolution of women.

In her 1925 collage, *Bewacht* (translation: *Watched*, see Figure 11), Höch combines reproduced imagery of an embroidered red carnation, the only aspect of the collage in color, with a cutout of a baroque-era man with a gun slung over his shoulder. His face has been replaced with an egg shaped cutout, mirroring the large egg-shaped cutout he stands upon. He is poised to “face” the carnation, which is blooming away from him. Rosika Parker writes on this:

Hannah Höch in her collage *Bewacht* appears more concerned with embroidery’s connotations than with the art’s formal qualities: the juxtaposition of shapes and objects conjures up the class and sexual associations of the art.³¹

In this way, this photomontage can be seen to represent a move away from antiquital values in regards to both femininity and embroidery. Höch’s later collage work featuring textiles and embroidery took a direct approach to Modernist aesthetics and sentiments, breaking traditional form through geometric graphic abstractions.

As art and industry merged through the subsequent decades between WWI and WWII, the purpose of embroidery also changed to serve as an applied, rather than expressive, medium.³² As a part of the war effort, women at home were expected to knit supplies and clothing for soldiers and their children in order to conserve resources. Leisurely and artistic needlework such as embroidery were put aside in favor of a utilitarian needlework which served family and country rather than the individual woman.

Although both World Wars saw the resurgence of a patriarchally-defined and

³⁰ Kathleen C. Boyle (University of Florida, 2014), pp. 1-87, 10.

³¹ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1984), 194.

³² Marjan Groot et al., “Lost in the History of Modernism: Magnificent Embroiderers,” in *MOMOWO: Women Designers, Craftswomen, Architects and Engineers between 1918 and 1945* (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2018), pp. 103-116, 116.

gender-role affirming deployment of needlework through propaganda dissemination (*see Figure 12*), the emerging second wave feminist movement quickly called for the reevaluation and redefining of needlework starting in the 1960s.³³ We will see needlework once again utilized as a means of feminine individual and collective expression, political voice, and protest both within public and fine arts spaces.

³³ Anne Bruder, "Stitching Dissent," in *Crafting Dissent: Handicraft as Protest from the American Revolution to the Pussyhats*, ed. Hinda Mandell (London: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., n.d.), pp. 111-121, 116.

CHAPTER III: Second-Wave Feminism and Subversion

Beginning in the 1970s, Western feminist artists reclaimed needlework as both a feminine object of protest and art. These second wave feminists were largely middle class white women seeking to elevate the artistic status of needlework while bringing the collective, private and domestic traumas of women into public spaces. Despite the sexism displayed toward their work, feminist art began to emerge during the 1960s in gallery spaces. During the 1970s, feminist artists employed textiles in their practice, seeking to decrease the binary between the terms *art* and *craft*; the work of these artists often centered around stigmatized womens' issues such as pregnancy, rape, homemaking, and menstruation.³⁴ By using a domesticized medium to address women's issues and then elevating the visibility of these objects as art for the public, artists such as Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Joy Wieland, and Faith Ringgold made women's private struggles public and made the personal political.

Amidst political and social turmoil in the 1970s, Chilean women employed embroidery in order to collectivize and record the atrocities that were taking place under a seventeen-year militant dictatorship led by Augusto Pinochet who arrested, tortured, and imprisoned thousands of dissidents and their families.³⁵ Their embroideries allowed their stories to be heard internationally as a powerful political voice. While women were not permitted to work outside their homes under strict gender-roles, women in the Santiago region were able to collectivize in secret home workshops and basements of the

³⁴ Sandra Markus, "Craftivism from Philomena to the Pussyhat," in *Crafting Dissent: Handicraft as Protest from the American Revolution to the Pussyhats*, ed. Hinda Mandell (London: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., n.d.), pp. 15-25, 20.

³⁵ Danilo Freire et al., "Deaths and Disappearances in the Pinochet Regime: A New Dataset," 2019, <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/vqnwu>, 8.

Vicaria de la Solidaridad (*Vicarate of Solidarity*), and embroider their atrocities in patchwork tapestries known as *arpilleras*:

Arpilleras served to document and denounce oppression in a country where all normal channels of free expression were closed. To the women, making arpilleras was a way to share their sorrows and concerns. To present-day viewers, arpilleras are a testament to the women's extraordinary strength and survival through tremendous suffering and loss,³⁶

These arpilleras were sold internationally by the Vicaria de la Solidaridad, providing these women with a source of income while sharing their stories.³⁷

Invasión de Sinchis a Cangallo (see Figures 13, 14, and 15) depicts the invasion of Cangallo by military forces and the sudden arrests of civilians via helicopter. The lower half of the tapestry illustrates the separation of plain clothed men and women as they are led towards a helicopter by military forces. The upper right portion of the tapestry shows a woman suspended from another helicopter, detailing the manner in which these people were abducted. The upper portion also depicts a man still working in the fields harvesting fruit under a smiling military watch while three men on the other half appear to be dead, half buried in the fields. This tapestry records specific details about the time, location, and details of the incident, making it not only a powerful political means of subversive dissemination of information, but as a creative historical record.

The governmentally-perceived non threat of this “woman's work” allowed the Chilean *arpilleras* to evade the strict censorship regulations imposed on literature and other media for a period of time during Pinochet's dictatorship. However, their

³⁶ Richard O'Toole, “What Is an Arpillera?,” The William Benton Museum of Art (Connecticut State Art Museum, June 23, 2014), <https://benton.uconn.edu/exhibitions/arpilleria/what-is-an-arpillera/#>.

³⁷Dayna L. Caldwell, 2012. "The Chilean *Arpilleristas*: Changing National Politics Through Tapestry Work," *Textiles and Politics: Textile Society of America 13th Biennial Symposium Proceedings*, 3.

international recognition eventually led to the recognition of the arpilleras as subversive contraband and the women were aggressively harassed by the military. The most violent response occurred January 17th, 1977 where an exhibition of the arpilleras at the Paulina Waugh Art Gallery was firebombed by members of the military.³⁸

The arpilleristas of Chile utilized textile work in order to collectivize, record, and share the atrocities of Chile under the rule of Pinochet's regime. Their works allowed international political awareness to be brought to Chile during the seventies and eighties. Not only did these women defy the oppressive censorship laws governing other media and creative outlets, but they defied gender roles and expectations by serving as the political voice for their communities and loved ones.

