

Title - How do designers use symbolism within embroidery and stitch?

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This is an extended essay, which overall investigates the idea of symbolism and how designers use symbolism within embroidery and stitch. From the research perspective, I will be looking into the representation of symbolism from a religious thought and to be looking at symbolism in some main themes including colour and pattern. My case studies and context will focus on Michelle Kingdom, Marjolein Starreveld, Willermien de Villers and Leslie Morgan combined with an exhibition called *The Crown to Couture* (2023) which explores stitch and embroidery from the fashion industry. I will use the work of theorists Tim Ingold, and Clare Hunter.

The word symbolism is defined as a “the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities” or even as “an artistic and poetic movement or style using symbolic images and indirect suggestion to express mystical ideas, emotions, and states of mind” (Oxford English Dictionary) showing me that there are more ways to define the word of symbolism. In relation to the symbolic use of textiles, some books explain that there is a purpose through a feeling in female characteristics. Presented in *the subversive stitch* by Rosita Parker saying that “When women embroider, it is seen not as an art, but entirely as an expression of femininity” (p.g 5) through this quote, it shows me that embroidery is more presented as a female dominated piece of work, However in The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms it is said that through the media of painting “symbolism was viewed as having developed from later Impressionism and from Neo-Impressionism which, in the 1880s, had increasingly concentrated on the suggestive rather than the descriptive” explaining how in the 1880s symbolism was more concentrated on the idea of suggesting ideas than the describing part of it, but how it was also first developed from the later impressionism saying symbolism perceived, in certain right-wing religious circles in France, as the art of materialism, concerned only with the everyday (The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms)

There is a clear historical and cultural background to the symbolic language used within embroidery (Hunter 2019). The word ‘embroidery’ is defined as “the art or pastime of embroidering cloth” (Oxford English Dictionary). These patterns were often narratives and had religious connotations. In Beryl Deans’ (date) book, *Embroidery in Religion and Ceremonial* she says that at “the present time symbolism seems to be less important than it was in the past when the spiritual ideas represented were generally known and recognised and the meaning understood” (pg. 31) which suggests that embroidery was a form of visual language represented in symbolism and that spiritual perspectives were acknowledged and understood by the users at the time. Deans also states that “Today some of the imagery seems to be irrelevant, and certain aspects are outmoded; the unreal natural history of the bestiaries is interesting and decorative but has little significance now.” (pg. 31) explaining that even today the imagery reference is still irrelevant and how it is said that its ‘outmoded’ meaning that the thought is old fashioned and out of date and has still not changed. Symbols can weaken the quality of the pattern used in some religious artefacts. Indeed, “some designers for the church prefer not to use symbols or signs, depending on the impact of the decorative quality of their work; and this may compensate for the lack of a deeper meaning” (pg. 31) church designers do not prefer to use symbols or signs only when there is an impact in their work in a decorative way, but it lacks some meaning in their work.

This is saying that symbolism in pattern sometimes not needed because it would bring down some designs when using symbolism providing the thought that is it worth including symbolism in design in general? Even though another thought was through embroidery which can have some meanings on colour, saying that “Yellow signifies sovereignty, it represents gold and stands for the sun” and how “black symbolises the evil principle, night and hell also sleep and rest” (pg. 41) this shows that Embroidery in a colour is shown another meaning compared to the meaning behind colour in general saying that it has a deeper meaning, coming from the

Symbolism is used by artist Michelle Kingdom who embraces the technique of embroidery and defines her work into a narrative story. According to Heidi Ingram (2016), her embroidery work is “deep and symbolic, exploring psychological landscapes and things no one talks about,” as exemplified in figure 1 which shows an embroidery piece, that shows a set of 26 men, that are dressed in grey tops with black trousers, rendered in applique, facing in a specific direction, with the outline of their shadow in white running stitch. The people are gazing over their own shadows. They are wearing black, which links to the idea of mourning and darkness, and grey that is mysterious but elegant at the same time. They are standing in a rigid formation and so appear to be in a school or army training ground.

