

Review Essay: Inclusive Textile Histories: Gender, Geo-politics and Decoration

Queering the Subversive Stitch: Men and the Culture of Needlework. Joseph McBrinn, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021. 231 pp., 16 col. and 71 b&w illus., paper, £23.99. ISBN 978-1-4725-7804-4.

Decorative Arts of the Tunisian École: Fabrications of Modernism, Gender and Power. Jessica Gerschultz, Penn State University Press, 2019. 256 pp., 42 col. and 79 b&w illus., cloth, \$99.95. ISBN 978-0-271-08318-6.

Textiles as National Heritage: Identity, Politics and Material Culture. Gabriele Mentges and Lola Shamukhitdinova (eds.), Waxmann Verlag, 2017. 322 pp., cloth, €34.90. ISBN: 9783830936091.

Decoration has secured a foothold within cultural history scholarship, but the legacy of disempowering associations with the artisanal, the amateur, the domestic, the feminine, the parochial, most stridently articulated in the Greenbergian trope of 'kitsch', still cast long shadows.¹ The three books explored here demonstrate the active role of decorative practices produced in under-represented contexts played in the articulation of contested identity politics. Their methodological frameworks offer productive synergies with the research agendas of students and scholars committed to decolonization and gender inclusivity. Each offers fresh primary evidence in the form of less-discussed material case studies located historically through diligent investigations of archives and respectful collaborations with local makers and scholars. Joseph McBrinn recalibrates histories of needlework to engage meaningfully with queer identities and practices. Jessica Gerschultz assesses how decoration was engaged in the reconstruction of colonial Tunisia and feminine agency into a new independence. Gabriele Mentges and Lola Shamukhitdinova investigate how textiles transmit contemporary identity and preserve contested heritages across Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and beyond. The rigorous transnational and interdisciplinary approaches exemplified in all three volumes resonates with the important reassessment of national design histories and gender of the last decade.²

McBrinn's book, *Queering the Subversive Stitch*, places masculinity centre stage opening up new case study focal points and theoretical vistas within the gender politics of needlework.³ Structured into six chapters, the volume juxtaposes three chapters that transcend temporal frames to articulate their explorations of methodological frameworks with three period-specific chapters. These central three chapters each highlight a distinctive chronological moment where masculinity and the creation of objects through sewing intersect: Victorian handicrafts and homosexuality; amateur masculine needlecrafts and modernism and masculine cloth and sewing amidst postmodernity. The geography of most of the chapters opens up global perspectives; chapters three and four focus in more particularly upon British and American case studies to unpack Victorian and Modernist contexts.

The introduction and second chapter lucidly establish the historiography of scholarship which inform the fresh contributions of McBrinn's argument. Rozsika Parker's paradigmatic study, *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), remains an essential touchstone for textile and gender histories; it operates as a theoretical contrapuntal core throughout McBrinn's book. He redeploys the methodological strategies of Parker's intervention to include boys and men who embroider in the ongoing critique of patriarchy, eloquently problematising the subtle negotiations in play:

I realize that there could be no more phallocentric act than inserting men into the narratives of women's history (as embodied in needlework), but it remains problematic that even though feminist discourse has long exposed the relational hierarchical constructions of gender and cultural production, needlework is continually (mis)read in gendered terms, regulating and stabilizing the very binary identities that feminism purports to deconstruct and dismantle. (pp. 40-1).

These methodological renegotiations thread a thoughtfully fluid theorization of masculinity, homosexuality and subcultures, as well as class and race, into a nuanced analysis grounded in fascinating textual and visual primary sources.

McBrinn reveals how the historical complexities of the act of needlework can be witnessed through impressively interdisciplinary case studies. His analysis deploys an involving spectrum of textual evidence, embracing the literary writing (contemporary poetry of Stephen Beal, novel writing from Henry James and E F. Benson to Alan Hollinghurst), sociological discourse (sexology treatises of