The *Dinner Party* (1975-1979) by American feminist artist Judy Chicago, pays homage to famous female historical figures while simultaneously exposing the oppressive constructs which have woven femininity with embroidery for centuries. The work was first exhibited at the San Francisco Art Museum in 1979 and is currently installed permanently in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art of the Brooklyn Museum. Executed by over 400 individuals over a period of 4 years, Chicago's vision matriculated in 39 full, embroidered and hand-painted, place settings seated around a non-hierarchical triangular table. Each place setting commemorates important historical female figures, divine and human. (*See Figure 16*)

Each place setting features gold cutlery and a golden goblet, and a painted china plate and an embroidered runner. The embroidery is on the edges of the runners,

³⁸ Rebecca Ansen, "Arpilleristas: Women's Craft as a Form of Protest," *Revolution in the Southern Cone*, 2010, <http://revolutionsofsouthamerica.weebly.com/arpilleristas-womens-craft-as-a-form-of-protest.html>.

gradually coming into closer contact with the plates. In Chicago's words this transition serves to be:

a metaphor for the increasing restrictions on women's power that occurred in the development of Western history. There is the same congruence between the plate and the runner that the woman experienced between her aspirations and the prevailing attitudes towards female achievement, and occasionally there is an enormous visual tension between the plate and its runner as a symbol of the woman's rebellion against the constraints of the female role.³⁹

Through the equal importance of the painted place with the runners, this work symbolizes the equal importance of painting and embroidery as art.

During the same time in the 1970s, the parallel postal-art project "Feministo" (AKA "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman/Housewife") was underway in the UK. This project also sought to elevate the artistic value of embroidery while elevating the domestic laborer as artist. Through its open-ended outreach, the project offered connection and identity to its participants beyond their domestic persona as mother, wife, or caretaker.⁴⁰ The works were created as a visual dialogue about the daily life of housewives and mothers, featuring imagery of domestic life and traditional craft techniques. These pieces cumulated in an exhibition, challenging the "value-laden division between 'home' and 'work', 'art' and 'craft'," ⁴¹ By disrupting the structure of the art gallery with these domestically produced works about women's issues, "Feministo" established, also established the personal as political.

Rozsika Parker's 1984 book, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, was a groundbreaking publication which analyzed the historical origins

³⁹ Judy Chicago and Susan Hill, *The Dinner Party Needlework* (Anchor Books, 1980), 24.

⁴⁰ Chris Lynch, "If You Show Me Yours, I'll Show You Mine," *The Tate Papers* 25 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.21061/alan.v24i1.a.2>.

⁴¹ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1984), 208.

and politics surrounding the textile arts and its ties to femininity. The book contextualizes arguments and stances taken by the second wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s within the larger history of feminine suppression and methods of subversion within women's needlework. This publication led to a series of six groundbreaking 1988 exhibitions by the same name, featuring a dual focus on women's embroidery from 1300-1900 and contemporary embroidery.⁴²

Along with the *arpillera* discussed above, Lyn Malcolm's 1985 *Why have we so few great women artists* (See Figure 17) was exhibited in this show. This installation features multiple forms of needlework positioned around a pair of knitting needles: samplers, an embroidered wall hanging, embroidered box, knit baby shoes, handkerchief, cupcakes made of fabric, and a tablecloth. Each of these textiles sequentially spells out the title of the piece. By delineating the scope of domestic needlecrafts women were expected to learn and practice, Malcolm creates commentary on the ways in which needlework has limited women's progress and status within the arts. The installation poses the answer to the question it begs to differ, emphasizing the limitations of women's domestic labors upon her art. The piece also addresses second-wave feminist concerns around women's representation in the arts (and the lack of recognition of textile works within these structures).

Another contemporary work from the exhibition featured imagery from the British Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp which operated from 1981-1985. The peace camp was established in opposition to US cruise missiles being sited in Berkshire, UK. Leah Harper writes of her experience:

⁴² "The Subversive Stitch Revisited: The Politics of Cloth," Exhibitions (Goldsmiths, University of London), accessed March 10, 2021, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/subversivestitchrevisited/exhibitions/>.

One of the things I remember most, apart from the mud, was how the layout of the airbase clearly represented how power works. The American military were at the core, then the British soldiers and then the police. Outside were this bunch of women, locked out, who would periodically tear down the surrounding fence. We could violate this male space and we were not leaving.⁴³

In the face of a violent, heavily armed military presence, these female activists gathered by the thousands and claimed this space as a means of establishing political voice. After weapons were flown into the base in 1983, thousands of women tore down miles of fencing. Through a combination of passive and active resistance, these women were able to enact political change; Mikhail Gorbachev specifically mentioned the activism of the Greenham Women as enabling him to meet with Ronald Reagan in 1986, leading to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.⁴⁴

Like in the suffrage movement that came before it, the women in the camps stitched banners as a means of voicing their political demands. The *Subversive Stitch* exhibition featured a number of these banners, as well as Janis Jeffries' 1986 *Home of the Brave* (See Figure 18), which is similar in form to the suffragette embroidered handkerchiefs. The lace handkerchief features a central image of one of the stitched banners reading "Women for Peace," surrounded by embroidered text which reads "You can't cage the Future, on Guard at Greenham 1981-1986," Like the suffragette handkerchiefs, this piece seeks to commemorate the political action taken by women.

The second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s fought to make the private issues of women public, reigniting the calls for political action made by the suffragists of the early 20th century. These feminists not only fought for legislative action to protect

⁴³ Leah Harper et al., "How the Greenham Common Protest Changed Lives: 'We Danced on Top of the Nuclear Silos'," *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, March 20, 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/20/greenham-common-nuclear-silos-women-protest-peace-camp>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

women, but fought for the elevation of the public status of women in the arts and larger society. By reclaiming women's history while advocating a more equitable future, the second wave feminist movement served past and forthcoming generations of women. Inserting needlework as a symbol of patriarchal domestic confinement within public spaces publicized the private struggles of women while elevating the media within the arts. At the same time, women internationally used needlework as both a subversive and outspoken means to collectivize and politically advocate for their communities in the face of atrocity.

CHAPTER IV: Contemporary Practices and Digitization

The needlework of contemporary female embroidery artists is reflective of Third Wave feminism's celebration of inclusive and multifaceted definitions of femininity, and its openness to the evolution and sometimes contradicting expression of the female identity.⁴⁵ While the second wave feminist movement was largely by and for middle class white women, the third wave feminist movement is characterized by sociocultural and economic inclusivity. While this era of feminism can be fragmented in specific goals and aims, the internet has allowed contemporary feminists to collectivize internationally and form sweeping social movements around collective issues, such as seen within the 2017 "Me Too" movement.