Kingdom claims that there “was just something beautifully fragile, odd and otherworldly about the medium. Figurative embroidery seemed tailor-made for expressing secret thoughts.” And how it is shown through her piece *Headlong over Precipice* that was created in 2015. From the title, the word precipice suggests that the people shown are in a “dangerous situation” (ref). The dictionary definition continues that “they are extremely close to disaster or failure” (Collins Dictionary 2019), indicating that the piece is describing or predicting something about the future, which does not show a promising future.

The image shows 26 people standing in lines. They are depicted in greys and blacks giving the characters a feeling or a sense of darkness. From top to bottom, they are in five diagonal rows with a single person standing in a sixth row at the back. From front to back, they are in six rows with a single person standing in a seventh row at the front. This shows through the way that they are dressed it represents some sort of structure formation in relation to a higher demand place like an army training ground, or even a prison due to the matching of uniform. There is also the presence of an odd one out in each line, it suggests that they are being punished for doing something wrong. Although it does also present some sort of pattern dysfunction, and with the way it is structured; with the front three people being a regular size but then it decreases as the image transfers to the back, is possible showing more importance from the figures at the front than the back. There number 26 is an even number.



Figure 1

The stitch contained within the embroidery is running stitch and chain stitch in an applique technique. The word stitch is defined as “a loop of thread or yarn resulting from a single pass or movement of the needle in sewing, knitting, or crocheting.” (Oxford English Dictionary), However, in this embroidery it is used to show separateness of each individual. The use of embroidery in *Headlong over Precipice* embodies a powerful feeling of commandment and ordering thoughts with the lay out of the design, with the colour combination in the whole design.

In *Mary Thomas's Dictionary of Embroidery Stitches* (1936) it explains these stitches and the embroidery techniques. Running stitch according to Thomas, running stitch can be used through “commercial stitch” and how it “is usually done in running stitch as it is quicker and easy to keep neat on the reverse side” (p.g 229). However, with a ‘Chain stitch’ it is presented as a “simple, but very effective stitch. It can be used both as an outline stitch and as a filling stitch.” From *simple stitcher* by Helen Dickson published in 2013, although according to Thomas is “a good method, as it is usually worked on the back and produces a neat unbroken line of back stitching on the front” (pg.229).

Kingdom uses ‘Applique’ to form a narrative of a group of men standing in one direction, wearing grey and black clothes. Thomas describes the idea of ‘Applique’ emphasizing that it “is the method of applying one material to another by the means of decorative stitchery” (pg. 1). There are some unique ways to describe the way of using applique; Thomas explains that there is a “light and dainty applique on net offers just as much scope for skill and originality as some of the larger subjects” (p.g 3), saying that a very faint application is able to offer the same amount of effect that any original applique will give. However more specifically for Kingdoms work there is a more specific type of applique, from my thoughts it looks like that she uses a hand applique technique to create the sort of rough edges in the design Kingdom wanted to show a sort of dysfunctional feel towards her piece with what either men or women are facing with a combination of the negative feeling. She has subverted the traditional use of stitch to demonstrate the power over authority but showing a sense of the gaining or earning of power.



Figure 2

Another artist that represents the idea of symbolism in stitch is Marjolein Starreveld, is said to be known who is known for creating breath-taking designs with how she looks at symbolism. Starreveld said in an interview with Textile.org (2016) that she looks for “symbolism of vice and virtue, like in the paintings of the old masters,” explaining how her work uses the contrast of vice and virtue. Vice is defined as “acting as deputy or substitute” acting as the second in charge and virtue is the “a quality considered morally good or desirable in a person.” (Oxford Dictionary of English). When combined this begins to show a contrast between the feeling of being second best and the feeling of good, how attitude to morals can be visually depicted and through texture. This suggests that Starreveld looks at the symbolism in the deconstructed form and the high quality of fabrics shown in figure 2.

