8: A Naturally Revolutionary Art?

As we have seen, the Victorians presented the link between embroidery and women as entirely natural, thus concealing the complex social, political and economic factors that had connected the two since the middle ages. The twentieth century, receiving the full weight of Victorian literature on the subject, accepted embroidery as evidence of the naturalness of femininity. In this chapter I shall look at the legacy of nineteenth-century attitudes towards the art and women.

The range of twentieth-century embroidery is enormous. It is practised professionally by artists, dressmakers, embroiderers, teachers, and by millions of women as a 'leisure art'. Rather than attempting to encompass it all, I shall concentrate on specific instances in which embroidery became part of a move to transform the relationship of art to society, and the place of women within society. Previous chapters traced the evolution of the link between embroidery and femininity, largely through the history of British embroidery, though I have tried to show that these connections were not limited to Britain. The scope of this chapter necessarily widens, to include Western European, American and Russian radical movements.

Amédée Ozenfant in *Foundations of Modern Art*, 1931, noted the changing relationship between the so-called fine arts and applied arts, between artists and craftworkers.

> If we go on allowing the minor arts to think themselves the equal of great art, we shall soon be hail fellow to all sorts of domestic furniture, each to his place! The decorators to the big shops, the artists on the next floor up, several floors up, as high as possible, on the pinnacles, even higher. For the time being, however, they sometimes do meet on the landings, the decorators having mounted at their heels, and numerous artists having come down on their hunkers.[1]

Ozenfant's comments on the effects of the breakdown of the art hierarchy reveals a prime reason for its existence. The artist's heights of inspiration are only impressive if they can be measured against the depths of domestic furniture. Ozenfant predicts a demoralising democratisation of the arts if 'artists' and 'decorators' meet too freely on the landings. Yet that is precisely what some avant-garde art movements wanted.

The artists involved in Dada, Surrealism and Russian Constructivism believed that an end to distinctions between the fine and applied arts would create an art relevant to the lives of the masses of the people – and infinitely richer in itself. Although all three movements manifestly failed to achieve their ideals, for different historical reasons, they opened up a space for women artists. Women's particular skills and traditional areas of activity in the domestic sphere, previously thought to be beneath the concern of the fine artist, were accorded a new importance.

Not all feminist critics consider that the opportunities thus provided for women were necessarily in their best interests. Linda Nochlin voices the ambiguity:

> On the one hand for a woman artist to 'return' as it were to her traditional role in the minor arts, generally less conducive to fame and fortune than a career in painting or sculpture, can be viewed as a retrograde step. Yet from another vantage point, we can say that advanced women artists involved in the decorative arts in the early twentieth century were contributing to the most revolutionary directions – both social and aesthetic – of their time.[2]

To call their 'return' a 'retrograde step' is to confirm, and conform to, conventional distinctions between media expressed in the term 'minor arts'. Nevertheless, the effort to overthrow the hegemony of the fine arts by merging them with the applied arts tended to benefit painting rather than embroidery; to modify masculinity rather than to transform femininity. Embroidery was employed as a fine art medium because of its association with femininity and nature. It was to be a disruptive influence on the male dominated fine arts, but this was to be a one-way process. The character of embroidery was assumed to be fixed and unchanging, eternally feminine.

Take the case of the Dada movement. The movement started in Zurich during 1915. Committed to combat materialism and over-intellectualisation, the artists involved rejected oil painting for all it connoted. Sophie Tauber, a member of the group, was then teaching at the School of Applied Arts in Zurich. She introduced the painter Jean Arp to embroidery. He later wrote about their work together:

> The Renaissance taught men to arrogantly exalt their reason. Modern times with their sciences and technologies have consecrated men to megalomania. The chaos of our eras is the result of that over-estimating of reason. We sought an anonymous and collective art. In 1915 Sophie Tauber and I embroidered and did collages.[3]

Jean Arp's contribution to the first issue of the magazine *Dada* in July 1917 was an embroidery, but a poem Arp wrote reveals that he valued embroidery not for its qualities as an artistic medium but for its stereotypical associations with intuition, feeling and above all with nature. The long poem called *The Spider Embroiders* ends with these lines:

> Embroidery is more natural than oil painting, the swallows are embroidering the sky for thousands of centuries, there is no such thing as applied art.[4]

In other words, embroidery is seen to be timeless, mindless and simply available to be incorporated into the fine arts. With embroidery Jean Arp and Sophie Tauber believed that they had found 'new material unburdened by tradition', but it was

embroidery's particular burdensome tradition, the way it was characterised as 'outside culture' and as an accomplishment, 'not work', that made it so appropriate for their intentions.

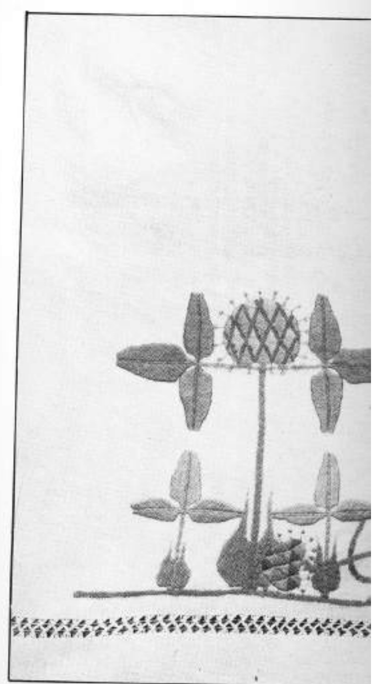
Hannah Hoch, an artist working with the Berlin Dada, did, however, evoke the particular historically determined qualities of embroidery and lace in such a way as not simply to appropriate the medium, but to highlight its gender associations. During 1922, she produced collages called 'domestic mottos'. In *Bewacht*, 1924, she disturbingly collages together a huge Chinese embroidered rose with an image of a tiny male martial figure.[5]

Embroidery has played a part in the ideological and formal concerns of twentieth-century art. It has been suggested that it was Sophie Tauber's background in applied arts that led her towards abstraction in art.[6] Similarly, the artist Sonia Terk Delaunay's work with embroidery was also, in part, responsible for her decision to work non-figuratively with colour. Her designs of tapestries and an embroidery of 1909 suggest that textile art prompted her move away from conventional use of colour and perspective, towards the development of the 'abstract' painting known as Orphism, which she initiated with her husband, Robert Delaunay, in Paris during 1913.[7]

Soon after the birth of her son in 1911, she made a patchwork blanket like those stitched by Russian peasant women. In Russia, where she was born, there had been a revival of interest in peasant needlework from the late nineteenth century. Throughout her career she continued to work simultaneously in the applied and fine arts. Committed to bringing art to a wider public and into everyday life, she designed caskets, lampshades, book covers, scarves, dresses, ballet costumes, embroidered waistcoats and embroidered coats. It has, however, been argued that, far from bringing art to a wider public, Delaunay's work was simply appropriated by the world of Parisian haute couture.

Of all the attempts to transform the relations of art to society, none was so far reaching as that which accompanied the Russian Revolution. From the October Revolution in 1917, and through the 1920s, artists and designers joined forces to 'wrench' the applied arts from the middle-class drawing rooms 'whither the old artistic culture had consigned it'.[8] A large number of women were active in the Russian avant garde, and embroidery was given a place in their innovative work.