The contemporary embroidered artworks of Alicia Ross, Sarah-Joy Ford, Hannah Hill, Sophie King, and Julie Jackson address Third Wave Feminist themes of identity and the historical context of embroidery and femininity, along with intersectional issues of sexuality, sexual identity, and race. By addressing the historical contexts and surrounding associations of femininity and embroidery within an artistic context, these artists are reclaiming embroidery as a feminine-serving, rather than feminine-oppressing, medium within the arts.

Alicia Ross is a Ohio-based artist whose large-scale embroidery work explores socially-constructed gender roles and the female form within the male gaze by blurring "the line between the sacred and the profane,"⁴⁶ Her works often call into question dichotomies of womanhood, such as mother vs. mistress, virgin vs. whore. By translating digitally manipulated photographs of popular cultural female figures and reappropriating

⁴⁵ Lorraine Morales Cox, "Critical Stitch," in *Critical Stitch*, ed. Rachel Segilman (Union College, NY: Mandeville Gallery, 2010).

⁴⁶ Alicia Ross, "About," ALICIA ROSS, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://www.aliciaross.com/about>.

imagery from fashion magazines/pornography into embroidery, Ross translates traditionally ephemeral, screen-percieved, 2D mass imagery into a permanent, physical, 3D object. Utilizing the method of cross-stitch, Ross replicates screen pixelation in her embroidery.

Ross' 2013 *Moral Fiber* series juxtaposes deconstructed imagery of women's bodies from pornography with framing typical of religious portraiture. The framing of *The Purse* (see Figure 19) is resonant with that of Christian stained glass portraiture. By placing her embroidery within the space of this frame, associations with religious idols such as the Virgin Mary are drawn by the viewer, contrasting with the deconstructed, pornographic content of the embroidery. The figure has a halo of pearled basting needles about her head, and holds a linen purse which provides another layer of dimensionality to the piece. The large purse seems representative of female agency, implying both a public life and monetary power. The figure is in an active posture denoting power as well, her gaze downward toward her own body. Through the juxtaposition of the religious referencing drawn by the frame and the pornographic figure depicted, themes of the virgin/whore dichotomy are drawn. While the deconstruction of the figure does not desexualize the female body, the posture of the figure and the dimensionality/size of the purse are denotative of female agency and power through her sexuality.

Sarah-Joy Ford is an UK-based embroidery and quilt artist whose work takes a Third Wave Feminist approach to textile arts and centers around themes of feminine queerness. Her ongoing research for her PhD in Design at the Manchester School of Art is titled *Quilting the Lesbian Archives*, she writes:

Quilting gives me a thrifty strategy for approaching this archive; gathering fragments, re-arranging with tender inquisitiveness, and forming a new

arrangement that might offer a different ways of knowing the familiar...this non-linear, materially driven form can offer a site for exploring the unruly experiences of the lesbian bodies, temporalities and affects. Although quilts have traditionally celebrated the milestones of a heteronormative life – birth, marriage, children, death – this project subverts this tradition and proposes the quilt as a space collapsing linear time and encountering the unexpected affects of the Lesbian Archive.⁴⁷

Ford takes interest in the historically-proven capacity of women's textile arts to invoke community and as a device to instigate political change, while creating a space for non-heteronormative women to exist within this feminine tradition.

Ford employs digital design and computerized sewing machines to translate her imagery onto the quilts. Her color palette and materials are often sensationally feminine, boasting bright pinks and purples on luxurious satins and silks. Her 2019 quilt, *Honorable Discharge* (see Figure 20) serves as a love letter to the “erotic fearlessness” of Donna Jackson, a woman who was discharged from the US military in 1990 for coming out as gay. Prior to the era of public opposition toward “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policies, Jackson was publicly shamed and ostracized.⁴⁸

Like Alicia Ross, Ford deconstructs and minimizes overtly sexual female figures in order to place the emphasis on the woman's power through her sexuality and agency, rather than depicting them as a passive sexual object. *Honourable Discharge* features the central imagery of Jackson in self-gratifying sexual ecstasy, embroidered in vibrant pinks and reds upon a lush quilt of white and baby pink satin. The figure is nude apart from the army tag around her neck and her glasses, both iconic and identifiable aspects in relation to Jackson's identity. Subtly embroidered around the figure in baby pink are rings of

⁴⁷ Sarah-Joy Ford, “Practice-Based: Quilting the Lesbian Archive, Sarah-Joy Ford,” *Decorating Dissidence*, no. 8 (April 3, 2020), <https://decoratingdissidence.com/2020/04/03/practice-based-quilting-the-lesbian-archive-sarah-joy-ford/>.

⁴⁸ Sarah-Joy Ford, “Honourable Discharge,” SARAH-JOY FORD, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://sarahjoyford.com/artwork#/honourable-discharge/>.

broken chains, stars, axes, and the interwoven venus symbol as symbol of lesbianness, externally adorned with a pair of wings. The overall effect of the quilt is a powerfully feminine and luxurious proclamation of female sexuality and agency.

London-based artist Hannah Hill has inserted embroidery within social media and meme culture to instigate conversations about the historical exclusion of women's needlework from the arts. Through an ironic and humorous lens, Hill creates awareness for feminist issues surrounding embroidery within spaces and amidst audiences which would typically not encounter these issues. In 2016 she went viral on Twitter when she posted her embroidered reappropriation of a popular meme with the caption "Spent about 15 hours embroidering this feminist art meme," (*See Figure 21*). The amount of time taken to embroider this meme stands in sharp contrast to the usual rapidity with which viral internet memes are recontextualized and reposted.

Since this artwork went viral, Hill has used embroidery within her artistic practice to address intersectional feminist issues of women's mental health, ethnicity, and sexuality. Her work is aesthetically remnant of the Grime art movement, which is a digital art practice that subverts everyday objects and self-portraiture through a contrasted and heavily outlined approach, characterized by melts, drips, and graphic imagery. However, Hill has become successful employing this aesthetic, traditionally dominated by male artists and masculine motifs, within an inherently feminine form in order to address feminist issues. As a social activist, Hill has utilized her success to host embroidery patch workshops around London with young girls as a medium to advocate body positivity and self care.⁴⁹ She is highly active on both Instagram and Twitter

⁴⁹ Hattie Collins, "Hannah Hill Sews Powerful Statements through Embroidery," i-D Magazine (Vice, December 6, 2016), https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/xwdz8q/hannah-hill-sews-powerful-statements-through-embroidery.