Havelock Ellis) alongside craft criticism and advice literature written by both heterosexual and homosexual men (articles for the magazine *Cross Stitcher* penned by trade unionist Norman Willis, the foundational manual *Needlepoint for Men* (1973) by Rosey Grier, the editorial agency of Louis Gartner promulgating 'creative crafts' in *House and Garden*, the exhibitions and articles produced by Russell Lynes in conjunction with the magazine *Art in America*) even rejoicing in the inclusion of coded Polari 'plain sewing' into the Oxford English Dictionary. Throughout the volume, the contested gendering of sewing is represented in drawn, painted, photographic and cinematic media as well as evoked through exhibition practices demonstrating the prolific historic record of men and boys stitching discernible across private, public and commercial visual cultures. McBrinn's impressive book engages meaningfully with an extraordinary spectrum of needlework with nuance. Makers, objects and writers situated within the cultural settings of galleries and art publications receive the most sustained attention, but informal, 'everyday' practices are also well-represented. This fresh primary research facilitates a nuanced and persuasive theoretical reassessment of how masculine sewing has been mobilized not only to stigmatise identities beyond heteronormativity, but also to resist and to subvert this oppression by investing this creative practice with coded and declarative manifestations of queer identity.

The three central chapters focus in upon Victorian, modernist and postmodern contexts respectively. Chapter three opens with a lucid juxtaposition of the tuition in needlecrafts enacted upon the Duke of Windsor and his brothers by Queen Mary with that of working-class boys in Metropolitan District Schools under the auspices of the Elementary Education Act of 1870. The ensuing close analysis of literary representations of male embroiderers in the circle around Henry James and Roger Fry illuminates the complex balance of self-realization and 'homosexual panic' witnessed in these narratives. A history of exhibitions of Bloomsbury embroidery recognizes the public dissemination of the collaborative needlework engaged in by Duncan Grant and the women of the Bloomsbury group. These earlier case studies locate and extend the final section where McBrinn deepens his own previously published analyses of Ernest Thesiger and the Disabled Soldier's

Embroidery Industry. Chapter four examines how the therapeutic engagement with needlework by veterans continued to operate after the Second World War, exploring private and public American networks across which the photographer George Platt Lynne practiced embroidery. Chapter five opens up global perspectives on the contemporary politics of cloth contextualizing canonical examples such as the AIDS quilt and the work of Yinka Shonibare within diverse vistas of gallery installations and objects which negotiate experiences of shame exploring both 'queer domesticity' and 'gay pornography'. The fascinating case studies of this chapter embrace mixed media, the intersections of embroidery, photography and sculpture such as the work of Satoru Aoyama and Michael Brennand-Wood. The empowering role of exhibitions at institutions such as the Craft Council in the United Kingdom and New South Wales in Australia, the Serpentine Gallery, London, the Shelbourne Museum, Vermont and the Lesli-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art, New York is rightly celebrated. The voice of this book speaks equally lucidly to students, scholars and engaged readers, achieving that challenging task of revealing fresh primary research and insights grounded in a nuanced synthesis of the established field.

The intersections of gendered hierarchies within the arts of decoration and post-colonial geo-politics are the core impetus of Gerschultz's important monograph. *Decorative Arts of the Tunisian École: Fabrications of Modernism, Gender and Power* represents a decade of multi-lingual, interdisciplinary research of the highest standard. Focussing principally upon tapestry weaving, alongside painted and ceramic mural forms, the study assesses how pedagogy, creative labour and artisanal practices played a vital role in the statecraft and post-independence cultural and touristic policy in the Arab African context of Tunisia. Habib Bourguiba's leadership in securing independence from French colonial rule in 1956, his appointment first as prime minister of the Kingdom of Tunisia then, when the republic was declared in 1957, his 30-year presidency informs the periodization of the project between 1948 and 1972. The nomenclature of core mediating institutions such as the gallery founded in 1960 known as both 'Les Métiers' and 'al Hira' interlinks French artisanal traditions and Arab 'craft' thereby manifesting fundamental transnational networks and disrupting received 'art-

artisanal binary' at the heart of Tunisian visual culture: 'While following no singular question or motivation, these artists shaped modernist thought and practice through the interrogation of art-artisanal binaries and intersectional identities by reimagining, refuting, and reproducing asymmetrical relationships.' (p. 10).

The history of institutions and pedagogy are at the core of Gerschultz's argument and fresh primary research. The connections between government cultural policy and funding are diligently charted from the legacies of colonial rule through the project of independence and the formulation of *tunisianité* (Gerschultz 2019, 19). Energised by Bourguiba's state feminism, the *École de Tunis* transfigured itself from a closed circle of gentlemen artists to include a community of Muslim women engaged in emancipating artisanal practices. Safia Farhat, first woman director of the *École des Beaux-Arts* of Tunis, emerges as a motivating force promulgating the persona of the woman weaver both in her teaching and the formation of the journal *Faïza* (Arabic for 'victorious').