Overall, Starreveld’s work shows contrasts through a range of medias and is very original, considering that she looks not only at the new fabric pieces, but also takes an interest in traditional fabric. This is represented through her piece ‘Rosenroth’ (fig. 2). The piece shows a crown in reds with a head and shoulders beneath in grey thread. It is in a collection of collages about the idea of royalty, with a collage and stitch design. It has two colours: the crown is made up of autumn-coloured threads, and how they are defined in an article by Laurie Meyerpeter (2007) demonstrates that “yellow pigments which are present but hidden throughout the growing season” and how the “Red colour is strongly influenced by genetics which influence a different pigment” through these symbolisms that some of the seasons colours can be unnoticeable and others can have a strong presence towards. Or even the colours can be influenced by another colour entirely. These are contrasted with other material pieces of different texture of fabric which are grey and white. The fabric is raw and unprocessed. The juxtaposition of the grey and white, with the autumnal hues indicates the combination of what Starreveld idea of how she replies to textile.org in an interview that she looked at the disformed and deformation. The combination of rough

materials and soft materials creates a contrasting feel with a sense of old and new techniques showing that you can also use the latest fabrics, but she also respects the pieces as well and still tries to incorporate that in some way.



Figure 3

Other perspectives about the symbolism in embroidery or stitch can also be unique. In Tim Ingold's "the life of lines" (2015) he describes the meaning behind a *beam* which is "a ray or shaft of light" it also shows "a directional flow of particles" (Oxford English Dictionary). Ingold (p.98) explains the beam of light through embroidery and uses this image (fig. 3) called 'The beam of light from The Hours of Mary of Burgundy'. He says that the "beam is depicted as a thread, as is evident from the gesture of the lady's right hand, which pinches the thread between thumb and forefinger exactly as is done when spinning from a distaff with a drop spindle" (p.98) In this way a stitch and thread are representing the beam of light and is main focus of the piece. Demonstrated how it is linking towards the idea of women's work with the idea of a 'drop spindle' which is explained in an article by cliffhousealpacas (2014) saying it is "a stick or spindle on to which wool or flax is wound for spinning" it is said that "The distaff also became a symbol for the female branch of a family and an emblem of women's contributions to the fabric trade" said in an article in 2016 by Alison Reid. Explaining that Ingold wanted to show a strong representation towards women in general and how it represented only through the mother side of the family with it also following towards the fabric industry altogether.

Although Ingold replied that (2015, pg.98), a beam can "curl around and within things; they are never straight. As the atmosphere to which they belong, beams inhabit the realms of the in-between." Explain through Ingold's thoughts that a beam would never be presented in a straight line, but it can curl around objects and within them show the form of flexibility giving the resemblance towards the idea of stitch, with the idea of it being involved in the thoughts of a realm which is shown as "a field or domain of activity or interest" (Oxford

English Dictionary) showing that there is some interest come from where the light touches within the in-between but it may show some importance towards the piece.

But the focus of a line is not always its ability to link or mark out the in-between, there are also important sections to a design and the background. Specifically, the knotting also has some significance in a piece of Textile. Indeed, Ingold continues that “knotting is the fundamental principle of coherence” (p.g.14) and coherence is a “form a unified whole” (Oxford English Dictionary) it shows me that knotting is shown as a joining the piece together and making it a whole. Describes that the knots are showing as something that belongs in a piece of a design making, with it being a fundamental part and how “It is the way forms are held together and kept in place within what would otherwise be a formless and inchoate flux” (pg. 14). Ingold is describing that knots are shown as the piece to the final product to finish of a piece and how it cannot be finished without the knot to tie the design altogether.