(@hanecdote), where she uses her platform as an artist to both share her artwork and engage in political commentary of feminist issues. Through her engagement with social media, Hill has been able to establish both a platform for her artwork and a feminist community independent of capitalistic structures of power. As a social influencer, Hill uses her platform as a tool to incite positive change and bring awareness to feminist and human rights issues.

Popular UK-based feminist embroidery artist Sophie King utilizes social media to amass a following and create a platform for herself independent of traditional art establishments. With almost 200,000 followers on her Instagram account (@kingsophiesworld) and commissions by the likes of Gwen Stefani, Teen Vogue, and Refinery29, King uses her platform and artwork to present social-political commentary on the problems faced by women in daily life.⁵⁰

King's series of embroidered roses juxtaposes delicacy and intensity, ephemerality and permanence, by directly embroidering onto live roses (*see Figure 22*). This series through text and imagery, addresses the emotional turmoil of relationship separation upon live roses, a symbol traditionally given to women as a sign of love and appreciation. Through the integration of two historical symbols of femininity, these pieces are timeless while they are ephemeral, powerful while delicate. In much of her work, through embroidered text, King physically materializes and gives permanence to feminist sentiments typically engaged with in online spaces, before using her platform to share these embroideries and reengage with these issues.

⁵⁰ Sophie King, "ABOUT," SOPHIE KING, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://kingsophiesworld.co.uk/pages/about>.

Subversive Cross Stitch was founded by Julie Jackson in 2003 in a witty response to encountering traditional sampler designs. Jackson began publishing books featuring cross stitch patterns of feminist witticisms in 2006, such as “Subversive Cross Stitch: 50 F*cking Clever Designs for Your Sassy Side.” Her publications, kits, and merchandise have been sold by popular retailers such as Urban Outfitters, Target, fab.com, and blue Q, as well as being featured in articles by magazines such as Bust, Venus, Nylon, and Readymade.⁵¹

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Jackson created and disseminated a free PDF cross-stitch patterns, amassing thousands of downloads and creating a community of women on social media sharing their works and practices (*see Figure 23*). Through this, these women have reclaimed cross-stitch within the domestic space as a feminist practice while creating an international community of feminist needleworkers during a time of stay-at-home orders and domestic isolation.

Third wave feminist artists employ needlework and new media practices as a means of reclaiming history and advocating for future political change. Through new avenues such as social media, third wave feminist artists are able to reject capitalist consumer culture and internationally and interculturally build community:

Instagram embroidery accounts and craftivism groups allow women to opt out of environmentally and socially damaging production cycles, and connect with a heritage of female labor and community⁵²

This opportunity afforded by social media to build an inclusive, diverse community independent of geographic location and class status enhances the ability of third wave

⁵¹ Julie Jackson, “About Subversive Cross Stitch,” About Subversive Cross Stitch | Subversive Cross Stitch, accessed March 17, 2021, <https://shop.subversivecrossstitch.com/pages/about-us>.

⁵²Wendy Syfret, “How Women Are Changing the World with Textiles,” i-D Magazine (Vice, November 14, 2016), https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/papevm/how-women-are-changing-the-world-with-textiles.

feminists to collectivize and push their aims of broadened inclusivity independent of patriarchal, capitalistic structures.

The heightened visibility of crafting on the internet broadens the works beyond a material phenomenon, encouraging viewers to perceive them beyond their tactility and representations, to their subjectification processes and social value.⁵³ This integration of old and new media practices reflect the ideals emphasized by third-wave feminism of intersectionality and inclusivity. The DIY needlework culture blossoming within online spaces also challenges the gendered binary of masculinity/digital culture and femininity/fabriculture. By challenging this binary, modern feminist artists are breaking down stereotypes around gender and artistic medium.

⁵³ Jack Z Bratich and Heidi M Brush, "Fabricating Activism," *Utopian Studies* 22, no. 2 (2011): p. 233, <https://doi.org/10.5325/utopianstudies.22.2.0233>, 246.

CONCLUSION

The industrialization of needlework beginning with the commercialization of Opus Anglicanum embroideries transferred the production and sale of embroideries from women to patriarchal structures within tightly-controlled guild workshops. Through the mass production and circulation that resulted, needlework became devalued as art and grew into a utilitarian consumer product or viewed as a lesser craft. The gendering and devaluation of needlework was heightened during the Renaissance through the establishment of separate academies for women's craft and men's fine art. These patriarchal structures of power excluded all needlework and textile art from the Fine Arts, while critics and literature established social constructs of the artist which further excluded women.

During the Victorian era, embroidery and femininity became increasingly synonymous. At the same time embroidery was used as a tool to educate women, it was also used to reinforce patriarchal constructs of femininity of domesticity, passivity, and subservience. As reflected in popular literature, needlework was viewed as a reflection of a woman's femininity and as a symbol of her agency. However, needlework also became a means of feminist resistance, subversion, and political power as exemplified by the character Madam DeFarge in *A Tale of Two Cities* and within early sampler verse alterations; although still confined to the domestic sphere, needlework allowed women to express a passive form of agency.

The first wave of the feminist movement in the UK and the US utilized needlework as a means for Suffragists to gather, organize, and voice their political aims. They utilized needlework to stitch their political protest banners, elevating the status of

these objects through their durability and aesthetic beauty. Suffragists also employed embroidery to record their history, from handkerchiefs detailing their protests to found objects documenting their imprisonment.

Feminists in the early 20th century also advocated for the elevation of embroidery within the arts, seeking to deconstruct the patriarchal structures which had excluded their works from the Fine Arts, such as the Glasgow Society of Lady Artists. Even female artists entrenched within masculine-dominated art movements, such as Hannah Höch, addressed the importance of the evolution of embroidery for the evolution of the social and political status of women.

Commercial interests continued to reinforce Victorian-esque ideals of embroidery and femininity. The primary distinction between associations of femininity and embroidery between the Victorian era and early 20th century was that the former established embroidery as a *universal symbol for* femininity, while the latter established embroidery as an *individualized expression of* femininity. The promotion and glorification of embroidery as women's domestic leisure stood in stark contrast to the progressive use of embroidery as a means of feminine collectivization and political power.

The second wave feminist movement established the personal as political, seeking to bring women's issues into the light by making the private, public. In this, artists continued to fight for the elevation of textile arts and used this media to publicly address issues of rape, pregnancy, menstruation, and homemaking. This period also saw an increase in feminist art critics and scholars who wrote and organized exhibits seeking to reclaim women's embroidery as fine art. Needlework became an instrument of feminist

collectivization and expression within the arts, such as Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*. Projects like *Feministo* created a collective platform for everyday women to create, share, and display their embroideries, creating community while providing women an identity beyond their domestic roles. Through their gallery display, these projects elevated both the artistic status of embroidery and the women from domestic laborer to artist.