The two factors–the number of women artists and the presence



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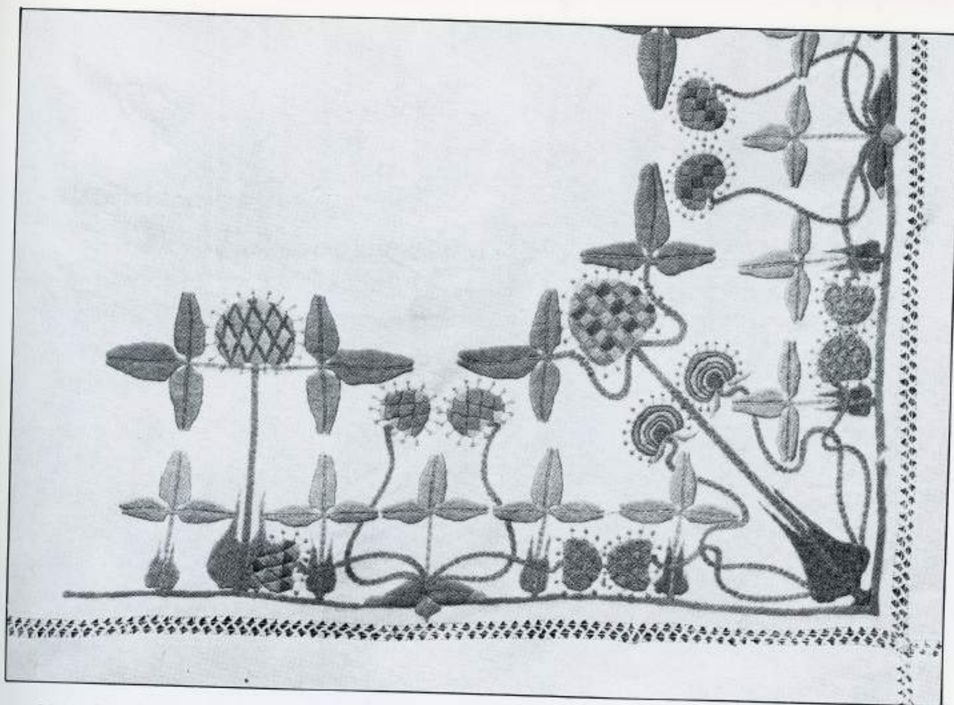
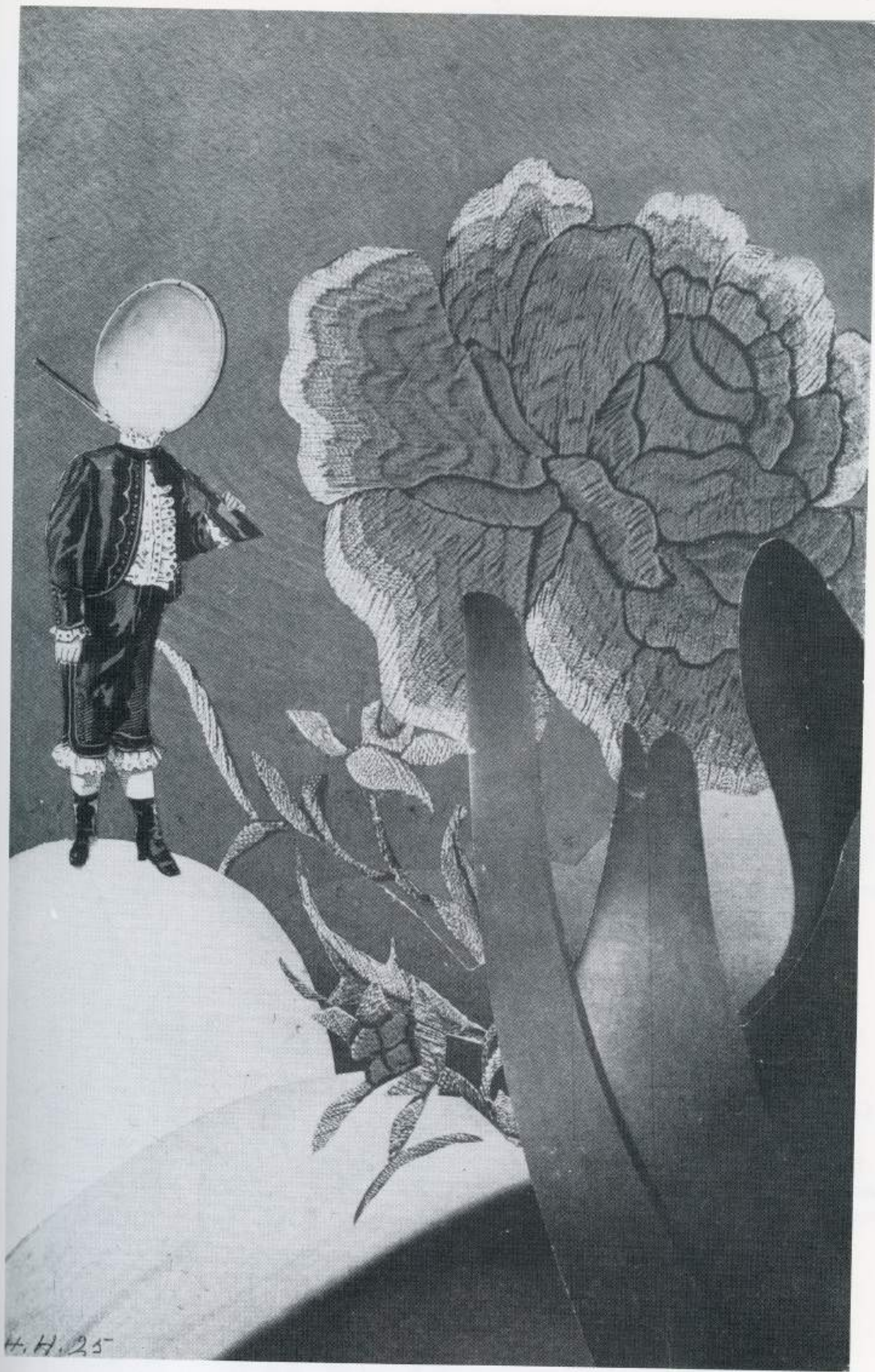


92 Embroidery designed by Jessie Newbery, worked by Edith Rowat (her mother), Glasgow School of Art, Glasgow. 1897. 66 × 259.8 cm. Photo: Anthea Callen. Jessie Newbery founded the embroidery department at the Glasgow School of Art, and from being a minor subject in the art school curriculum it soon became the most important 'craft' taught there. Whereas earlier theorists wanted embroidery to be 'perfect' in order to improve the embroiderer, Jessie Newbery wanted work 'as perfect as may be' for the sake of the design.

93 Conway School, London, 1907. Greater London Council Photo Library. Education for girls in the early years of the twentieth century still included a training in femininity through needlework. Boys were given books as school prizes, while girls were rewarded by being permitted to take home their needlework without first paying for it.

94 *Tapisserie Feuillage,* Sonia Terk Delaunay, Musée Nationale d'Art Moderne, Paris. 1909.

95 (right) *Bewacht,* Hannah Hoch (German, b 1889), private collection, Germany. 1925. Collage. Embroidery was an art used both figuratively and in abstract work. Sonia Delaunay's move towards abstraction was perhaps facilitated by her familiarity with embroidery and patchwork. Hannah Hoch 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.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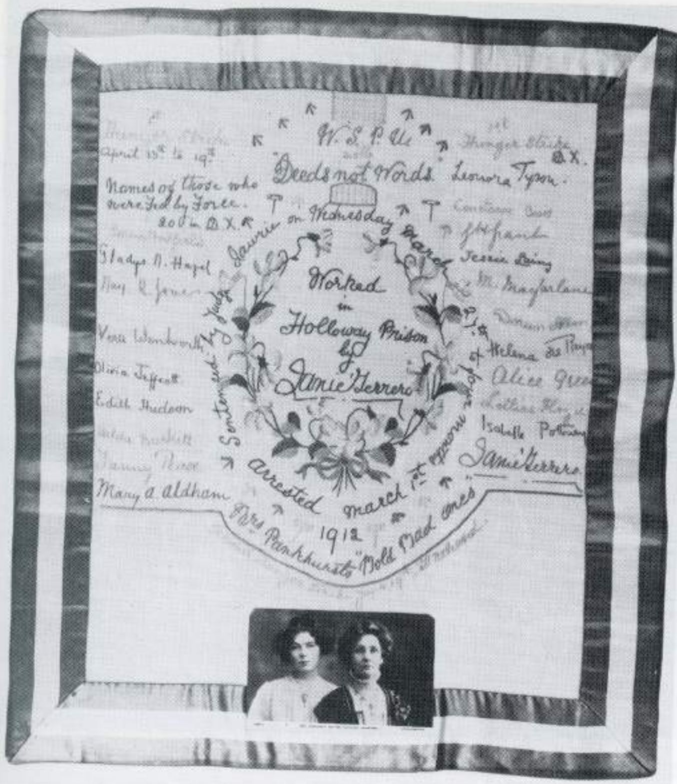
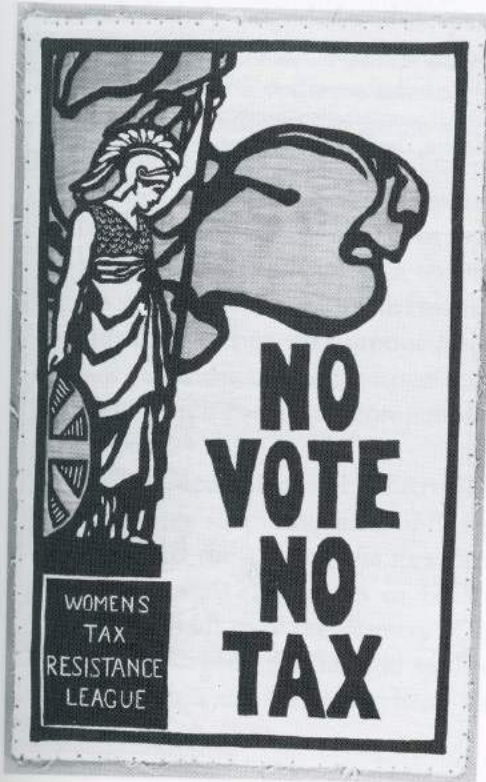
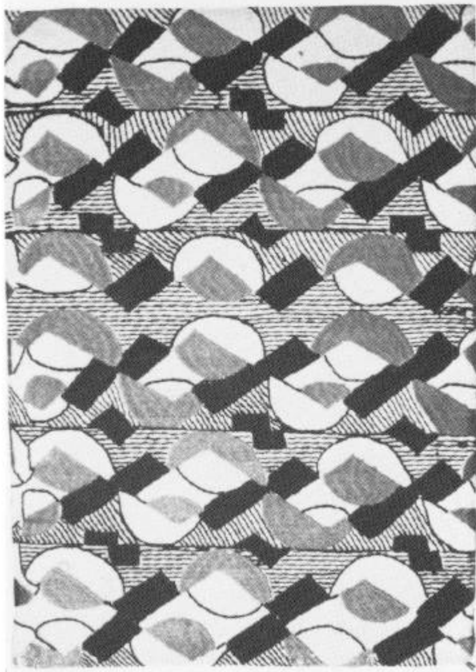