Another theorist that also tells a story behind some of the threads, but also references meanings that are a part of a textile piece; is Clare Hunter (2019) in “*threads of life*”. Hunter describes the borders in embroidery saying that “Embroidered borders provide an emotive and satirical commentary that amplifies meaning and mood in a procession of symbolic motifs and cameos of everyday life” (pg. 7) saying that the borders in embroidery has some critical and strong feelings towards someone which is shown to change and enhance the overall thoughts about the piece as a whole, however sometimes it cannot be spotted or noticed. She continues that people “can no longer interpret all the tapestry’s double meanings, unravel its intellectual challenges or unpick the creative all the creative connections caught in the coloured thread” explaining that sometimes not all tapestry pieces can no longer interpret the meanings behind pieces, and explain that Hunter believes that artworks do not always show a meaning behind their work from anything not even the coloured threads telling me that sometimes meaning can't be interpreted in designs.

I came across Willemien De Villiers, who is a South African artist, that experiments with themes that include nature, gender inequality, misogyny, and patriarchy. Her work is presented as a delicate set of intricate and interlinked pieces that are formed through her emotions of the deeper interconnection towards the world (Willemien, 2023).

From a symbolism perspective, Willemien would often use references to thread, where the colours would be pinks, reds, browns, and the off whites, which would be inspired from the body figure. Another addition is how she combines the stains that are contaminated in the fabrics, which interprets the symbolic meaning towards the living experience of women and the traumas for as well.

This can be represented through her collection series titled “Subversive Bride” the meaning of subversive is defined as a “seeking or intended to subvert an established system or institution” (Oxford Dictionary in English) or the idea it is trying also “to try to destroy or damage something” (Cambridge Dictionary) saying that behind the piece have something mentioning destroying or damaging something is Willemien’s past life that she experienced.

But also how in the Subversive stitch by Rosika Parker mentioned in her book that “The manner in which embroidery signifies both self-containment and submission is the key to understanding women’s relation in art” (pg.11), wording how embroidery is that from a women's relationship towards art, can signify that it is “the condition of being complete, or having all that is needed, in itself” (Oxford Dictionaries) and the process of submitting something it also explains how “embroidery has provided a source of pleasure and power of women” (pg.11) describing how embroidery has a very strong representation towards women thoughts.

Which is represented through willers work, where through textile.org with an interview by Heidi Ingram (2016) Willemien’s mentioned that the main direction of inspiration to a brides Trousseau which is “the clothes, linen, and other belongings collected by a bride for her marriage.” (Oxford English Dictionary), where it is a collection of tablecloths and other domestic fabrics, that had developed stains in which to explore the patriarchy and the restriction of women. Where the inspiration from Willemien’s own personal background comes into motion, because the tablecloth was a possession that belonged to her sister in laws grandfather's wife.

In the piece, there were some representations of stains that are coloured as red stains, symbolizing to me that it may represent a sort of bloodstain effect telling me, saying that it is symbolizing the time of the month for every woman and how it described in Willemien’s definition that she was ‘childless’ due to not be able to give birth. Other references in this piece can be shown through wedding themes around the pieces; one of them being the lace detail that is found on the pieces, in W Magazine by Camille Okhio in 2022 showing that lace can be “lace is charged with a myriad of emotions, experiences, meanings, and memories”. Demonstrating that lace has a resemblance towards the idea of connection to past life. The piece altogether shown is wanting to show some glimpses and references towards what to come but also what is in the past. However, it does show some parts as unhappy emotions to contrast with but referencing the life experience.



Figure 4

In *Embroidered Textiles: Traditional patterns from Five continents*, by Shelia Paine (1995) she explains that in some areas of Africa she talks about the male robes saying that they are “embroidered in bold asymmetric patterning of interlacing, spirals, squares, triangles and circles” (pg.30). Paine is describing that ‘asymmetric’ saying “it is having parts which fail to correspond to one another in shape, size, or arrangement; lacking symmetry” (Oxford English Dictionary) demonstrates that embroidery in African culture is shown as a combination of patterning that is failing to respond to the idea of a shape looking at the basic structures and size. Altogether demonstrating that they do not have a sense of perfection in their embroidery, but it is still shown as the lack arrangement and presented in other ways of perfection.