Gerschultz assesses the impact of this programme with subtle nuance, honouring the aspirations to achieve the reconciliation of contrasting imperatives of cultural heritage and regenerative modernisation, whilst nonetheless recognizing disempowering dichotomies of status vestigially embedded within the mediation of artisanal craft. The power dynamics informing relationships between the cartoon artist, the weaver, patrons and mural decoration are at the heart of current scholarly debates about tapestry and modernism.⁴ A highlight of Gerschultz's argument is her recognition of the volatility of hierarchies operating across ever-shifting transnational and gender fluidity. Whilst capturing colonial legacies adopted from France, the book foregrounds multiple indigenous cultural traditions and volatile political forces within Tunisia often lost in 'international' modernist histories of tapestry. State policies and educational programmes, private ateliers and galleries, civic spaces and mediating publications are interconnected in a careful social history evidenced through close analysis of well-chosen visual case studies lavishly illustrated. The impact of

legislation such as the One Percent Law providing funding for public arts in civic building explicitly demonstrates the relationships of government agency upon craft pedagogy and practice.

Structured into six chapters, the book uses its first two and fourth chapters to map how the transition from a colonial period towards an independent Tunisia reverberated in the material creativity and state-supported pedagogy of French male painters such as Pierre Boucherle, Jacques Marmey and Jean Lurçat. The heart of the book sings forth mostly mellifluously in the central chapters devoted to the women students enrolled in the tapestry programme at the New *École* around Farhat who materialised *tunisianité* on their looms and in their lives. Gerschultz clearly secured the trust of these women who shared fascinating recollections and candid photographs of teaching studios and prize-givings. This extraordinary fresh primary evidence is explored in dialogue with critical writing within Tunisian journals and press of the time such as *Faïza* and *Femme*, journal of the National Union of Tunisian Women, as well as government agency publications such as the bi-monthly *Tourism in Tunisia*, important contextual sources rarely included in histories of post-war art and decoration. The textual analysis of student essay writing produced at the satellite pedagogic 'Artisanal City' of Den Den capturing under-represented voices of these women makers demonstrates the superb calibre of archival research Gerschultz achieves in her book (pp. 136-7).

The final chapter explores the private tapestry studio financed and directed by Farhat in Radès, as she built upon the commercial success of her enterprise, Société Zin. The complex ambivalences of Gerschultz's argument are perfectly sustained in this last case study, where the tensions between empowering and hierarchical energies of women's weaving practices and their reception strain against each other. One cannot help but feel Farhat's decision to follow the conventions of her Modernist brothers, signing these collectively created tapestries, although no doubt pragmatically motivated to secure the best financial opportunities, nonetheless did undercut the affirming empowering energy at the heart of this collaborative female creative environment. Gerschultz's concluding attentive analysis of Farhat's *Ulysses* and *Penelope* tapestries of 1970 persuasively brings

the argument full circle where textile and context resonate in the unresolved reimagining of the epic poem echoing Tunisia's troubled futures. The careers and decorations for state offices for tourism and textile industries, hotels, schools and private commission of Féla Kéfi, Halouma Karoui, Jellal Ben Abdallah, Abdelaziz Gorgi, Zoubeir Turki, Habiba Doula and many more illustrated and discussed carefully in this book may well be unfamiliar to even well-versed students and researchers in the field of 1950s modernism. Gerschultz's book is a core intervention in the reimagining and decolonisation of modern period syllabi and scholarship.