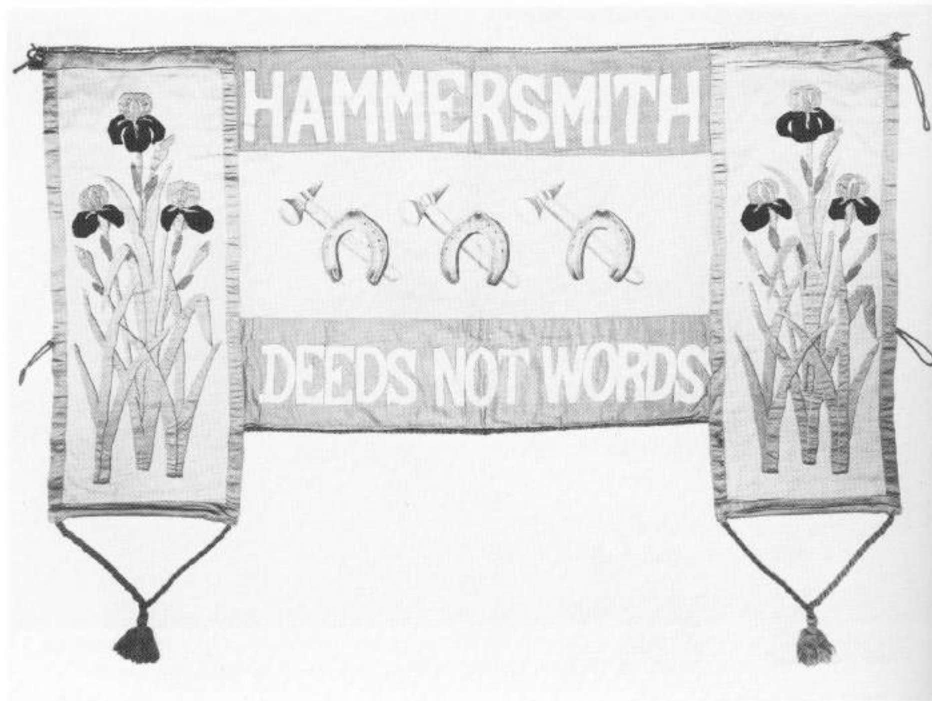
98 Suffrage handkerchief, Janie Terreno, Museum of London, London. 1912. Embroidered signatures as gestures of solidarity and protest combined the political tradition of petition with the social tradition of embroidered signatures as mementoes to mark special occasions.

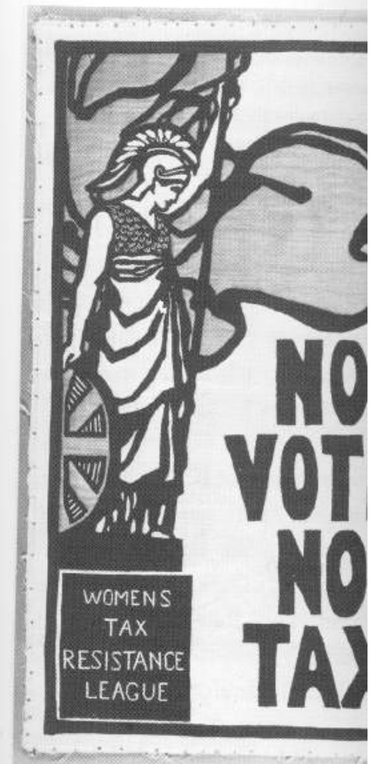
99 Suffrage banner, Museum of London, London. c 1911. Appliqué and embroidery. Banners were an established feature of political demonstrations in Britain, but whereas trades union banners were largely produced by a professional banner-making firm, the women of the Suffrage movement employed their considerable personal skills previously reserved for such objects as portières and mantel draperies. Within the Suffrage movement there was an arts and crafts society called the Suffrage Atelier.

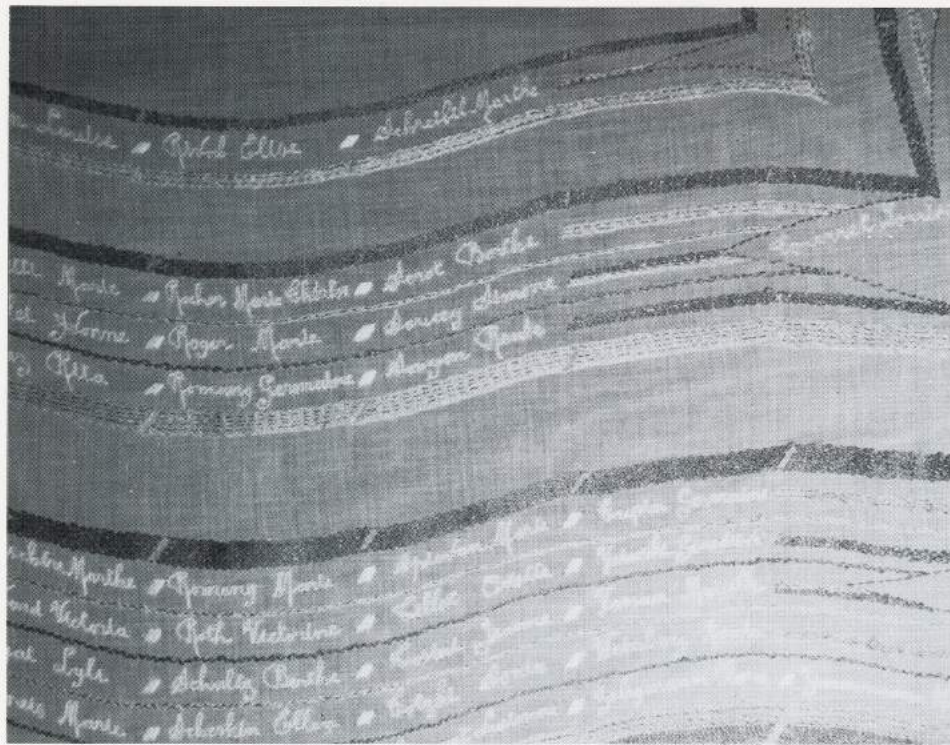


96 Embroidered bookcover, Liubov Popova (Russian, 1889–1924), c 1923–24. Silk thread on grosgrain. 45.2 × 31.5 cm. George Costakis collection.
In Russia, embroidery had a long history as a peasant art, hence during the Revolution a number of artists, including Liubov Popova and Olga Rozanova, worked with embroidery as part of their attempt to transform the relation of art to society.

97 Suffrage banner, Museum of London, London. c 1911. Paint, embroidery and appliqué.







100 Table cloth, Sweden, 1945. Photo: Nappé
There is a long tradition of embroidery as testament of survival and resistance in the face of political persecution and racial oppression – most recently in Soweto and in Chile. In 1945 women who had survived Nazi concentration camps embroidered a table cloth for Count Folke Bernadotte, the Swedish diplomat who had enabled them to reach refuge in Sweden. Cornflowers, poppies and daisies are worked in the centre and surrounded by the names of all the women who worked on the cloth.

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of embroidery – are explicable in terms of the recent history of women and the history of art in Russia. In the latter half of the nineteenth century women had been active in the intelligentsia and radical groups, setting a precedent for twentieth-century women to participate fully in the artistic avant garde. The prominence of embroidery in the work of avant-garde artists was due to the theories of the late nineteenth-century art movements in Russia. Artists in the 1870s had repudiated 'art for art's sake', wanting to make art 'useful' to society.[9] In their desire to revivify the fine arts and to create a new national culture they had turned to Russian peasant art, including embroidery. Thus, embroidery and carpentry workshops had been established as part of what is known as the Russian Neo-Nationalist movement.

Prior to the first world war, artists looked to peasant art as a means by which indigenous cultural modes could be reinforced in opposition to the dominant place given to foreign culture. The painter Natalia Goncharova wrote, 'I turn away from the West . . . for me the East means the creation of new forms, an extending and deepening of the problems of colour.'[10]

She incorporated her knowledge of peasant costume and embroidery into both painting and embroidery. Her claim that embroidery extended and deepened 'problems of colour' indicates that, as in the West, embroidery was seen as an essentially universal or intuitive medium. In 1912 Goncharova exhibited work 'in Chinese, Byzantine and Futurist styles, in the style of Russian embroidery, woodcuts and traditional tray designs'.[11]

The romantic, nationalistic use of embroidery was transformed by the Revolution of 1917. For avant-garde artists the Revolution announced the advent of a communal way of life in which the artist would be an integrated member, bringing her or his skills to industrial design and production. Declaring that easel painting was redundant, artists turned to peasant art and embroidery in their search for an art compatible with socialism and collective practice.

The Department of Fine Arts (IZO) was created in 1918 under the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (NARKOMPROS). It organised the arts for the new Soviet Government. In the four years from 1917, artists in IZO re-organised art schools and museums all over the country. Olga Rosanova, an artist with a training in both the fine and applied arts, created the applied arts sub-section and became its head. Believing that the cultivation of

a new applied art culture should grow not out of the destruction of previously existing traditions, but out of their modernisation, she organised workshops in the old centres of Russian applied arts.