Embroidery continued to be utilized as a feminine means of subversion and political expression during the late 1970s. Chilean Arpilleras utilized embroidery to bypass strict censorship laws under a military dictatorship, collectivizing and sharing the atrocities faced by their communities with the world. The Greenham Women's Peace camp utilized suffragist practices of stitched protest banners in combination with physical occupation of patriarchal military structures. The needlework from both of these feminine-driven political movements later became artworks within gallery exhibitions. The second wave feminist movement saw women forming communities to create and disseminate their needlework publically in order to meet their political aims and allow their voices to be heard. While the Chilean Arpilleras created their works covertly, this subversive deployment of needlework allowed their communities voices to be heard by an international audience.

The third wave feminist movement places an emphasis on sexually and racially inclusive constructs of femininity while advocating for women's collective advancement in the public sphere. Needlework has been reclaimed by both artists and everyday women as a feminist, rather than feminine, practice. Often drawing on historical motifs and associations with femininity

Within the fine arts, women reclaim the history of needlework to dismantle old constructs of femininity while advocating for third-wave feminist ideals of inclusivity and sexual agency.

The internet and social media platforms have provided needlework artists the opportunity to establish themselves independent of patriarchal power structures while creating international communities for women to politically collectivize. Contemporary feminist needlework reclaims embroidery as object of women's domestic leisure independent of patriarchal structures and markets while being politically feminist in content.

AFTERWORD: Materiality and Technology

The feminization of tactile, material artistic mediums such as embroidery, quilting, and needlework is often incongruent with the present-day dominance of digital culture and technological forms of artistic expression. Although some needlework artists have integrated their practice with digital aesthetics and platforms, there still exists a gaping duality between the tactile and the technological. As the prevalence and domination of digital culture rose throughout the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, the representation of female artists and feminine ideals operating within this space was and largely still is marginalized. Although some female artists have integrated materiality with digital and robotic technologies, these artists are currently few and far between, and their representation within gallery spaces is extremely sparse.

The history of digital culture is and remains inherently masculine as both a male-dominated professional and artistic field. Despite pushes for women and girls to enter technological studies and professions *and* the rapid growth of jobs available within this sector, the rate at which women are pursuing degrees and careers in these fields has declined over recent decades.⁵⁴ Within digital art exhibitions and festivals, a 2018 study of 2076 total artists found that women artists comprised only 22% of exhibitors, 83% of which reported experiencing discrimination within their field.⁵⁵

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Cyberfeminist movement advocated for women to challenge digital culture. The 1992 “Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st

⁵⁴ In 1997, 28% of those graduating with a Bachelor’s in Computer Science were women, while in 2016 it was only 19%.# As of 2020, women comprise only 19% of entry-level tech positions and 10% of executive positions, while earning less on average. Data taken from “The Latest Statistics on Women in Technology,” ISEMag (ICT Solutions and Education, November 1, 2020), <https://www.isemag.com/2020/10/telecom-the-latest-stats-on-women-in-tech/>. and N. Georgiou, “Gender inequality and the digital arts: How do sexism and gender biases influence female digital artists” (2018).

⁵⁵ N. Georgiou, “Gender inequality and the digital arts: How do sexism and gender biases influence female digital artists” (2018)

Century” by the VNS Matrix collective argued the female body as site of destruction under patriarchal technology, aiming to marginalize the masculine grip on technology by “delineating computing in and through the female body and female pleasure,”⁵⁶ In popular digital media such as commercials, television, and video games, the female body is often corrupted by patriarchal entities as a marketing device, i.e. “sex sells.” Through women themselves integrating female sexuality within technological spaces, women can reclaim agency over their autonomy and bodies. This is also intersectional with feminist Afrofuturist reconstructions of the female body. Today, new media feminist artists reclaim the sexuality by asserting agency over their own bodies by visually and physically integrating the female body with technology. Although I was unable to find artists who specifically incorporated needlework and robotics, progressive contemporary female artists such as Liliane Lijn’s 2016 *Spinning Dolls* (Figure 24) have integrated technology and textile, marrying Third-Wave feminist and Cyberfeminist ideals and old/new media integration.

This research informed my own studio practice. In conjunction with this essay, I constructed a pair of interactive robotic sculptures incorporating patchwork, embroidered textiles titled *Bloom* (Figure 25). Through research into the history of women’s needlework as political device and fine art, observation of statistical trends on the ways in which women have been set back by the COVID-19 pandemic, and robotic technologies, these sculptures utilize both a historical and contemporary framework to marry traditionally feminine (embroidery) and cutting-edge, masculine-dominated (robotics) media within the arts.

⁵⁶ Jennifer Way, “Digital Art at the Interface of Technology and Feminism,” (*A Companion to Digital Art*, John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2016), 198.

The textiles used were found at a flea market and are hand-sewn patchwork silk scarves with linear embroidery running their lengths. Each fragment of these scarves carries its own history; these fragments are in a variety of colors and show patterns popular within a wide spectrum of cultures. I think of each of these pieces like individual women, the pieces sewn together with pieces of similar color and complementary pattern to form each scarf: their cultural feminine lineage. Overlaid with a linear embroidery pattern, the needlework fortifies the strength and unification of these fragments. I then sewed three scarves together for each sculpture, marrying the individual scarves into a singular textile, representative of a universal feminine.

