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Dissertation Proposal

From tapestries to today's textiles industry, the way we view embroidery has shifted monumentally throughout our society. In this essay, I will explore the juxtaposition and symbolism within my key words; Embroidery, Domesticity and Femininity. I will be looking into how different movements have reflected the perception of women through the ages. I will be researching into the cult of domesticity and how they believed in controlling the way women acted, behaved and reinforced confinement of the home. While also commenting on the way these setbacks led to the progression of women in the art industry. I want to look into how femininity was seen as being confined to one's gender and identify the shift in womens growth.



Figure 1. 'Maidstone July' (James, 2006).

Keyword: Embroidery

Textiles can be seen as being vital to society due to it being used in versatile industries and art practises. However, the fabric creating them takes mass amounts of energy, uses up endless quantities of resources and it often leaves huge volumes of waste.

'An average consumer throws away 70 pounds (31.75 kilograms) of clothing per year. Globally we produce 13 million tons of textile waste each year 95% of which could be reused or recycled' (Herbszt, 2019).

The way textiles are fabricated and what you do with the pollutants involved in production can often have a huge effect on the environment. 'However, hand embroidery has potency far deeper than its decorative surface: it is a form of handwriting delineating the domestic,

the social and political' (Millar, 2012). This leads me on to my first key word; Embroidery meaning 'patterns that are sewn onto cloth using threads of various colours; cloth that is decorated in this way' (Oxford University Press, 2020). Similar to the textiles artist Rosie James, I believe embroidery reflects the physical traces of the stitcher symbolizing the transition from craft to art. To me thread on fabric can have the same desired artistic effect as a pen stroke on paper.

A major component in material culture is textiles. In today's society, textiles can be linked with products of technology, items of trade, consumer goods and cultural symbols. The art of textiles is a notion of human activity, it expresses value of many kinds. When looking at textiles it is important to take into consideration the history in order to understand the significance behind the craft.

Judith Brown stated, 'The industrial revolution has moved basic textile work out of the home and into large factories; we buy our clothing ready-made. It is a rare person in our cities who has ever spun thread or woven cloth, although a quick look into a fabric store will show that many women still sew' (Barber, 1995).

Prior to the Industrial revolution, the textiles industry primarily depended on women to create hand embroidered pieces. Materials could be delivered to the home, allowing women to focus on domestic duties such as childbearing and improving upon their artistic ability. Whilst also reflecting the confinement of the home. From handspun wool to cotton, the invention of the loom and spinning jenny meant that cotton eventually replaced wool in the textiles industry, therefore representing the age of production. During the industrial revolution, textile mills created new and exciting opportunities for women in the workplace. Many women worked in the textiles industry, which was considered far less dangerous than jobs in coal mining. However the textiles industry was overcrowded and dangerous due to accidents in the workplace. Women often worked in unsanitary workplace environments due to there being no health and safety regulations leading to many casualties and tragedies. The industrial revolution gave women freedom and accomplishment as they were earning their own wage in the textiles industry and yet women were paid poorly for their exertion, forcing them to rely on their husbands or fathers income. Many artists who created textiles in the industrial age have gone unaccounted for, this is primarily due to women's successes not being acknowledged in this time period. Similar to one of the world's most influential female writers; Jane Austen, she too did not get full recognition for her writings until after her death, when society had a different view on women. Jane Austen was an English novelist whose work depicted love, marriage and the time period in which they were created. 'A

woman, especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can' (Goodreads, 2020). Jane Austen was a fairly harsh moralist, her female characters weren't allowed to pursue individual courses of behaviour such as passion or rebellion. This may be a reflection of societal times. During this time, her portrayal of gender norms and stereotypes were not perceived as being controversial or blasphemous like it would be in today's society. People believed that this was an accurate representation of women. Beliefs of the time period were reinforced by popular cultural ideals and going against these societal norms could result in ridicule or harassment. I believe that women were continuously trapped within a patriarchal structure of which they were yet to escape.



Figure 2. 'Domestic Dancing' (Hankwitz, 2012).

Keyword: Domesticity

My next keyword is Domesticity meaning 'the state of being domestic; domestic or home life' (Dictionary.com, 2020). I believe domesticity is a direct correlation between women and how they were once treated as second class citizens to males. Domestic is also referenced as being 'A servant hired to work for a household' (Merriam-Webster, 2020). Many perceived women to be less worthy than their male superiors and not abiding of male standards. This is the result of men having ownership over women's possessions and earnings. During this time, married women had no legal rights. This meant that in rare cases of divorce or domestic

abuse charges, custody favoured the husband, revealing the way women were trapped in a patriarchal society.

‘The cult of domesticity was strong among the middle class by the 1830s, emphasizing the sanctity and purity of family life and the moral task of women as mothers and wives’ (Wolff, 1995).