Before the revolution Rosanova had been working with embroidery. For the magazine of the Suprematist artists, she prepared a design for an embroidery in three colours, declaring her determination to widen the definition of art beyond easel painting. She incorporated her embroidery designs into dress. Large patches of embroidery were placed on the dresses to accentuate the geometrical outline of the design, and to provide a sense of dynamism and rhythm.

At a State Exhibition of the Applied Arts Workshop in Moscow, 1919, peasant embroideries were exhibited after designs by Rosanova and Nadezhda Udaltsova, Kazimir Malevich and K.L. Boguslavskaya-Puni. The women peasants from Verbovka in Kiev embroidered for such objects as handbags, blotting pads, wall pockets for letters and papers, pillows, skirts and scarves. 'The embroideries were indeed amazing, shining with their coloured silk' observed Udaltsova.[12] The socialist artists appeared to accept the contradictions in designing work for the peasant women to stitch.

Embroidery gained a particular significance with the movement to develop a new Russian costume. Artists and designers collaborated in the attempt to design clothes intended for industrial mass production. At the time of the first all-Russian conference on artistic industry in 1919, however, the economic situation made it impossible for their ideas to be put into production. At the conference the dress designer Nadezhda Lamenova declared:

> Art has penetrated to all spheres of our living environment, stimulating the artistic taste and sensitiveness of the masses. Dress is one of the most appropriate guidelines. Artists in the field of dress must take the initiative into their own hands, working to create from the simplest materials the simplest but beautiful types of dress, suited to the new tenor of life among the workers.[13]

Lamenova was a leading figure in the drive to design costume for the workers, to be based not on signs of social position but on

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the conditions of life and the requirements of health and comfort. She organised the Workshop of Contemporary Costume and the Atelier of Fashion in 1923, which produced its own magazine. The editorial elaborated their aims:

> In designing new styles one must try to achieve a blending of the existing trend in European fashion with the characteristically national features of Russian Art.

Articles included Alexander Exter, the painter, on 'Constructivist Costume' and Yevjenia Prebelskaya on 'Embroidery on Present Day Production'.[14]

Embroidery was given a place in the new costume for its beauty and for its association with peasant national costume. Yet the women artists and designers felt forced to justify its presence. Embroidery still carried overtones of bourgeois decadence. In 1918, in *Letter to the Futurists*, the artist V.E. Tatlin wrote, 'The Futurists have been too preoccupied with cafés and various embroideries for emperors and ladies. I explain this by the fact that our artistic vision has lost three-fifths of its clarity.'[15]

Prebelskaya repeatedly defended her use of embroidery:

> Work on the Constructivist phase in women's clothes has impelled the designers to take a fresh look at embroidery in relation to women's clothes, and to see it not as a separate feature or mere embellishment but as being to a certain degree a constructive and crowning element.
>
> European clothes are not without decorative features that serve no constructive purpose but a purely visual one. They are not sufficiently clear in their relationship to the garment's construction.[16]

The argument that embroidery was a 'constructive' aspect of the dress design rather than an embellishment was thin indeed. Nevertheless, Lamenova adopted a similar line of defence for her use of the art:

> What used to be called trimmings has significance for the whole garment: it can strengthen the rhythms of planes, intensify the style. . . Our New Costume will match the new quality of life

characterised by industry, dynamism and awareness of its power.[17]

Behind the women's arguments lay a more general conflict within the post-revolutionary debates on the applied arts. Some called for 'the whole decorative and embellishment aspect of costume (to be) annihilated' while others insisted that 'there is nothing inappropriate to the Proletariat in a certain degree of smartness and attractiveness.'[18] At a practical level, however, embroidery was simply not appropriate for the mass production which was the ultimate aim of the designers of the New Costume.

Tacit recognition that embroidery was unsuitable for the New Costume always existed in the organisation of the Atelier of Fashion – the 'laboratory' for revolutionary clothing. It had started in 1923, two years after the introduction of the New Economic Policy which opened up a market for consumer goods. Two types of clothing designs were produced: one for mass production and one for individual orders. Although Lamenova included embroidery in her syllabus for 'Studies in the industrial production of artistically designed clothings', by 1924 embroidery was concentrated on clothing designed for internal and external exhibition. Lamenova was put in charge of the Workshop for Folk Crafts, and in collaboration with Vera Mukhina, a sculptor, she won a prize at the Paris World Exhibition for costume based on folk art. The two incorporated Russian folk embroidery and Mukhina produced her own designs for embroidery.

Today, in Europe, Russian Constructivist clothing is greatly admired for its modernity, and the artist designers are praised for their energy and idealism:

> True daughters of the Revolution, they decided to drop art for art's sake, give up painting, and concentrate on industrial production for the masses . . . They might perhaps have been the forerunners of those gutsy, talented, young people of the Sixties who made London of the Sixties swing.[19]

Such a comparison denies the specific historical conditions which both permitted and finally frustrated their work. And it ignores the crucial fact that the artist designers were not dispensing with artistic concerns in their work. Their use of embroidery – an art form they considered appropriate for their socialist practice –

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testifies to the way they were attempting to transform and fuse art and design. Later commentators, however, regard their embroidery as a shameful but natural feminine weakness which the women had tried in vain to suppress. Of the painter-designer Alexandra Exter, Meriel McCooey writes: 'Though she seldom incorporated any of these ideas into her styles for the masses, she had a secret predilection for creating extravagant fantasy dresses, richly embroidered.'[20]

Criticised by their contemporaries, misunderstood today, the revolutionary artists who advocated hand embroidery underestimated the historically determined character of the medium. Its ties with bourgois femininity were not transcended by its peasant connections. Neither could a medium which is fundamentally a 'unique' art form be employed for mass production.

For the Constructivist artists, embroidery's association with femininity was a hindrance, producing accusations of bourgeois decadence that they felt called upon to refute. For the British Women's Suffrage Movement it was a connection they believed they could use to advantage. In their hands, embroidery was employed not to transform the place and function of art, but to change ideas about women and femininity. Far from desiring to disentangle embroidery and femininity, they wanted embroidery to evoke femininity – but femininity represented as a source of strength, not as evidence of women's weakness. The movement left behind numbers of embroidered marching banners: some identifying local groups, others representing individual campaigns and professions, and a series celebrating great women of the past and present.

The tradition of banner-carrying demonstrations had grown up with the Trades Union Movement from the 1830s. Union banners were an obvious source of inspiration for the feminists. They adopted the same format of pictorial message combined with a slogan. But whereas two thirds of trades union banners, since 1837, had come from the same source – George Tuthill's banner-making business – feminist banners appear to have been varied and individual creations. Trades union banners were silken, painted, highly polished works. Suffrage banners daringly combined embroidery, paint, collage and raised work in original and equally well finished products. Their effective use of mixed

media was perhaps a result of the middle-class women's lack of professionalism – a positive outcome of 'accomplishment'. Decades of skill developed for ecclesiastical banners, altarcloths, drawing-room drapery and smoking caps lie behind the banners.

Demonstrations were an important aspect of the Suffrage protest in the early years of the twentieth century. In 1906 Lady Frances Balfour described a demonstration organised by the WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union) to march on the House of Commons: 'A huge concourse of working women . . . met under the Labour Party with their own flags and carrying their own babies.'[21] The demonstration was small, however, compared with the great marches of 1908. In June of that year 13,000 non-militant Suffragists marched from the Embankment to the Albert Hall. Each trade marched under its own banner: there were actresses, artists, shop assistants, factory workers, home makers and many more. Women carried banners celebrating the achievements of well known women from Boadicea to Marie Curie. At the head of the procession a huge banner flourished the word RECTITUDE. Slogans were uniformly well designed and direct with simple, strong, instantly legible lettering. ASK WITH COURAGE; ALLIANCE AND DEFIANCE; LEARN AND LIVE; DARE TO BE FREE; COURAGE, CONSISTENCY, SUCCESS.

Ten days later a demonstration organised by the militant Suffragettes was of a size never seen before or since. *The Times* estimated that a crowd of about half a million converged on Hyde Park.

Not only banners but parasols too were embroidered in the Suffrage colours of green, purple and white with the initials WSPU, and carried on the marches. The parasol was such a quintessentially feminine object that, taken in conjunction with embroidery, it suggests that the use of the art by the movement was tactical, to counter anti-suffrage propaganda that constantly depicted feminists as 'large-handed, big-footed, flat-chested and thin-lipped'.[22] The representation of the Suffragettes as lacking in femininity might have frightened other women away from identifying with the movement; and discredited the campaign as motivated not by politics but by the personal grievances of women who had failed to achieve the supposed fruits of femininity.

There was nothing naïve in the Suffrage use of embroidery. They were familiar with methods and materials of pictorial

embroidery. They understood the symbolic content of materials. In a banner depicting St George, the saint's wings are silk, his face satin, and the dragon appliquéed in linen, reminiscent of stump work from the seventeenth century.