Textiles as National Heritage: Identity, Politics and Material Culture translates impactful new research into the role of textiles in embodying the multiple ethnicities and contested geo-political heritages of the fluid nation states and empires of Central Asia for an anglophone audience. Both based at the University of Dortmund, Mentges and Shamukhitdinova who edited the volume, secured contributions from an impressively interdisciplinary constellation of scholars principally working within Kazakhstan as well as some colleagues based in Europe and America. Generative research collaborations into textile cultures within post-Soviet Uzbekistan undertaken between 2010-12 and 2013-15 brought together designers, craft-makers, retailers, galleries and collectors as well as University researchers. The book is formed of five thematic sections varying from two to four chapters in length. The clusters explore how national identity is embodied in textile heritage, the mobility of craft technologies, typologies of textiles as markers of identity, 'consumption scapes' and the role of collectors, museums and UNESCO in performing and preserving these heritages. Two of fifteen chapters are devoted to contexts outwith Central Asia (Algeria and Peru). Mentges' introductory remarks articulate a succinct historiography of how decolonising energies within heritage debates might operate amidst the particularities of Central Asia across the trajectory of legacies of the Silk Road, fashion and textile production and trade at the moment of publishing in 2017. A clear articulation of the complex geopolitics of these regions inhabited, traversed and conquered for centuries by multiple ethnicities and ideological regimes will be a great boon to

novitiates to this area of study, introducing these contested pasts and their impacts upon creative industries and trade:

This Uzbek option for the classical form of state building allocates to textile culture a central place in order to encapsulate – materially – the difference between what is its own and what is not. It becomes potentially useful in numerous ways in the discovery of a national identity: as lived memory, i.e. as a performative memory technique looking back to Central-Asian past preceding both, phases of Czarist colonization and Soviet modernization; as visualized history, as specific commercial tool and finally as a medium for the display of national brands on the global market (p. 18).

As with Gerschultz's book, this collection of well-focussed case-study essays introduces objects and cultural histories still often outwith the committed attempts of educators, curators and scholars to promulgate more inclusive worldwide syllabi, displays and analyses. The methodological aims of the chapters encompass attentive technical studies, such as Melanie Krebs on vegetable dyes.

Shamukhitdinova is equally dextrous in material analyses of pattern making and the examination of touristic and fashion consumers of Uzbek skullcaps. The thought-provoking chapter by Ardak Yussupova argues persuasively that modern tapestry played an important role in Cold War geopolitics in Kazakhstan during the Soviet period and in contemporary textile pedagogy. The volume's editors collaborate productively in two chapters that assess consumption environments and the branding of textiles for exchange within Central Asia and in the global marketplace. The final section juxtaposes three contrasting perspectives on collecting: Annette Krämer explores German museum acquisitions whilst Binafsha Nodir provides unique insights into current makers and object typologies and the impact of government policies on production and trade. Leyla Belkaïd-Neri unpacks transnational entanglements in UNESCO policies and Algerian dress history. For this reviewer, a conclusion synthesizing the achievements of the volume would have been a welcome addition, in particular helping to clarify the rationale underpinning the inclusion of the Peruvian and Algerian chapters which, though well-argued in their own right, perhaps felt at a bit of a tangent to the central aims and other chapters. At time of writing, the tragic unrest being enacted in these regions and nations weighs heavily upon the conscience of historians and populations safely distant from conflict. Alongside a guilty sense of helplessness, one might take some comfort from the volume's

advocacy of the role of heritage objects and their histories. A highlight of the book is the rich and fresh photographic record of makers, objects, fashion shows and retail displays capturing this sparsely populated and visited part of Central Asia at the start of the twenty-first century.

Collaborating with local scholars, makers and custodians of heritage is a vital act of solidarity, preservation and interpretation which has a part to play, however modestly, in keeping the hope that tragic losses and lessons of history might not be repeated alive.

The circumstances of the pandemic have afforded this reviewer the opportunity to reflect on a direct comparison of the three dominant modalities of design history publishing in 2021. Penn State University Press generously provided a copy of the cloth hardback; Bloomsbury dispatched a paperback; the Münster publishers provided an e-book. All three publications deploy scholarly apparatus effectively, not only mapping new contributions and the established field of scholarship diligently in the referencing and bibliography, but also providing helpful indexes. The production values of the cloth hardback, with well-balanced colour saturations and pleasingly large scale illustrations, remain uncontested. The e-book affords its own different benefits, better serving the facilitation of digital searching within and across chapter subsections and bibliographic detail which students and the current generation of scholars have come to expect as the norm. The paperback shares ease of portability with the e-book. Hope springs eternal that further reflection, innovation and investment in reimagining the reader's visual experience in e-book and paperback publishing formats might someday secure comparable elegance of page layout and high-resolution colour illustration of traditional hardbacks. However, amidst the supply chain challenges and economic repercussions of the pandemic, the moment is perhaps ill-suited to costly experimentation; one is grateful for the minimal impact on publishing thus far.

