

Proposal for Extended Essay

Stitch, Domesticity and Masculinity

1908267

Surface Pattern Textiles

2547 word count

Julia Lockhart

The following proposal for further research will be around three key words: Stitch, domesticity, and masculinity. Stitch and its significance throughout time will be the focus of research. Following this, domesticity surrounding stitching will be discussed alongside arguing the fact that the art of stitch is not a pastime that is often associated to females/ women.

These are the two main definitions of stitch: a loop of thread or yarn resulting from a single pass or movement of the needle in sewing, knitting, or crochet. And using stitch as a verb the definition is to make, mend, or join (something) with stitches. (Oxford, 2023)

The difference between the art of stitching and sewing has been learnt from researching these key words. Stitching is the basic component of all things related to textiles, such as knitting, embroidery, quilting and sewing and other needlework practices. Whereas the act of sewing is the action of joining two objects together using multiple stitches during the process of looping thread or yarn. Sewing is one of the world's oldest crafts and is said to be the foundation of practices like tapestry, patchwork, and embroidery. Sewing usually is only used for its basic function of bringing two pieces of fabric together, and by hand, there is only one kind of stitch used. Whereas there are multiple different types of stitches if used for embroidery, such as cross, knots, back stitch, chain and many more (Victoria Finley, 2022) .

There are many other art forms that include stitching, most known as cross stitch. Cross stitch is a type of embroidery where the artist will create basic stitches in an X formation. Research has revealed that the earliest dated cross stitch sample was created by an English female named Jane Bosticke, which dates to 1598. The piece was stitched using silk threads onto a piece of linen, see figure 1 (Victoria and Albert Museum).



Figure 1: Jane Bosticke 1598

Further research into Stitch and the papers of Dr Amy Twigger Holroyd, and *Re-knitting: the emotional experience of opening knitted garments* 2014. *The Journal of Design Strategies* will be looked at to discuss more around the differences between the word stitch and commonly used words related to stitch such as sew. Also, continued research will look further into the basic need of stitch and how it is one of humanity's fundamental needs of living, and how far back stitching goes for this I will be looking into *Geometry of Hand-Sewing: A Romance in Stitches* and *Embroidery from Alabama Chanin* and *The School of Making* by Natalie Chanin. The works of artist Julia Griffith Jones will be included in this discussion and research by Dr Amy Twigger Holroyd such as her papers, *Re-knitting: the emotional experience of opening knitted garments* and *Designing an educational tool to revitalize woven textile mending* (2017)

Over the years, the basic need of stitch has never changed, it is one of the main fundamental human skills that has been passed down through thousands of years, and generations that continues to be practiced every day. Historians believe that the act of hand sewing started around 20,000 to 25,000 years ago during the Neolithic period 7000-1700 BC, also known as the New Stone Age. During this time, humans were just starting to settle into a more domesticated lifestyle of growing their own food instead of hunting. Research suggests that during the time that humans started to make

advancements with their tools and everyday practices, the art of sewing and weaving also developed. The first articles of clothing were crafted from skins and furs of animals hunted, needles at the time were either crafted by cutting and shaving down bone or horns and thread was made from animal sinew (a tough, flexible band of connective tissue that connects muscles to bone), see figure 2. Iron needles were invented around the 14th century however the eyes of the needles were not as they are today; the typical eyed needles were created in the 15th century (Lucy Adlington 2016).

The centuries-old art of stitch is strongly associated with domesticity, which refers to activities related to maintaining the home and family life. Stitching involves sewing, embroidery, knitting, and other forms of textile manipulation. Historically, these activities have been carried out by women and have been considered part of their duties as homemakers. The link between stitch and domesticity is apparent in the role that stitching has played in creating and maintaining the material aspects of home life and in shaping gender norms and expectations.

Stitch



Figure 2 – Bone Sewing Needles - Jamestown Rediscovery

The word 'Domesticity' is defined as "home or family life" This definition has come from the Oxford Dictionary 2023. With continued research into how stitching has always been seen as a female activity or pastime, this will be linked to domesticity and looking at the ways stitch was used and viewed throughout history, and the possible reason why stitching is seen mainly as a female activity

Through discussing the key word domesticity, the work of Rozsika Parker and reading through her book *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (2010) will be researched. Her book investigates re-evaluating the reciprocal relationship between women and embroidery and has brought stitchery out from the private world of female domesticity into the fine arts. I will also be looking at Elizabeth Wayland Barber and her book *'Women's work: The First 20,000 Years Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times'* (1996). This will be looked at to learn more about what women's role was in the household through the years.