Their excellent stitchery in the Art Needlework style (see Chapter Seven) was, to their contemporaries, evidence both of an education in the feminine virtues of selflessness and service, and of a natural feminine capacity. Their claim to femininity could, however, equally have been used against their demand for the vote, so the form and content of the banners depicted femininity not as frailty but as strength, and embroidery was presented not as women's only appropriate medium but co-existing with paint.

The banner from the Hammersmith group, for example, consists of three panels. A painted and raised depiction of hammer and horse-shoes is flanked by embroidered irises in Suffrage colours. Irises were at this time among the most popular flowers in Art Needlework, as *Needlework Monthly* observed in 1907: 'The pretty iris design is the favourite work of the season, for table covers, duchesse sets, all in unbleached linen with the design already painted, to be worked in silks.'[23]

For the Suffrage banner the irises are expertly embroidered in crewel work, the stitch taught by the Royal School of Art Needlework. The banner is reversible; backing the crewel-work irises, the same design is displayed in appliqué velvet. Paint and embroidery, and masculine and feminine symbols, share the same space and make a political point – the demand for equality, not androgyny.

The content of most of the embroidery aimed to present the Suffrage Movement as supporting equal rights – as reformist not revolutionary. Thus the Women's Tax Resistance League, created in 1909, depicted Britannia on their banner above the slogan, 'NO VOTE NO TAX', implying that, given the vote, women would work for the same ends as men. The embroidered Britannia also points to the irony in an allegorical female figure representing a nation which denied women the vote.

Similarly, amongst the banners commemorating female heroines was one dedicated to 'Queen Victoria, Queen and Mother'. The inclusion of the Queen with such women as Marie Curie, Boadicea and Elizabeth Barrett Browning demonstrated the movement's patriotism and their political astuteness. As seen in Chapter Seven, the Queen was used as a powerful affirmation

of the importance of family life by embroiderers in the nineteenth century. Here, the campaigners harnessed the Queen's popularity to their cause. Acclaiming her as Queen *and* Mother countered anti-suffrage propaganda that God had ordained women to raise children, not to take part in political life.

The heroines selected for the banners and their attributes generally assert the breadth of women's capacities. The Marie Curie banner has embroidered panels radiating from the word RADIUM. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry is signified by green velvet and pink silk roses and purple fleur-de-lys.

The set of heroine banners reflects the organisational ideology of the Suffrage movement, which, unlike present-day feminism with its insistence on a collective structure, set up its leaders as sources of inspiration and devotion. Thus a banner commemorating members of the WSPU who were forcibly fed in prison is embroidered with the names of Mrs Pethick Lawrence, Christabel Pankhurst, Mrs Pankhurst and Annie Kenny in *art nouveau* lettering. Below are appliquéed signatures of their followers in purple and green thread. Each woman appears to have embroidered her own name. Some were highly skilled embroiderers, others able only clumsily to follow the lines of their handwriting. This banner transformed a prison gesture of solidarity into a public statement.

Imprisoned and on hunger strike, the women embroidered handkerchiefs with their signatures, bringing together the tradition of political petition and protest with a female social tradition by which guests would embroider their signatures for their hostess to commemorate a visit. The London Museum owns two suffrage handkerchiefs: one embroidered by Janie Terreno marks the hunger strike of 1911. It bears a photograph of Mrs Pankhurst and Christabel, the signatures of those forcibly fed and some tiny embroidered violets.

Janie Terreno was a musician from Essex who took part in the mass shop-window smashing protest in March 1912. She was arrested for throwing a stone through the window of an engineering firm, Stedalls, in Oxford Street. Imprisoned in Holloway and force-fed, her letters to her husband illuminate the feelings for the Pankhursts that motivated her adulatory embroidery. The Suffragettes were forbidden to talk to their leader in Holloway, and Janie Terreno described their response: 'We fought for her and won . . . we were put into our cells by force and then broke our

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cell windows and everything we could . . . we only took our meal on Sunday evening after receiving her instructions that we were to eat. . . We obey her absolutely.'[24]

Elsewhere she exclaimed, 'I cannot tell you the joy it is to have our leaders with us . . . the sight of their dear faces has cheered everyone.'[25]

The other handkerchief in the London Museum is dedicated to Janie Terreno herself, and commemorates prison sentences delivered in Newcastle in 1910 and in London during 1910 and 1911.

The delicate embroidery declared that the supposed weaker sex was being subjugated to the torture of force-feeding – and resisting. They signed their names in the very medium which was considered proof of their frailty, and justification for their subjugation.

The Suffrage demand for equal rights and opportunities, and the ideology of the Arts and Crafts Movement with its insistence on the importance of creative work, combined to make considerable impact on the teaching of embroidery.

At the Glasgow School of Art, Ann Macbeth and her colleagues transformed methods of embroidery instruction, insisting that the design should arise out of the technique employed, and encouraging students to invent their own designs rather than follow patterns (see Chapter Seven).

Numbers of teachers, following those at the Glasgow School, emphasised design, colour and experiment, rather than the concentrated development of technical excellence.

Ann Macbeth encoded her ideas in *Educational Needlework*, 1913, written in collaboration with Margaret Swanson, a teacher at the Pupil Teachers Centre, Ayr, from 1899 to 1908. They believed that needlework would assist in

> the development of intelligence and formation of character, . . . the imagination of the child is stirred and curiosity plays freely . . . without curiosity, no conjecture is possible – a point to be noted from the start in all experimental work. The boy or girl who uses material and needle freely in independent design ranks on a plane with the scientist who makes a hypothesis, with the artist who makes an experiment.[26]

The authors reveal the influence of feminism in that they assume both boys and girls are to develop character and curiosity, and that both can use the needle to advantage. The progressive ideas they propagated within education were still in evidence in 1928 when the National Union of Women Teachers debated a resolution at their annual conference:

> The time has come for a more equal form of education for future home life, as between boys and girls, by the giving of instruction to boys in the simple elements of domestic subjects such as needlework and cookery and the girls instruction in light woodwork.[27]

However, such attempts were continually undermined by the absolute identification of embroidery with femininity. Curriculum projects and teacher training continued to designate embroidery a girls' activity. An expanding leisure industry utilised the feminine ideal in its attempt to encourage embroidery, assisted by women's magazines.

Magazines managed to present each change in the social and political climate in terms of its implications for embroidery. Thus they represent embroidery as the means, during the economic crisis of the thirties, to manifest the feminine qualities of sensible thriftiness, and to keep up appearances. They urged their readers to create 'beauty with utility', employing embroidery techniques like cross stitch and smocking that would wash and wear.[28]

At the same time a new shift occurred in the feminine ideal. Embroidery was increasingly advocated as a means, not overtly to femininity, but to individuality. However, the concept of individuality in relation to embroiderers became subtly sex-stereotyped. The forward to Rebecca Crompton's *Modern Design and Embroidery*, 1936, suggests that embroidery 'even in its simplest form may become the expression of personal thought and feeling', as it is 'work which mirrors [a woman's] own thought and personality.'[29]

With the end of the second world war, peace – for women's magazines – meant plentiful embroidery materials. The editorial of *Embroidery* declared:

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> available in all abundance. These things can never be taken for granted again after the lean war years, when one felt guilty plying the needle for any purpose but 'make do and mend' and wools and silks were impossible to get. . . Now that every variety of material is easily and quite inexpensively available it is most encouraging to attempt any form of hitherto untried work.[30]

But the abundance of embroidery equipment was not sufficient encouragement in itself. The idea that embroidery fostered individuality was increasingly emphasised. Catherine Christopher in *The Complete Book of Embroidery and Embroidery Stitches*, 1944, observed that

> few pursuits can rival embroidery for the opportunity it offers to impress her creative ability upon her surroundings and personal belongings. The things thus created may be few and far between, but they are an expression of yourself so individual and personal that they will always be cherished.[31]

In *Creative Embroidery*, 1967, Christine Risley described embroidery as 'making a personal statement'.[32] The twentieth-century writers have partially dispensed with the Victorian ideology of embroidery as selfless work for the comfort of others. Instead, embroidery has become a manifestation of the self. But the expression of personality is limited to personal thoughts and feelings. Nineteenth-century notions that to fulfil the feminine ideal an embroiderer had to manifest sensibility in her work has simply been updated – rephrased for a Freudian and post-Freudian society.