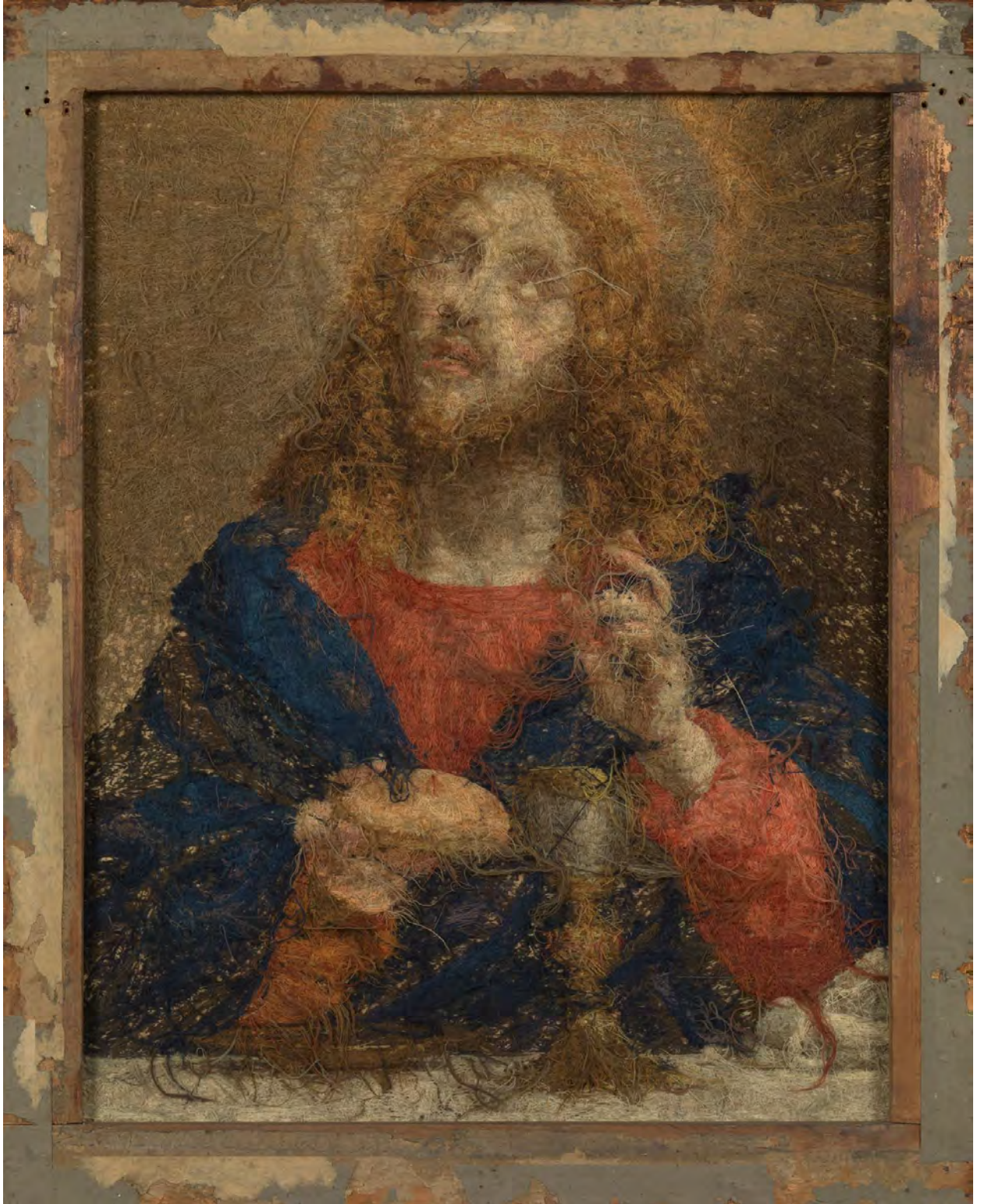
These ceiling-suspended sculptures are an abstract emulation of the rose, which bloom over the viewer as they are walked beneath. In many cultures and especially within needlework, the rose serves as a symbol of love, resilience, vitality, and female sexuality. *Bloom* synthesizes my passions for juxtaposing old and new media forms, feminist themes, and interactivity. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, this project is a love letter to the genealogy of women who mend themselves, their families, and their communities.

FIGURES



Figure 1: Unknown, *Sampler*, 1650-1700





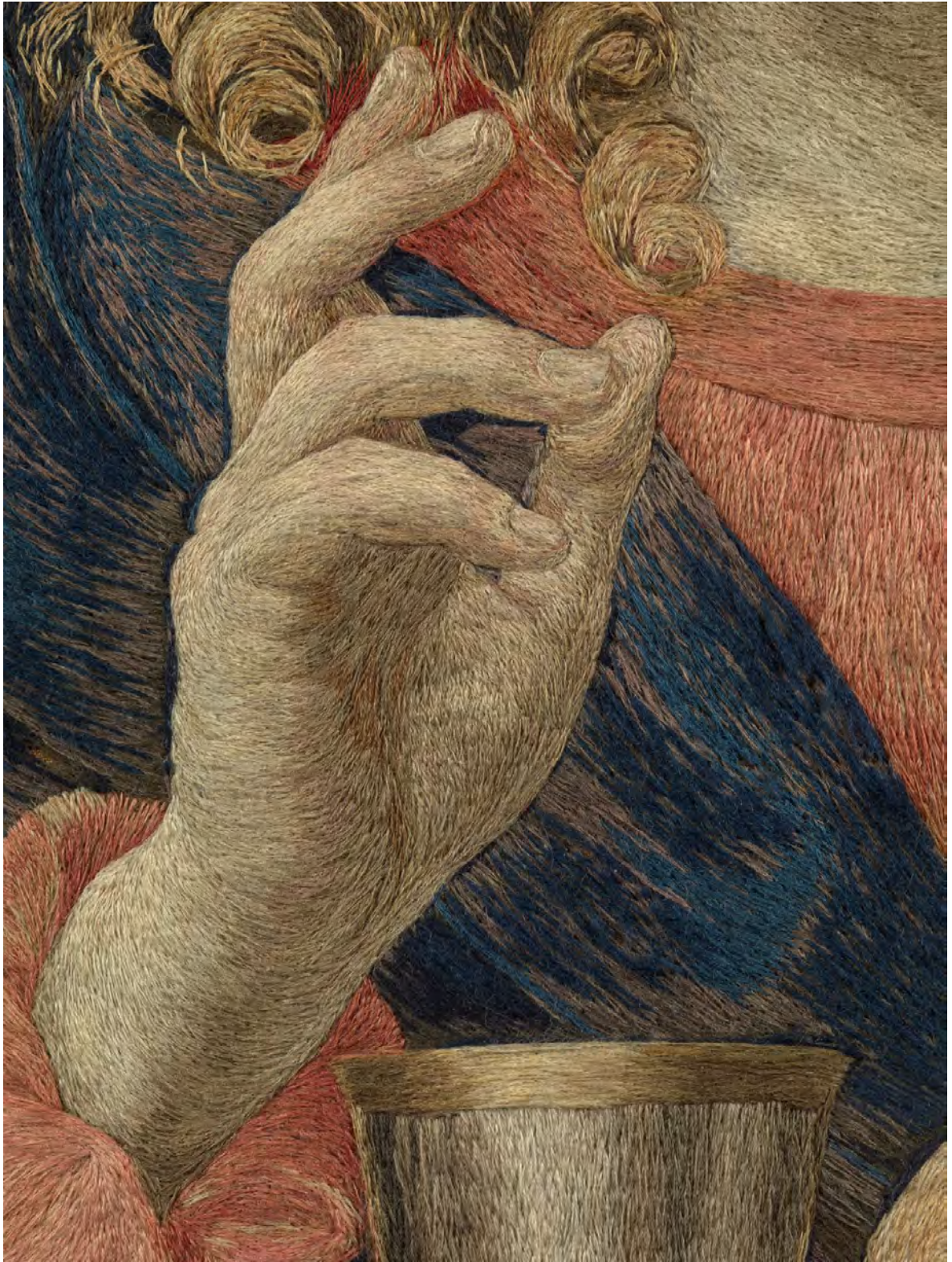


Figure 2: Mary Linwood, *Salvator Mundi* after Carlo Dolci, 1798



Figure 3: Mary Linwood, *Tygress*, 1798



Figure 4: Sol Eytinge Jr., *Monsieur and Madame Defarge*, 1867



Figure 5: Museum of London, *Votes for Women Souvenir & Official Programme*, 1908