One reason for the gendered perception of stitching is the societal expectation of women's roles in the home. Throughout history, women have been primarily responsible for maintaining the household, and this included making and repairing clothing and

household items. Thus, the skills required for stitching were considered essential for women. As this expectation of gender roles has evolved over time, stitching remains linked to notions of femininity and domesticity.

Going forward in time to the 1630's as Barber explains in her book, women were assigned the job of stitching clothing and using embroidery to embellish clothing because the men of the time saw women as being too fragile to use heavy tools and stitching kept them out of danger. During the Middle Ages, the art of stitch and embroidery being visible on clothes was seen as a clear mark of social distinction and political power. During this time professional embroiders could be men or women but because at this time stitching was an activity most women applied daily, it was overlooked that men who were also professional embroiders (Barber, 1996).

In 1660 the bubonic plague hit Europe and swept across the continent, wiping out thousands of people. For the art of professional embroidery this time was deadly, as many of the wealthy clients who previously purchased stitched fabrics were now gone. During this time fabric and the resources for stitch and embroidery became extremely sparse, so being able to provide your family with fabrics and these resources started to be seen as a high level of class and embroidery quickly became a symbol for power and entitlement. (Finley 2022)

Alongside the economic diversity of the Plague years, the Renaissance brought new ideas about art and who made it. During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the differences between men and women's job and skills were at complete opposites, men's jobs and skills were mainly used in agriculture, smithing, carpentry, and mining. Meanwhile women of this time were learning the art of embroidery and stitching for clothing repairs, singing, and dancing. Therefore, embroidery was an indication of status but not a fine art at the time, at least according to men. It was "just women's work" Women thought differently of course, and they continued to use their skills with needle and thread to express themselves. For instance, Mary Queen of Scots famously spent hours upon hours sewing during her time in captivity, one of her pieces shows her wit and personality with this piece of an orange cat wearing a crown and playing with a mouse, seen in figure 3 The piece symbolizes Queen Elizabeth of England toying around with the less powerful

Queen

of

Scotland.



Figure 3: Embroidered panel, by Mary Queen of Scots (1569–1584). Royal Collection Trust.

Moving forward into the Gregorian Era (1780- 1789), women during this time were mainly at home doing housework or creating a piece of needlework, it was thought to be a great accomplishment if the lady of the household could produce beautiful, stitched pieces. This is a piece that Queen Charlotte of the UK created using her sewing and stitching skills.



Figure 4: Queen Charlotte of the United Kingdom - Needlework pocketbook 1781

Satin, coloured silks and enamelled gold

I will also be looking at the book *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* 1984 by Rozsika Parker. This book investigates stitch and how submissive women must be. This gendered division of labor was reinforced by cultural

expectations. Women were taught needlework skills as part of their education and were often judged on their ability to sew well. Men, on the other hand, were not expected to have any proficiency in this area, and in fact, it was often seen as unmanly to engage in such “feminine” pursuits.

Despite the strong link between stitch and domesticity, there have been efforts to challenge these gendered expectations. The rise of feminist movements in the 20th century brought about a reevaluation of women's roles in society and questioned the idea that women's work should be confined to the home. As a result, stitching and other domestic activities were reinterpreted as hobbies rather than obligations, and men began to participate in these activities as well.

Contemporary artists and designers have also sought to challenge the association between stitch and domesticity, using stitch in unconventional ways that defy traditional gendered expectations. For example, contemporary textile artist Cos Ahmet uses stitch to create abstract paintings that challenge the idea of stitch as a feminine pursuit. By incorporating stitch into traditional male spaces such as the art gallery, Ahmet can demonstrate the versatility and power of this centuries-old art form.



Figure 5- Cos Ahmet, 2014

The word 'Masculinity' is defined by "qualities or attributes regarded as characteristic of men or boys." This definition has come from the Oxford Dictionary 2023. This key word will be researched to investigate male stitch artists and professions that use stitch frequently that are mainly dominated by men throughout the ages. In this section I will be looking into *Queering the Subversive Stitch: Men and the Culture of Needlework* 2021 by Joseph McBrinn.

Stitching, or the art of needlework, has been attributed mostly to women in most cultures, including Western culture. However, men also have been practitioners of needlework for centuries, albeit to varying degrees in different eras and cultures. The history of male stitch is rich that showcasing the importance of needlework, the changing attitudes towards gender roles, and the evolution of crafts and design.