Currently, African textiles are represented as a new perception towards symbolism. In an article created called *The Documentation of Embroidery Types in South Western Nigeria* produced in 2016, where the embroidery is said that “most designs have different symbolic interpretation irrespective of similarities of Decoration” (pg. 9) and how “some motifs on embroidered garments have no symbolic connotations attached to them” (pg.9), the meaning of ‘irrespective’ demonstrating that it is “not taking (something) into account” (Oxford English Dictionary). Signifying, that most designs in the African culture that some designs do have unique symbolic meanings, although designs may not have been considered in the comparisons in decorations, and saying how motifs indicate that there is no reference to any symbolic contexts towards them. Although, throughout the article, there can be similarities between motifs for instance “Aska ska Biu (two knives) Hausa is called abe meji (two knives) in Yoruba” (p.g.9). Signifying to me different country's embroidery meaning can signify the same things sometimes but on in another way. Even though there is some symbolism in motif designs it can also be shown through written elements as well, how it was saying in an article by Maude e Southwell Wahlman ‘African symbolism in Afro-American Quilts’ explaining that “Quilt Designs may also be inspired by African writing traditions, which often use cloth as a medium for ideographs” (pg.71) ideographs meaning that “a character symbolizing the idea of a thing without indicating the sounds used to say it”. (Oxford English Dictionary) shows me that African traditional writing has a very direct concept towards their main theme and how African “writing is considered as sacred and protective, associated with knowledge, power and intelligence” (pg.71) Demonstrating, how writing is shown as a version of a controlling feeling in a positive way, with the idea of it being untouchable combined with a strong understanding giving through the idea of power over everything. On the other hand, from an Africa's religious thought it is said that “Central Africa, priests use symbolic art forms related to the Kongo cosmogram” Saying that it is “a circle Containing 4 points around indicating birth, life death and rebirth in the world of the ancestors underneath the sea” compared to religious beliefs explains that there are shown to be different understandings when it comes to the symbolic reasons through embroidery but containing a very dark feeling towards the knowledge in a religious perspective from a simple circle design. I think, altogether African culture in symbolism can be presented as a thought on not considering the but has a strong presence to religion, combined with a powerful negative but positive presence.

Considering that “a quilt is a quilt is a quilt, colours, patterns, techniques, and materials are all clues as to the maker behind the quilt” (Selvege the fabric of Life pg.35) Even from the different parts to a quilt it can explain the meaning behind the designer, which can be shown through Leslie Morgans work, who is known as an embroider who creates quilts, with the combination of multiple techniques; involving screen printing, painting, mono printing, and other techniques.

That enables her designs to contain a sense of meaning, texture, atmosphere, and mood in her work. Morgan is known as a storyteller, where her work, enables it to connect back to her life experiences. Which is shown through her dialogues of an abstract emotion in nature but full of personal symbolism, and to the considering of fabrics and relationship to each other through the concept, mood and message that can harmonies well together.

For Instance, symbolism can be represented through Leslie Morgan's work, which would include her series called ‘New Life Rising’, which can be shown through the inspiration of a colour palette theme related to a cloth. That was referenced from her previous series titled ‘If you are up a ladder Boogie’ was said to be developed by overseeing risks and enabling them to be developed booking more specifically at ‘Fragments of survival.’ First of all looking at the words, ‘fragments’ from my understanding, it demonstrates that it is separated from something, and combined with survival meaning the idea of the continuation of living and staying alive, shows me that this piece of work is telling me that it sounds like this piece was trying to keep the itself together and connecting together through fragments and not to break a connection with the idea of it may saying that someone was trying to stay alive which may show resemblance to morgans life experience. And how the piece is present in the colour scheme of black and white, which can be described in Black and white – symbolic meaning in the art & design exhibition description that “White is pure light and black is the absence of light. In many ways, these two non-colours are associated with life and death rituals”. Shows me that her piece might have an extremely dark mood backstory and the idea of someone is fighting for their life with the fragments holding together.