Figure 6: Museum of London, *Great Law Abiding Women's Suffrage pilgrimage Great Demonstration in Hyde Park and service in St Paul's Cathedral, Saturday and Sunday, July 26th & 27th, 1913*

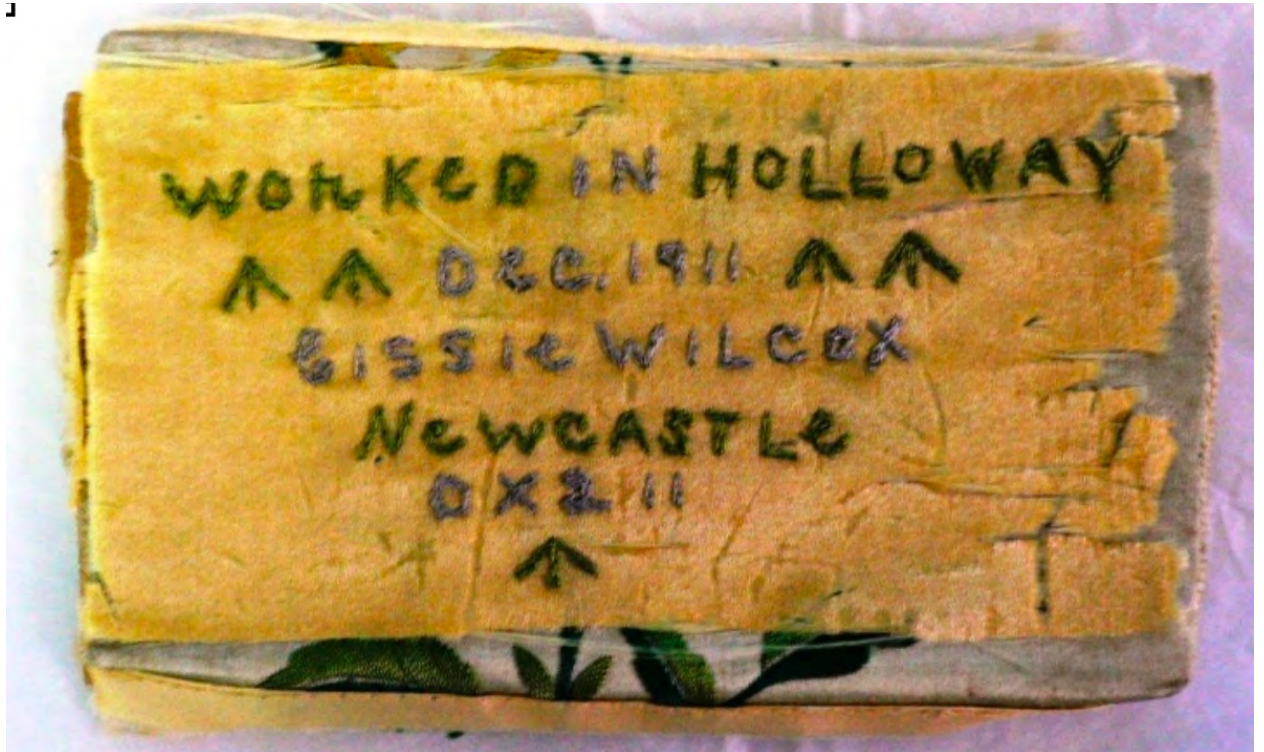


Figure 7: Cassie Wilcox, *Needlework panel*, 1911

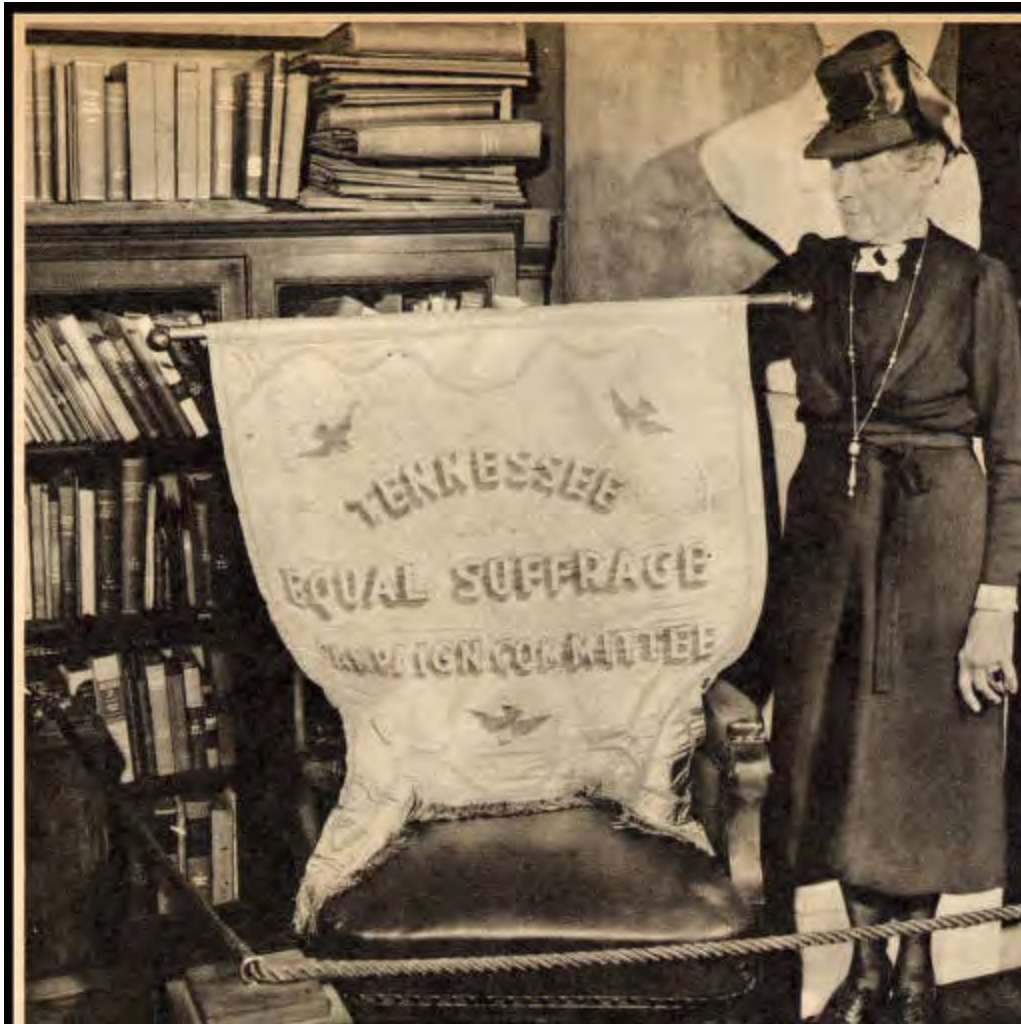


Figure 8: Tennessee Virtual Archive, *Jeanette Acklen with suffrage banner*, 1948



Figure 9: Tennessee State Museum, *suffrage banner*, 1920



Figure 10: Clarence Hudson White, *Ring Toss*, 1899



Figure 11: Hannah Höch, *Bewacht*, 1925



Figure 12: New York City WPA War Service, *Remember Pearl Harbor / Purl Harder*, 1942



Figure 13: artist(s) unknown, *Invasión de Sinchis a Cangallo*, ≈1977



Figure 14: artist(s) unknown, *Women under arrest (Invasión de Sinchis a Cangallo, upper section)*, ≈1977