These three books each make impressive and distinctive contributions to the commitment to strive for inclusive research strategies and histories firmly grounded in the material experience of objects and place. McBrinn both captures the vital contributions of feminist design history which have long

located embroidery as a complex social and political practice, whilst reassessing how non-binary theorizations of gender enhance our understanding of the identity politics of needlework. Gerschultz moves beyond a Modernist model of internationalist European master-artists which still dominates much tapestry scholarship. This important new research recognises the more complex dynamics of transnationalism intrinsic to the medium and its histories, revealing not only the distinctive state pedagogy and commissions traversing between twentieth-century France and colonial and post independence North-Africa, but also the emancipatory articulation of gender afforded in commercial studios. Mentges, Shamukhitdinova and their co-authors demonstrate deep and thought-provoking interactions between heritage, material cultures and fashion in the Central Asian context, a rare inclusion in many University syllabi. A stimulating reading experience is guaranteed when engaging with the exemplary work of these scholars whose interventions affording both more fluid and inclusive perspectives on gender and geographies and the commitment to attentive material analysis will help to diversify curricula and perspectives within modern textile history.

Claire I R O'Mahony

Associate Professor of History of Art and Design

Department for Continuing Education

University of Oxford

Oxford, United Kingdom

Email: claire.omahony@conted.ox.ac.uk

¹ Impactful assessments of the contested status of decoration and ornament include Jenny Anger, *Paul Klee and the Decorative in Modern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Elissa Auther, 'The Decorative, Abstraction, and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in the Art Criticism of Clement Greenberg,' *Oxford Art Journal* 27, no. 3 (2004), pp. 339–64. David Brett, *Rethinking Decoration Pleasure and ideology in the Visual Arts* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2005). Anne Dressen, *Decorum: tapis et tapisseries d'artistes* (Paris : Flammarion and Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, 2013). Alina Alexandra Payne, *From Ornament to Object : Genealogies of Architectural Modernism* (New Haven, Conn. ; London: Yale University

Press, 2012). Christopher Reed (ed), *Not at Home : The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996); Jacques Souilhou, *Le Décoratif* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2016).

² A sound historiography of the energetic scholarship around gender, geo-politics and decoration in recent decades is beyond the scope of a reflection of this brevity but a few indications include Jeremy Aynsley, *Nationalism and Internationalism: Design in the 20th Century* (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, 1993). Anna Calvera, 'Local, Regional, National, Global and Feedback', *Journal of Design History*, Vol. 18, no. 4 (2005), pp. 371-83. Laura L. Doan and Jane Garrity, *Sapphic Modernities : Sexuality, Women, and National Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Kjetil Fallan and Grace Lees-Maffei, *Designing Worlds : National Design Histories in an Age of Globalization* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2016). Javier Gimeno-Martínez, *Design and National Identity* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016). Pat Kirkham, *The Gendered Object* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996). Pat Kirkham and Susan Weber (eds.), *History of Design: Decorative Arts and Material Culture, 1400–2000* (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2013). John Potvin, *Bachelors of a Different Sort : Queer Aesthetics, Material Culture and the Modern Interior in Britain*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014). Penny Sparke, *As Long as It's Pink : The Sexual Politics of Taste* (London: Pandora, 1995). Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber and Alicia Ory DeNicola (eds.), *Critical Craft : Technology, Globalization and Capitalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

³ McBrinn's contention that masculinity has been marginalised within the critical scholarship around sewing is persuasive. Recent studies which also engage meaningfully with cognate ambitions to create more inclusive histories of embroidery include Johanna Amos and Lisa Binkley (eds.), *Stitching the Self : Identity and the Needle Arts* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020). (to which McBrinn contributed a chapter), Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art + Textile Politics* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2017). Rosika Desnoyers, *Pictorial Embroidery in England A Critical History of Needlepainting and Berlin work* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

⁴ Cindy Kang, Laura Pirkelbauer, Laura L. F. Sevelis, Virginia Gardner Troy, K. L. H. Wells and Bruno Ythier, *Marie Cuttoli : The Modern Thread from Miró to Man Ray* (Philadelphia, PA, 2020). K. L. H. Wells, *Weaving Modernism : Postwar Tapestry between Paris and New York* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019). Romy Golan, *Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927-1957* (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 2009).