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Men who picked up the needle

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Embroidery

I was taken aback. Not only did men participate in my workshops, my own mentor, Tom Lundberg, a prominent Colorado-based embroidery artist, was also male. I found this response, from someone who had been teaching and consulting in the fashion industry for decades, astonishing. It made me wonder what people actually thought about men who engage in embroidery.

While folk embroideries in India are generally done by women, the professional embroiderers are mostly men. A quick peek into any contemporary fashion designer's karkhana will validate this. But clearly that wasn't enough, so I embarked on some research and was pleasantly surprised by my findings. A local legend in Kashmir tells us that a rafugar or danner named Alibaba is accredited with the evolution of the technique of ornamenting fabric, which came to be known kashida

kaam.

Other sources mention that the art of embroidery was brought to the valley by a Persian Sufi saint and his skilled disciples. At a design workshop conducted in Kashmir in 2003, I found the most adept artisans were men. Women had only recently been trained to do this work and their embroidery was distinctly inferior in quality.

In India, it has always been the men who did the professional embroidery but, it seems that the Victorian perspective of needlework as feminine and biased by gender had seeped into the urban Indian psyche. According to historian Rozsika Parker, in medieval Europe, both men and women embroidered in guild workshops. However, Victorian historians re-constructed history by ignoring the male embroiderers and promoting the notion of embroidery as a feminine activity. In the 16th century, needlework served to endow women with an education with elevated class associations, and through the samplers it was deemed an education that was “safely feminine”, thereby leading to the idea of embroidery as women’s work. And this misconception seems to have percolated into contemporary society, bringing up all kinds of responses.

An American textile historian was rather upset about the questions that I asked about her father who did needlepoint, invented his own patterns and made them into dining table and chair seat-covers. She accused me of having “an odd, sexist attitude”. While I claim to be “not guilty” on this count, would it be appropriate to pass the buck to all those who think that embroidery is not an appropriate preoccupation for men?

Francesco Vezzoli, whose works have been displayed at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, used embroidery as a reaction against the London art scene of the mid-1990s, when he re-envisioned paintings by Mark Rothko as modest-sized hand-stitched petit point embroideries. His signature pieces are canvases with laser-print images of iconic actresses, models and singers, on which he embroidered metallic threads to form tears or blood. Ben Ahearn is an American artist working with embroidery textile crafts as a medium to explore masculinity’s conflicting messages and the violence that sometimes arises from men’s adherence to society’s behavioural norms.

He learned in kindergarten that having a lunch box decorated with a floral pattern would invite ridicule for “performing his gender inappropriately”. This event became a “magnified moment” that led to his current art practice. Using embroidery, he explores these ‘moments’ while narrating how “he was trained to take his place as a white male in the heteronormative, patriarchal society.”

In my internet wanderings, I came across a French high-school teacher who does embroidery and quilting as a hobby, who said he “could not live without making things” with his hands. Another stitch blogger defined himself as “a male stitcher” enjoying it for over 25 years. He learnt it from a friend when stationed in Iceland, serving in the Navy.

While all these findings were interesting and demonstrated that gender bias was an ingrained, conditioned response, as opposed to something that men were averse to, the most interesting facet of my discovery were military quilts. Military or soldiers’ quilts are traditionally made from wool serge or worsted twill used in military uniforms. Often referred to as Crimean quilts, bright colour is a key feature of quilts made in India. Military quilts were popular in mid-19th century. The designs and intricacy of skill were much appreciated by the Victorians, and The Great Exhibition of 1851 included more than 30 examples submitted by military personnel. It is therefore ironical that selective rendering of historical fact by Victorians was responsible for creating the aura of femininity around the practice of embroidery. Apparently, soldiers were encouraged to take up sewing as an alternative to pursuits of drinking and gambling.

Needlework was also used as therapy for those recuperating from injury. A large, intricately pieced patchwork quilt made of small hexagons of wool and a motif featuring six pointed stars and diamonds, though unsigned and undated, is attributed to Private Francis Brayley who served in India (1863-1877). He was hospitalised (1875-1876) due to ‘Rifle Drill Fatigue’, when he possibly embarked on this stunning patchwork quilt, which is part of the Victoria and Albert Museum collection in London.

It isn’t only military personnel who have worked with needle and thread; the inmates of prisons in the UK are also encouraged to take up embroidery. Many of these unlikely stitchers say that they “pick up a needle and find calmness.” This ‘Fine Cell Work’ enterprise allows prisoners to earn money through needlework and is

recognised by prison authorities and prisoners alike, as a way of improving confidence levels, channelling aggression and reducing stress. The scheme runs in 30 prisons, with 400 prisoners, 80 per cent of whom are male.

The soldier, prisoner or hobbyist, along with the male embroidery artisans in India, may not fit the demographic of the upwardly mobile, urban Indian male, inspiring him to pick up the needle. But contemporary artists, such as Puneet Kaushik, who uses crochet and bead-work and other textile techniques, along with Vezzoli, Ahearn and Lundberg among others, are leading the way to redefine the stereotypical male who cannot sew on his own buttons.

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