Figure 15: artist(s) unknown, *Women under arrest (Invasión de Sinchis a Cangallo, lower left section)*, ≈1977



Figure 16: Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1975-1979



Figure 17: Lynn Malcom, *Why have we so few great women artists?*, 1985



Figure 18: Jannis Jeffries, *Home of the Brave?*, 1986



Figure 19: Alicia Ross, *Untitled (The Purse)*, 2013



Figure 20: Sarah-Joy Ford, *Honourable Discharge*, 2019

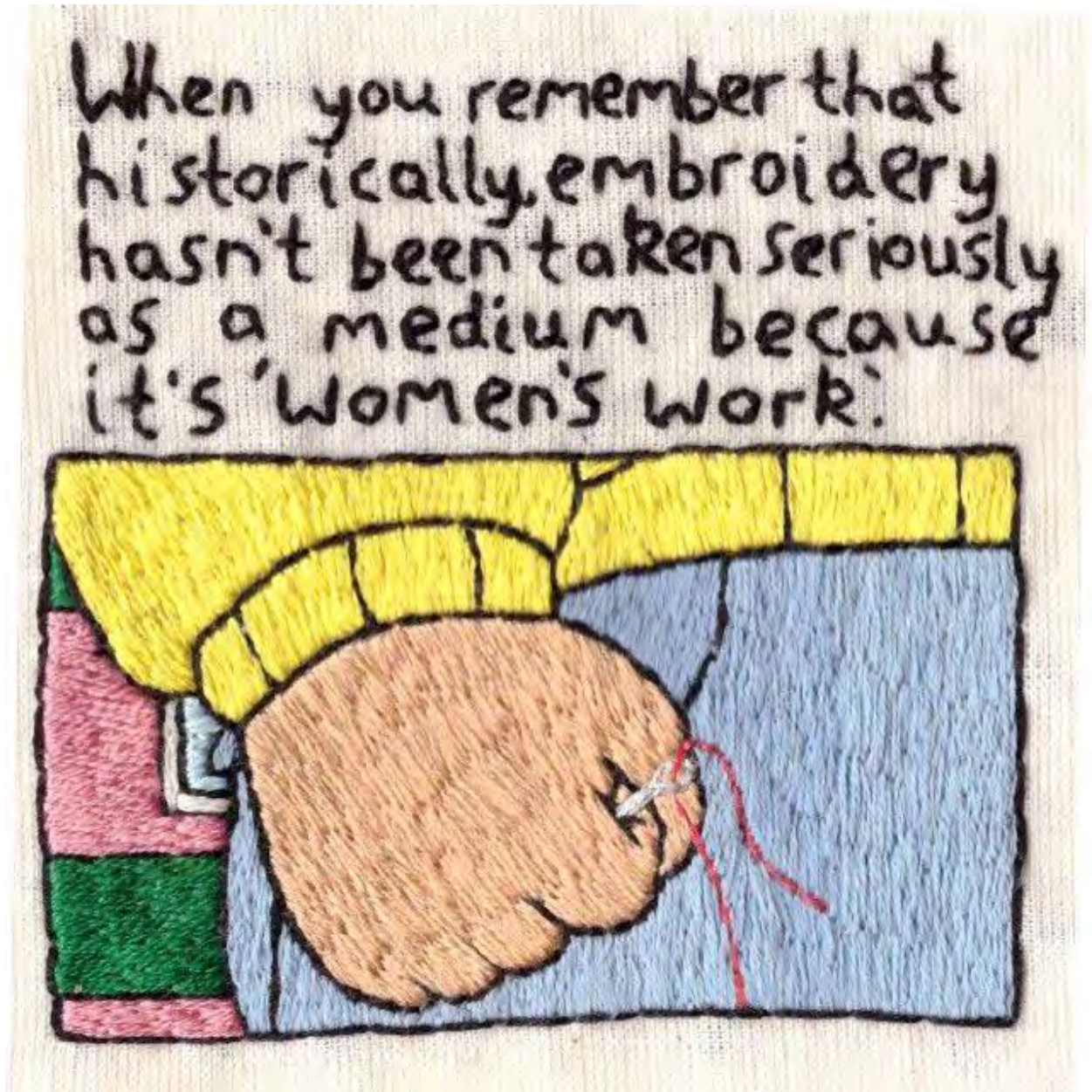


Figure 21: Hannah Hill, *untitled* (via Twitter @hanecdote), 2016



Figure 22: Sophie King, *embroidered "never forgive, always forget" real roses*, 2018



Figure 23: various via Instagram- courtesy of subversivecrossstitch.com , *Nevertheless She Persisted*, 2018



Figure 24: Liliane Lijn, *Spinning Dolls*, 2016



Figure 25: Lilith Haig, *Bloom*, 2021

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