The earliest recorded evidence of male stitch dates to ancient Egypt around 1400 BCE. The Egyptians valued needlework and created intricate designs using various techniques, including cross-stitching, embroidery, and tapestry. Men were skilled in using needles and other tools to produce clothing, accessories, and household items. The pharaohs, depicted in tomb paintings, were often shown wearing embroidered garments, indicating that needlework was a vital industry during that period. (McBrinn 2021)

In Europe during the medieval period, needlework was viewed as a male occupation. Men produced extraordinary embroidery for religious figures and royalty. They also sewed armor, banners, and tapestries bearing significant family and personal emblems. However, by the 16th century, needlework was deemed a female occupation, and men were no longer encouraged to pursue it. Needlework was considered a feminine activity, and a man seen involved in needlework was considered unsuitable for the masculine identity. (Adlington 2015)

In the 18th century, needlework saw a return to mainstream prominence as a gender-neutral industry in Europe. Men emerged as prominent stitchers during this period, and needlework became an essential social engagement for men of means. Amateur and professional associations of male stitchers emerged during the 18th century. In France, the men's needlepoint guild was established in 1662. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the Royal School of Needlework accepted male students for the first time in 1911. (McBrinn 2021)



Figure 6: A fine wool work of the H.M.S. Marlborough in full sail near a lighthouse, circa 1860.

This H.M.S. Marlborough (1855-1904)

From research, I have found that between 1840 to World War I, many British sailors would pass the time of long hours at sea, or in port, by stitching art works known as wool pictures, or in those times called Woolies. Many of these pieces show ships, ocean views and often symbols of patriotism. It is said these pieces were made by the sailors as a memory of their voyage, and to be a gift for a loved one when they returned.

In the early 20th century, the world marked a significant turn in gender roles and attitudes towards needlework by men. Knitting, specifically, emerged as a popular pastime for soldiers fighting in the First World War. Similarly, during the Second World War (WW2), knitting and needlework were used as therapeutic activities for wounded soldiers. The rise of post-war feminism saw men turning to more traditionally masculine hobbies, and needlework once more became a pastime reserved predominantly for females.

Despite stitch being viewed as a pastime, traditionally, for females since the WW2, male stitchers have continued to thrive in recent times. The essay will continue with looking at the craft and design revival of the 21st century, which has seen an emerging interest in needlework among men and non-binary individuals.

To continue with the argument of the stereotype associated with stitch, as seen in figure 7 below the works of Tom of Holland, who uses traditional darning techniques, and Stewart Easton, who combines embroidery and illustration in his art, have gained international acclaim for their innovative needlework will be discussed. Similarly, artist Jim Lawrence, who uses embroidery to create thought-provoking portraits that explore social issues through his work with thread.



Figure 7: Patching and Mending by Tom of Holland 2017

In conclusion, research into the three key words discussed, has provided a deeper interest to explore the association of stitching and sewing as a male pastime. The history of male stitch is a testament to the resilience of needlework as a craft, as well as the evolving attitudes towards gender roles. Men have always been involved in needlework. Nonetheless, it has been at different times and in various cultures and viewed as suitable or unsuitable for masculine identity. The rise and fall of needlework's popularity among men is heavily influenced by political, social, and cultural changes such as wars, post-war feminism movements, and changing attitudes towards gender expressions. As the revival of craft and design continues to thrive in the 21st century, it is likely that male stitch will regain its popularity, as more men navigate the needle and thread for personal and artistic expression. This leads to possible question/s for further research:

Questions- Why is stitch seen as a female activity?

Bibliography

Amy Twigger Holroyd (2019). *Fashion Knitwear Design*. The Crowood Press.

Reid, A. (2011). *Stitch magic : sculpting fabric with stitch*. London: A. & C. Black.

Chanin, N. (2018). *The geometry of hand-sewing : A Romance in Stitches and Embroidery from Alabama Chanin and The School of Making*. New York: Abrams.

Amy Twigger Holroyd (2017). *Folk Fashion*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Finlay, V. (2022). *Fabric : The Hidden History of the Material World*. London, Uk: Profile Books.

Adlington, L. (2015). *Stitches in Time*. Random House.

Benoit, C. (2011). Available at:
https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_etd/send_file/send?accession=kent1302280135&disposition=inline.

Parker, R. (1996). *The Subversive Stitch*.

Higgin, L., Margaret, M., Hulse, L. and School, R. (2010). *Royal School of Needlework handbook of embroidery (1880)*. London: Royal School Of Needlework.

Wayland, E. (1996). *Women's work - the first 20, 000 years : Women, cloth, and society in early times*. New York: W.W. Norton.

McBrinn, J. (2021). *Queering the Subversive Stitch*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Masculinity – Surgeons, upholstery, tailors, sailors, army

Stitches in Time by Lucy Adlington 2016

Female stitch artists- cayce zavaglia, lisa smirnova, Meredith woolnough,

Male stitch artists- Ben Venom, richard mcvetis, Orly Genger