The claim that embroidery conveys the individuality and personality of the embroiderer was repeated so insistently because writers on needlework wanted embroidery accorded the status of art. In the twentieth century the personality of the artist has become all important: creativity is considered to reside in the person of the artist, not in what she or he makes. We speak of 'a David Hockney', 'a Gwen John'. Indeed, in certain art practices it is necessary for an artist only to designate an object as art for it to become so. Thus, if embroidery is to win recognition as art, it has to be stamped not with a pre-drawn pattern, but with a particular personality. But whereas the personality of a painter is

expected to be eccentric and egocentric, for women embroiderers the notion of personality is still constrained by the feminine ideal. Macbeth and Swanson's conviction that embroidery allowed for the free play of the imagination, intelligence and curiosity was subsumed into a twentieth-century feminine ideal: 'Even the least skilled attempts at creating beauty reveal and help develop vitality, warmth and other desirable personality traits.'[33]

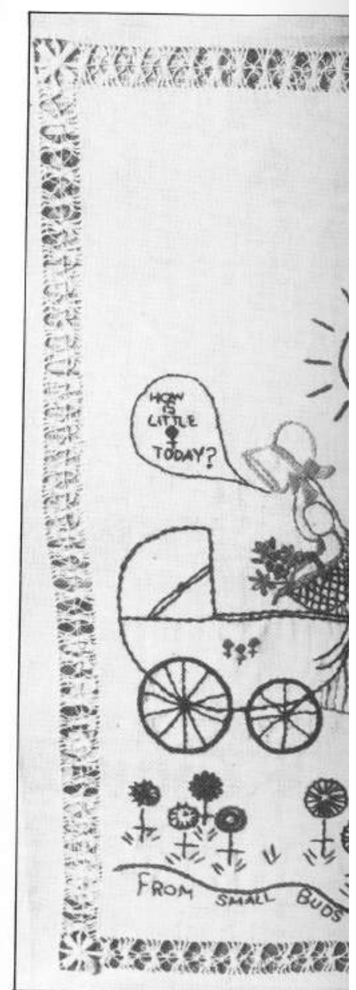
It is this categorisation of embroidery as the art of personal life outside male-dominated institutions and the world of work, that has given it a special place in counter-cultures and radical movements.

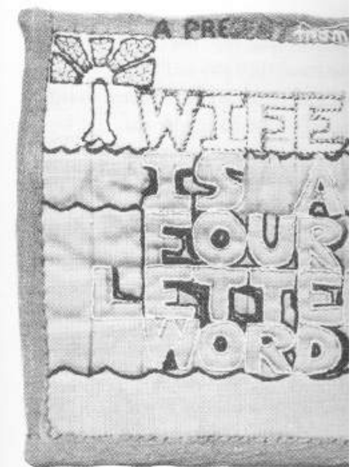
In the 1960s embroidery suddenly gained a new face. Embroidered suns rose over hip pockets, dragons curled round denim thighs, rainbows arched over backs. For the hippy era embroidery symbolised love, peace, colour, personal life and rejection of materialism. Everything in fact that embroidery and femininity had connoted since the nineteenth century. A woman reminiscing about her life in London in 1970 commented:

> In my hippy phase when I was living in a commune we all embroidered. It had various meanings: pleasure, self-indulgence with colours, a determination to make your clothes beautiful. It also functioned to establish you as a member of a tribe because all of us with our embroidered jeans knew that we were libertarians. For the men who embroidered, and wore embroidery, it signified the taking up of femininity and enjoying it.[34]

For men, long hair and embroidered clothing constituted a rebellious gesture against a hierarchical, puritanical, masculine establishment. However, this was less a subversion of sex roles than a longing for the freedom of an idealised image of childhood – mother-loved, anarchic and untouched by daddy's world.

Interestingly, one of the scenes most frequently embroidered on jeans was that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the scene that from the sixteenth century had been so popular with embroiderers. However, as Peter Beagle in *American Denim*, 1975, points out: 'The emphasis in all the Adams and Eves is never on original sin, or even on temptation, but on the beauty of the primal couple and on a kind of wistful, original innocence in





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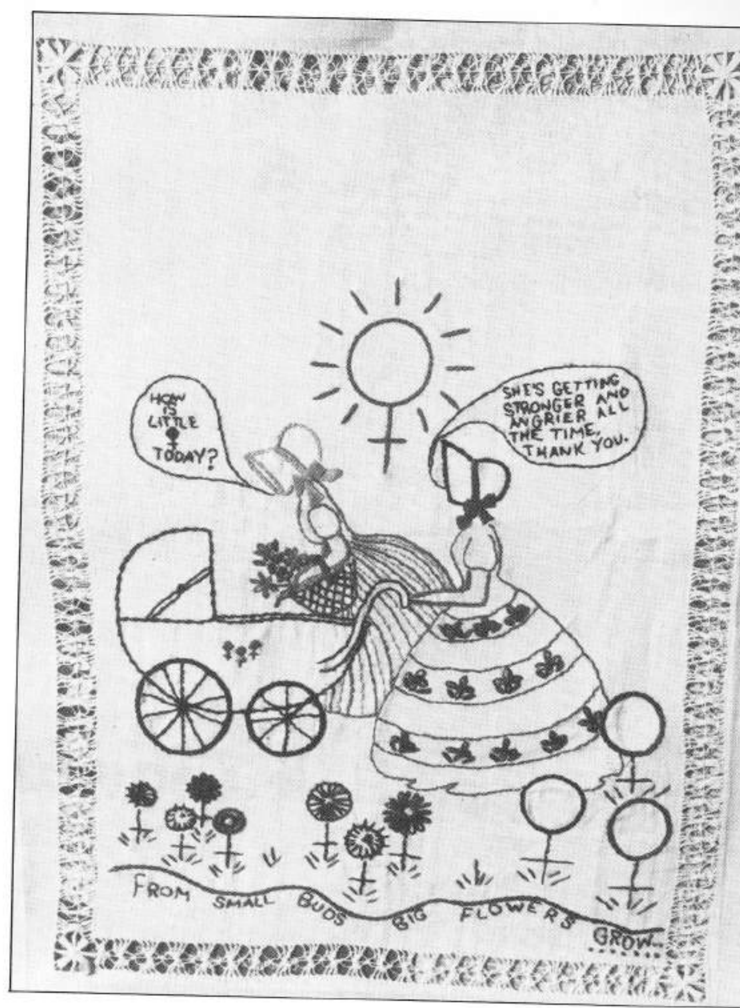

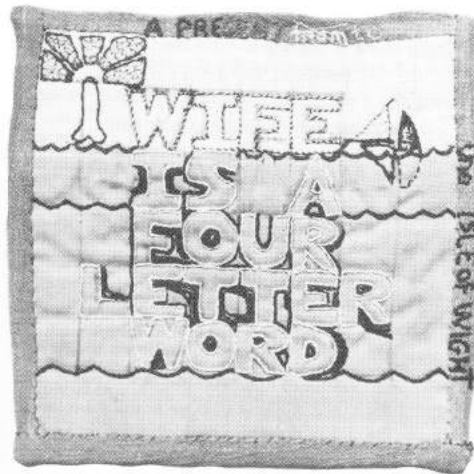

101 Embroidered runner, Beryl Weaver, reproduced in *Spare Rib*, 1978. Taking traditional embroidery motifs, Beryl Weaver reveals the way they prescribe the feminine ideal.

102 Sampler, Kate Walker, The Gal, London. 1978.
This was one of the art works in *Feministo*, the postal art event in which a group of women in Britain exchanged art works through the post, creating a dialogue about their experience as women, artists and mothers working at home.

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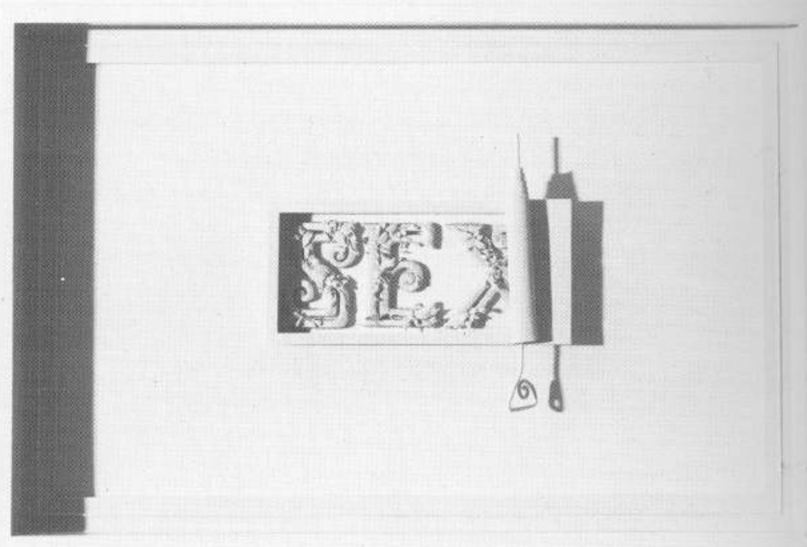
105 Sampler, John Nichols Hackleton, Christies, London. 1858.
Despite the art's role in the construction of femininity since the Renaissance, there have always been a few men and boys who practised the art for the pleasure it provides and the artistic possibilities it offers.



106 . . *.in a tin,* Catherine Riley, Crafts Council, London. 1978. Photo: Ed Buziak.
Catherine Riley was trained as a textile artist but became interested in what embroidery connoted. Here she conjures up the art's association with the repression and containment of women's sexuality in the name of feminine purity. The title hints at the other side of the high premium placed on women's purity – the idea of women's bodies as commodities.

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which even the serpent is a brother.'[35] But what 'freedom' for women is in this? While the man appropriated the naturalness and innocence of femininity, he referred to the woman as 'my old lady', as she sat silently stitching – an earth mother for the pre-fall Adam in his floral denim. In other words, while hippy embroidery signified loosening the constraints of masculinity for men, for women it simply replaced one feminine ideal with another. Embroidery now connoted not gentility but fecundity.

The Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s inherited particular facets of the counter-culture: the rejection of establishment values, the refusal of rigid sex roles, and a recognition of the central importance of personal life – but all with a crucial difference. Feminists viewed these issues within a political perspective; it was an oppositional, not an alternative movement. The organisation of personal life with a strict division between the public and private, the domestic and professional, the emotional and intellectual, the masculine and the feminine, were analysed as the means by which one group maintained power over another.

The hippy love of embroidery as a gesture of defiance – one in the eye for a grey masculine world – lived on in the Women's Liberation Movement. But whereas hippies had simply celebrated the emotional and individualistic associations of embroidery, feminists in their embroidery showed that the personal was the political – that personal and domestic life is as much the product of the institutions and ideologies of our society as is public life.

Some feminists take traditional embroidery motifs which connote the domestic and feminine ideal, and reveal what the pretty stitches conceal. Beryl Weaver embroiders bouquets of flowers, ladies in crinolines amongst the hollyhocks, rustic cottages. These images, originally derived from eighteenth-century prototypes, became popular in the thirties when the rapid expansion of building in the suburbs of industrial towns had awakened the Victorian idealisation of rural life (see Chapter Seven). Today they have an added ingredient of saccharine nostalgia. Natural, rural femininity is conjured up in opposition to the brutality and artificiality of urban industrial society. Beryl Weaver subverts these images: 'I was never encouraged to create disturbing images, so my anger comes through in the pretty pictures I was brought up with.'[36]

The picturesque cottage casement is embroidered with the words 'shattered and shuttered' – Beryl Weaver's feelings about the solitary confinement of a life dedicated to domestic femininity and nothing else. She describes herself as a 'housewife drowning in suburbia'. A crinoline lady amongst the flowers has a double embroidered caption: one reads 'To women's work' in recognition of women's heritage of embroidery, and in opposition to the ideology of the embroidered convention that to be feminine is to be seen not to work, and certainly not to participate in waged labour. The second caption reads 'Two women's work', drawing attention to the assumed solitary state of both embroiderers and their embroidered lady, and to women's double burden. Often Beryl Weaver calls the images into question by a judiciously placed feminist symbol. Thus, a traditional bunch of flowers is carefully embroidered, and placed in a vase patterned with women's symbols. She attacks 'the way we are always compared to flowers: women and flowers – personal and warm – pretty but stultified. One man even went so far as to say he liked women to be independent, so he could go from one to the other, like a bee on spring flowers.'[37]

Kate Walker is an artist who has employed embroidery in a fine art and feminist context since the early 1970s. She describes how an exhibition of Polish art alerted her to the possibilities of textile art:

> They used all kinds of materials and forms which seemed to express their upheavals and dissatisfactions. I saw events, assemblages, street art using ropes, textiles and, most interesting to me, banners made of patchwork cloth in a mediaeval style. This art seemed to convey a determined respect for their own past culture, uniting it with their struggle for a better future.[38]

A year later, in 1974, she exhibited an embroidery in the first show at the Women's Arts Alliance in London called 'Sweet Sixteen and Never Been Shown'. It was a mixed media show, presenting a variety of events, performances and assemblages, with audience participation. Looking back, Kate Walker says:

> It was early in the development of the women's art movement and there was no consciously worked out programme for

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insisting on equal inclusion of women's skills, but Carol McNichol showed her vegetable-like ceramics and Rose English some leather craft pieces. I sneaked in an old patchwork cushion I had made, alongside my paintings and assemblage. We automatically erased the line between function and aesthetics, between craft and art. We felt the most urgent need to be for intervention at all levels both within and without the gallery system.[39]

Kate Walker's attitude is characteristic of contemporary feminists' determination not to reject femininity but to empty the term of its negative connotations, to reclaim and refashion the category:

> I have never worried that embroidery's association with femininity, sweetness, passivity and obedience may subvert my work's feminist intention. Femininity and sweetness are part of women's strength. Passivity and obedience, moreover, are the very opposites of the qualities necessary to make a sustained effort in needlework. What's required are physical and mental skills, fine aesthetic judgement in colour, texture and composition; patience during long training; and assertive individuality of design (and consequent disobedience of aesthetic convention). Quiet strength need not be mistaken for useless vulnerability.[40]

She takes the format of the sampler, but the stitched sayings are defiant not compliant, most unladylike; 'Wife is a four-letter word', 'This is a present to me', both declaring her rejection of the self-repression and submission encouraged by traditional sampler-making.

Other women have been prompted to view embroidery critically and analytically through being trained in the art.

Catharine Riley trained as a textile artist. Her embroidery evokes and subtly parodies the emotions associated with needlework – purity and chastity. In an exhibition in 1980 all the pieces on show were worked in shades of white, conjuring up and cutting across the way whitework embroidery is intended to confirm the image of women as sexless, spiritual and sensitive. In one work the word 'sex' is spelled out in bone-silk and flowers, and contained in a white sardine tin, beautifully mounted and framed in pure white.

As we have seen, the notion that femininity, and embroidery as the art of the feminine, come naturally to women has affected women of all classes but in specifically different ways. It is the relationship between embroidery and class that feminist artist Margaret Harrison explores in her work, attacking both the fine art/craft division and class divisions. She assembles examples of traditional needlecraft and contemporary doilies 'made in the factory by working-class women and sold back to them'. Her intention is to reveal the process of de-skilling working-class women since the industrial revolution.

Embroidery also has a place in the feminist effort to transform the conditions of art practice, the relationship of artist to audience and the definitions of what constitutes art. Because embroidery is an extremely popular hobby, and a skill taught in schools, it is considered by many to be a more accessible medium, reaching a wider audience, than painting. And as an art employing thread and textiles, embroidery is used to question the primacy of paint and canvas. The British feminist postal art project 'Feministo' came into being partly in opposition to established, male-dominated modes of art practice.

During 1975, women began exchanging art works through the post, setting up a visual dialogue about their lives as housewives and mothers. They utilised whatever materials they had at hand and whichever domestic skills they possessed, including embroidery. Monica Ross, a participant, summed up the ways in which 'Feministo' departed from the competitive individualism fostered by the institutions associated with fine arts:

> Our creativity derives from non-prestigious folk traditions. It is diverse and integrated into our lives; it is cooked and eaten, washed and worn. Contemporary standards either ignore our creativity or rate it as second-class. We communicate, we don't compete. We share images and experiences. The posting of one piece of work from one woman to another makes ownership ambiguous. Our creativity is valid.[41]

'Feministo', with its images drawn from domestic life and its craft techniques, managed to convey a double message. Phil Goodall, an artist in the group, observed: 'Within the postal event we both celebrated the area of domestic creativity and "women's world" and exposed it for its paucity.'[42] They validated domestic art, yet

drew attention to the extent to which women's time and energy has been absorbed by their massive contribution to the domestic economy.

The art works were finally collected into an exhibition. Placing the embroidered, knitted and crocheted work in an art gallery was intended to challenge the value-laden division between 'home' and 'work', 'art' and 'craft'. Similarly, by bringing work deemed to belong to personal life into a public gallery 'Feministo' affirmed the central tenet of today's Women's Liberation Movement, that the personal is political, that personal life is determined by the wider political structure. The art gallery is maintained as a special space by what is kept outside of it. 'Feministo' disrupted that structure.

Another feminist art project which carried so-called craft into the heart of the art world is *The Dinner Party*, which was first exhibited at the San Francisco Art Museum in 1979. Conceived by feminist artist Judy Chicago, it was executed by more than 400 women and men. On an open triangular table are 39 place settings, each commemorating a particular goddess or woman in Western history. The settings include a goblet, cutlery and a china-painted plate, designed to evoke each individual woman and her historical period. The plates rest upon embroidered runners. The embroideries take the work beyond hagiography. They place the women in context by being stitched in the style and technique of the woman's time. Chicago writes:

> We examined the history of needlework – as it is reflected in textiles and costumes, sculptures, myths and legends and archaeological evidence – from the point of view of what these revealed about women, the quality of their lives and their relationship to needlework.[43]

A photographer, Susan Hill, became 'Head of Needlework', after apprenticing herself to a group of traditional needleworkers. Students of textiles under her direction amassed an embroidery sampler book for Chicago to use when designing the runners: 'I would study the book endlessly,' she says, 'trying to determine how the marvellous visual qualities of these different types of embroidery could best be utilised.'[44]

The relationship between the plates and the runners is symbolic. For the place settings of the women of antiquity, the

embroidery is stitched on the periphery of the runners. Slowly, over the centuries, it encroaches on the plates. In Chicago's words this is

> 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.[45]

Nevertheless, given women's ambivalent relationship to embroidery, using the art to place their lives in context inevitably has its ironic moments. The plate representing seventeenth-century feminist Anna Maria von Schurman, declared enemy of needlework, is placed upon a reproduction of a Dutch sampler.

The value of *The Dinner Party* is that embroidery is used appreciatively but above all symbolically. There is no suggestion that embroidery rather than painting is women's proper art form. The piece simply states that women have and still do employ stitchery, illustrating the varied history of women and the art.