The cult of Womanhood or cult of Domesticity was a belief that transformed into a mindset, which declared the way in which women were to act and function in society during the 1800's. The four cardinal virtues of the cult of domesticity included; piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. It could almost be described as an ideology. As "cultural beliefs that justify particular social arrangements, including patterns of inequality" Maconis, J. (2010). Unknowingly, dominant people use cultural beliefs such as the cult of domesticity, to keep a level of social understanding. Such as, reinforcing obstacles to keep women from evolving. Outward appearance was important during this time as many believed that the way women presented themselves, reflected their husbands income and therefore represented the social position of the family. This belief was mostly apparent amongst the middle and upper class society and eventually extended to women of any social status. The cult of domesticity stated that women should devote themselves to their religion, act subservient and to prioritise the needs of household duties before their own. During this time period women were given far less opportunities regarding education, politics, work and social status. The men of this time, engaged in politics, business and commerce whereas women had no political voice. Religion offered women an escape from the home, a place of belonging and the ability to further a woman's education through teaching and bible readings, 'She felt that her destiny had been shaped by her gender' (Cambridge University Press, 2020). During the late 1800's, women were still struggling to achieve public visibility and female practitioners were still treated differently to male artists. For many centuries artistic expression has focused on home life. 'Housework, Gender and Subjectivity: Cultures of Domesticity is an exhibition inspired by the work of feminist media artists working with issues of spectatorship, self, and identity' (Abrahams, 2012). The exhibition was created by artist; Molly Hankwitz whose work focuses on domesticity within the home, the space representing the various aspects of gender subjectivity. Molly Hankwitz investigates the roles of women throughout different cultures, commenting on the stereotypical ideology of the housewife. Her digital performance piece; 'Domestic Dancing' portrays a woman vacuuming in her kitchen, played on a continuous loop. Though the piece may seem simplistic, it is the context behind it that makes the piece significant. Many believe that the kitchen is symbolic of a woman's place. I believe that the 'Domestic Dancing' piece is on a

continuous loop because it represents the consistencies between women and their household duties. "Food and clothing: These are what societies worldwide have come to see as the core of women's work" (Barber, 1995). Throughout the ages, Women have predominantly dedicated their lives to being a key figure of the home and childbearers. This digitized performance piece makes a clear comment on the expectancies of a woman's place in the industrial revolution.

Keyword: Femininity

My final keyword is described as having qualities traditionally assigned to women. Femininity is defined as 'the quality of being feminine; womanliness' (Dictionary.com, 2020). I view this as an outdated statement, due to societies' evolution of these ideologies. In today's society, we have grown to understand femininity as an expression of individuality. 'But femininity cannot be understood as a fixed set of essential traits that characterize all women' (Windsor, 2015). Masculinity and femininity can be expressed through social roles and one's perception of identity relating to gender, sexuality, race, age, ethnicity and class. Due to this, there is no single definition of femininity or masculinity that truly describes all men and all women. Gender ideology shows us that there is a direct contrast between gender and sex, stating that when you are born you are given a gender identity that acts as a guideline for behavioural and social expectancies, throughout one's lifetime.

"The expression of gender characteristics that are not stereotypically associated with one's assigned sex at birth is a common and culturally diverse human phenomenon that should not be judged as inherently pathological or negative" (Gires, 2019).

Throughout history, femininity has been a term used to predominantly describe women's attributes or qualities such as; nurturing, demure and cultivating. However in today's society, femininity can be representative of one's gender identity instead of an oppressing, stereotypical portrayal of women. In the art world, the term femininity represents the feminist art movement and women's fight for artistic equality in the nineteenth century.



Figure 3. 'The Annunciation of the Virgin Ideal' (Perry, 2012).

For centuries, both male and female artists have portrayed femininity within their work including; the pre-raphaelites whose paintings depicted many of Shakespeare's beloved femme fatales and medieval art. In today's art society, Grayson Perry is famously known for his variety of works that reflect both masculinity, femininity and gender stereotypes. 'There is a strong autobiographical element in his work, in which images of Perry as 'Claire', his female alter-ego, often appear' (Tate, 2011). Grayson Perry is an contemporary English artist (Born on the 24th of March), 1960) whose work is celebrated for his embroidered tapestries, ceramic vases and his controversial cross - dressing. Grayson Perry has claimed; 'I just love dressing up in everything a man is supposed not to be, in all that vulnerability, sweetness, preciousness and impracticality' (Jeffries, 2003). Grayson Perry viewed the risk of crossdressing as an exciting aphrodisiac, resulting in him revealing his gender identity to the artworld, this can also be shown within his practise. Grayson Perry created his large tapestries using a computer generated loom, which I believe is a representation of the industrial revolution and the change from handspun textiles and hand stitched embroidery to the modernised spinning wheel and loom. Perry was born into the information age, this meant that he was born into the prime time of technology and the uprising of knowledge and research. I believe that this is clearly shown within Grayson Perry's practise because his work uses public opinion as a way to inform his art. Though Grayson Perry was born into the information age, he grew up in a time where dressing up as a woman was frowned upon due to societal and cultural opinion. 'Sexuality is like going through a maze, in the dark' (Channel4, 2016). This meant that though sexual orientation and gender identity was known about, it wasn't widely talked about and was often hidden away. I believe that this could be one of the reasons, as to why Grayson Perry explores the themes of gender, identity and social class within his work as art can be seen as a true reflection of the self. Though Grayson

Perry doesn't define himself as being feminine, I believe that his work clearly depicts femininity through the males perspective, representing the deconstruction of gender stereotypes in current society.

To conclude this dissertation proposal, I have researched into the direct correlation of my three key words; Embroidery, Domesticity and Femininity. Whilst doing this, I have now recognised the significant link between these words and the importance in which the role the industrial revolution played in the relation to the evolution of these words. These keywords are symbolic of societal ideologies that oppressed women, leading to women's growth. I believe that it is crucial that these controversial topics are widely talked about, in order to inform and educate people on women's historical backgrounds. This is due to the textiles artists during the arts and crafts movement, whose names went unaccounted for due to their work being seen as feminine by male artists. I have deconstructed the way in which society views femininity by looking at contrasting opinions and beliefs. This essay has made me think about textiles and the way women have taken embroidery outside of home life and transformed it into being one of the worlds biggest industries. Unknowingly, my three key words have impacted upon my practise, allowing me to explore varied areas which has led me towards my final dissertation question:

'Has the advancement of technology meant the demise of hand embroidery?'

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