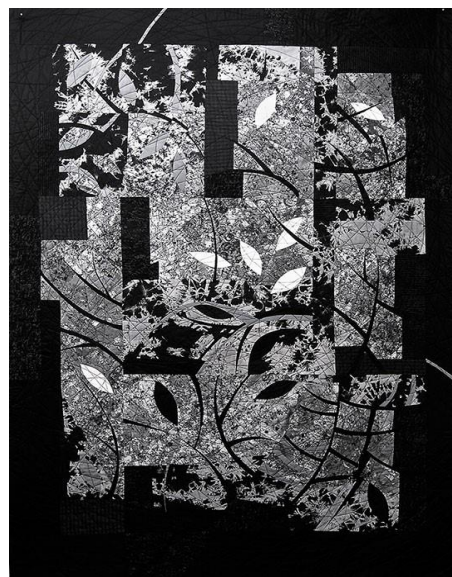


Figure 5

Sometimes, symbolism is not always referenced to interiors, but Fashion can also show some resemblance towards symbolism, from embroidery and stitching with powerful meanings to not just from the past life but also to the present and future predictions; it can be represented in *to Coulture Magazine* which is showing a Fashion Embroidery piece which is shown through a "LOEWE bespoke printed leg of mutton sleeves cotton pique polo with detailed embroidery and hand beading, printed twill de laine trousers with hand-beading" (pg.100) Which is shown as a collaboration between Dan levy and Designer Loewe's called 'In American: A Lexicon of Fashion' (who creates Designs on a modern perspective of masculinity and femininity) where he drew inspiration from AIDS activists David Wojnarowicz best known for designs around civil rights and gay identity. It is built upon an image of two men kissing from Wojnarowicz's work named after a homophobic cartoon the artist came across.

This piece of work shows a strong resemblance to gender and identity and how levy replied that he wanted to symbolise "the resilience, the love, and the joy" written by Christina marfice in 2021, meaning that levy wanted to show the resilience which is the "capacity to withstand or to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness" (Oxford Dictionaries) showing me that the symbolism in the outcome it representing the difficulties that some people had to overcome but how it is also showed a positive vibe with the idea of love and joy involved as well. From a closer descriptive view, the colours presented in the piece with the colour blue showing as the main statement colour represents the idea of the sky and sea that also can be associated by inspiration, the idea of open space, freedom, and imagination. Contrasting with the meanings of loyalty, wisdom, confidence, faith, and intelligence. Shows me the representation of the ability to not be afraid with the idea of being confident in what they are doing is right thing. Although, there are other colours besides blue; there is some representation of pink, to the show an idea of passion and then hints of green says that it symbolises the thought of growth and the new developments. There is unusual present towards maps as well it tells a sense of direction for someone who is lost and following yourself into the right path or how there are other people that are like you and the idea that you are not alone.

Overall, this piece shows me that it the piece wants to say that anyone can be anything with the either starting off or already in the mix that have the confidence and the passion to be who they are and to say that all around the world there are other people like yourself you just need to look for them, representing the idea of the gay rights and civil rights in the gay community.



Figure 6

Symbolism in embroidery can be shown through a religious perception but saying that there is some unimportance from the present more than the past, with the idea that religious colour perception is shown through more expansive thoughts with the resemblance towards the idea of life and death. With the thought of exploring the structure and form of a design the colours and numbers. Developing through original techniques from applique, running and chain stitch and learning more about the meaning behind each and how they are involved in a piece of design. Looking more deeper into the knowledge of colour, looking at meanings in a single colour but also double colour meanings that have a stronger meaning. But looking at the comparison of new and old materials, with how embroidery line can be shown as a representation towards women, linking to the idea of a drop spindle. Or the idea of parts of embroidery and stitch refer to everyday life of artists and theorists themselves explaining how they get inspiration from everyday life from there past and present and how it is predicting the future in their own lives. Throughout my research symbolism in embroidery and stitch can be presented in many other ways; from colour, pattern, techniques interiors and fashion. Through gender, civil rights and how artists link piece to their past, present and future lives to emulate a strong and powerful message to the audience.

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