The most recent radical movement to employ embroidery is the Women's Peace Movement. Large, brightly coloured embroidered and appliquéed banners have been produced since 1978 to be carried on marches and, more recently, attached to the perimeter fence at Greenham Common air base, where women camp in protest against Cruise missiles.

The iconography of the banners combines Suffrage symbolism, traditional peace motifs and feminist political symbols. For example, the banner stitched by Thalia and Jan Campbell and Jan Higgs to celebrate the Women for Life on Earth Action for Peace, 1981 to 1982, is in the Suffragette colours, purple, green and white; and includes representations of trees, doves, a woman's sign and the anti-nuclear symbol, along with women linking hands in a circle. Groups often include specific reference to their location; thus Hastings women based their banner on the Bayeux Tapestry, and the Otley Peace Action Group's banner depicts the town.

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We have seen how deeply identified embroidery has become with nature and the feminine. The peace movement women deliberately evoke the meaning of embroidery to emphasise that they are campaigning against the nuclear threat *as women*. Displayed at Greenham, the banners declare the fence a boundary between femininity and masculinity, between life and death, technology and nature. Never before has the use of embroidery so clearly demonstrated the place of the art in the splitting that structures and controls our society – and may one day destroy us.

It is crucially important to recognise how diversely women have lived and resisted the specific forms of sexual oppression operating in different cultures and classes. And embroidery continues to illustrate to this day the heterogeneity of women's work. Two comments from contemporary embroiderers provide a salutary reminder of the dramatic diversity of present-day approaches to the art:

> Starting to embroider in a fine-art context was a direct result of my activities with the Women's Liberation Movement from about 1970. At that time I had not found any application of my feminist ideas to art, but felt a strong need to make feminism literally visible. Embroidery was one technique among many which could be combined in new ways to create forms of art truer to our skills and experience.[46]

Kate Walker's utilisation of embroidery as a medium with a heritage in women's hands, and thus as more appropriate than male-associated paint for making feminist statements, co-exists with an absolutely conventional embroidery practice expressed by Lady Tavistock:

> I am always doing tapestry . . . and make about seven or eight things a year. I have completed a tremendous number of cushions, some rugs, spectacle cases and five pairs of evening slippers for my husband.[47]

Lady Tavistock could be speaking from the nineteenth century, when embroiderers stitched for home, husband and peace of mind.

Today, in the 1980s, numerous factors have again combined to encourage a revival of enthusiasm for embroidery as a 'home-craft': an economic recession co-exists with adulation of the home, the home-made, the hand-made and the natural. The production of canvas patterns is a thriving business. They sell at high prices to affirm their artistic value and social status. They are carefully designed to preserve the art's 'natural', genteel, feminine connotations. A designer for a large needlecraft shop in the United States told me that she was instructed never to include buildings in the patterns she produced: only natural scenery was permitted.

As well as the 'hobby' embroiderers there is an ever-expanding number of embroiderers who practise it as a fine-art medium. Art schools today have embroidery departments: amongst the best known is Goldsmiths' College in London. Art-school trained embroiderers consider that the medium offers 'textures and colours that would not be possible in any other medium'. Modern materials have widened the scope of the art:

> Traditional techniques like quilting, padding, couching, and the application of metal threads and glass beads are still employed, but materials such as transparent acetate are now used, and few artists produce work today that consists entirely of embroidery in the conventional sense of the word. The search for new forms and new techniques has led to a greater use of embroidery mixed with collage, where flat pieces of material are cut and sewn on to the picture surface.[48]

Embroiderers have formed numbers of exhibition groups: for example The 62 Group, The Textile Studio and the New Embroidery Movement. Possibly embroidery's connection with the tradition of craft co-operative work, rather than the fine arts which foster and expect competitive individualism, has helped to foster this tendency.

Older embroidery organisations – The Royal School of Needlework and The Embroiderers' Guild – co-exist with the new groups. The Guild has seventy-seven branches in Britain, providing instruction, organising exhibitions and maintaining a library and study group at their Hampton Court headquarters. The Royal School of Needlework, established in 1872, continues to offer classes in all forms of embroidery, in addition to a

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two-year apprenticeship scheme, and the restoration of old or damaged embroideries.[49]

Despite the proliferation of professional groups and the recognition of embroidery as an art form, twentieth-century feminine ideals still dominate attitudes towards the art to an amazing extent. Embroidery is still seen as an emotional gesture rather than creative work. A woman who has embroidered intermittently throughout her life, admits

> I have always embroidered for other people, for people that I was trying to woo. Initially it was my mother, and after that it has been either women or men that I have been in love with or wanting to gain favour with. I can remember quite clearly going to this man's flat, stealing his jeans and covering them with embroidery. I find it intensely pleasurable, but I have got to have the emotional inspiration, there has got to be a significant person I am embroidering for.[50]

Embroidery can also provide a vehicle for dealing with highly ambivalent, complex feelings provoked by a significant other. 'Embroidering a lover's clothes means that I am going to leave him,'[51] another woman told me. The construction of femininity inhibits the direct expression of anger. She explains her embroidery as a placatory gesture towards the man she is 'deserting', but acknowledges that the fury which fuels her departure is expressed yet safely concealed in the stabbing satin stitches.

The extent to which embroidery becomes implicated in relationships arises in part from the fact that embroidery still plays a crucial role in many women's childhood. Embroiderers I interviewed all admitted that embroidery had provided a means of gaining affirmation and attention from the adult world: 'I was the eldest of five, but a real loner. I was by myself all the time. Throughout my primary school days embroidering was the one thing I felt gave me kudos amongst adults.'[52] To embroider announced to adults that she was good and feminine, not naughty and masculine. This path to adult approval and conformity appealed because it provided a way of gaining needed love and attention; but also because, quite simply, embroidery was enjoyable:

> Did I embroider as a child? Yellow daisies round the tea-tray

> cloth whiled away holiday afternoons in rainy Scarborough summers. I remember, before that even, the first sewing lessons I ever had, using thick orange silks or brown coarse 'crash cloth' were easy, a lovely feeling in the fingers, when I was five. The teacher seemed so pleased with me, always a clever, neat, teachable child. My father taught me to sew originally. He loved to make things, still does. He praised my earliest efforts, it made me want to try, it was from him I got the idea. The nuns at school gave me the skills. My feminism and friends gave me the necessity.[53]

Most embroiderers talk of the lazy-daisy tea-tray cloth still treasured by their parents: 'The Irish linen tablecloth with green embroidered shamrocks and drawn threadwork is still on the trolley at my parents' home.'[54]

However, for middle-class women embroidery usually ceases when they leave home and family, and comes to a full stop if they go to university: 'My parents were pleased with my embroidery, quite proud of it, but I stopped for a while at university because knitting, embroidery and crochet seemed like the kind of suburban things I had left behind.'[55] But above all embroidery represented the feminine, the emotional, the family, considered at odds with intellectual life. For some embroiderers the split created a deep sense of conflict:

> I am a sociologist – I cringe – never say this – why? Because it seems a lie. I care about my work, but it is not part of me as are patchwork and embroidery. Should I try to make it so, is my sewing a clinging to a dependent, passive childhood, a female stereotype, or is it truly me?[56]

The psychic disjuncture she describes is confirmed by attitudes she faces in the college where she works: 'I was doing a patchwork cushion with embroidered details one day in the staffroom and the Head of Department was entirely contemptuous. I soon learned never to tell people I embroider.'[57]

The categorical separation of femininity/embroidery from masculinity/professionalism is the outcome of the Victorian success in preserving embroidery as the demarcator of women's

sphere. A comparison between Victorian and twentieth-century attitudes towards the art nevertheless reveals telling differerences.

As long as Victorian women overtly fulfilled the feminine ideal of sensitivity and service with their embroidery, stitching selflessly for home and husband, they could expect their work to be regarded with chivalrous deference. Only if they became 'selfishly' absorbed in their work did they encounter mockery.

The Victorians identified embroidery with femininity in the context of rigidly defined sex roles. Embroidery is still identified with femininity, but the framework has changed. Women have challenged the constraints of femininity and entered previously masculine preserves. On the whole women no longer embroider as a gesture of wifely or domestic duty. But the aspect of embroidery as a bond between women has lived on. Books, exhibitions, magazines and societies devoted to embroidery and dominated by women constitute a curiously autonomous female area. It is largely ignored by men. Chivalrous approval has given way to silence, unless embroidery is carried across the borders into masculine territory. An embroiderer can become a sociologist but does not bring her work out in staffroom, boardroom or pub.

The laughter provoked by embroidery practised 'out of place' illustrates the strength of sexual divisions in society. In the history of embroidery we can see both the negative and positive effects of the art's position in relation to the social structuring of sex difference and art practice. The role of embroidery in the construction of femininity has undoubtedly constricted the development of the art. What women depicted in thread became determined by notions of femininity, and the resulting femininity of embroidery defined and constructed its practitioners in its own image. However, the vicious circle has never been complete. Limited to practising art with needle and thread, women have nevertheless sewn a subversive stitch – managed to make meanings of their own in the very medium intended to inculcate self-effacement.

For women today, the contradictory and complex history of embroidery is important because it reveals that definitions of sexual difference, and the definitions of art and artist so weighted against women, are not fixed. They have shifted over the centuries, and they can be transformed in the future.