Mark My Words: The Subversive History of Women Using Thread as Ink

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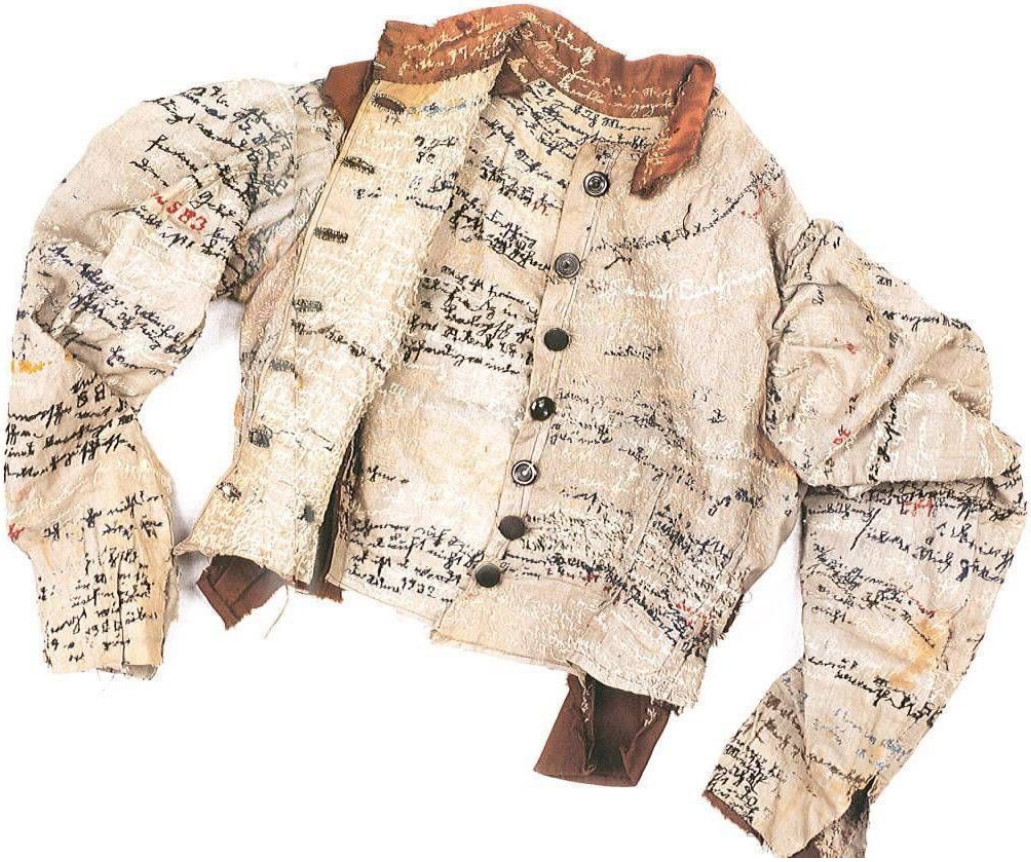
KATE DAUDY, THE WEDDING DRESS. IMAGE VIA WIKIPEDIA.

For as long as women have been sewing, they've been using embroidery to tell their own stories—often in societies that refuse to hear them otherwise.

Agnes Richter's jacket is, on first glance, not unlike something one might expect in a Gothic-inspired couture collection. With its rust-colored lace collar and cropped silhouette, and with dense writing stitched delicately across its rough surface, it has more than a hint of McQueen about it. The origin is startlingly different, however: dating back to the 1890s, it's the work of a German seamstress who had been consigned to an asylum. Although it's often falsely described as her straightjacket, it was actually cut and assembled from a hospital gown, tailored and then turned into an autobiography wrought on fabric. Many of the phrases are indecipherable, although a few have been translated. The word "Ich" (I) is repeated frequently.

Richter's jacket joins a rich tradition of women stitching words onto clothes, turning to thread and fabric in place of ink and paper. The reason behind this practice is obvious: Embroidery, needlework and darning were traditionally a female domain. That's why we have the word "needlewoman" and not "needleman." Much has already been made of the power to play with that heritage. Throughout modern

history, plenty of artists have reclaimed this craft, which was once overlooked and consigned to the realms of the domestic. Think of Tracy Emin's quilts, swearwords embroidered on cutesy collars, and plenty of feminist slogans picked out in cross-stitch. There's a pleasure in these reclamations. They're compelling: providing a way to simultaneously subvert and pay homage to previous generations of women.



*Agnes Richter's jacket. Image via **Facebook**.*

Plenty lies beyond these well-known reference points, though. This thread-and-fabric formula stretches to poetry, politics, protest, confession, commemoration, and cultural history. Although a few artists paint, print, or knit their words, many more have chosen sewing. It's an intricate method, taking time. There's none of the spontaneous joy of scribbling down notes, pen struggling to keep pace with thoughts. Instead, it's precise, with little room for going back and editing. Each word endures.

To pick up on a few of these most consistent strands, one might begin with poetry—and with **Sonia Delaunay**. Born in the Ukraine, with much of her life spent in Paris and Spain, the multi-talented artist turned her hand to painting, textiles, stage sets, and furniture across the course of her career. She often played with the relationship between words and visuals. In the early 20th Century, she worked on several *robes poèmes*, or **poem dresses**. First, she embroidered Philippe Soupault's words onto a curtain that could be worn as a cloak. Then, in 1922, she turned to dresses, taking text from Dada poets including Tristan Tzara and Joseph

Delteis and juxtaposing their writing with bright blocks of color. Letters crawled up sleeves and down skirts. Unfortunately, this (literal) poetry in motion hasn't survived, and nothing remains of these vivid creations beyond the sketches. It's incredible to imagine them, though: poems, usually confined to books or pamphlets, instead worn out and about, perhaps whirled around a dance floor.

Plenty have since placed verse on garments. Debbie Talanian's **"Howl" skirt**, created a few years ago, pays homage to Allen Ginsberg – his streaming lines scribbled out in chunky black capital letters. Kate Daudy's Wedding Dress features a poem cascading down the back from the waist, bright against the white fabric. The final few lines spill out to the edge of the hem, reading, "a bunch of bleeding roses."


Oh
HERE YOU ARE
AMONG THE ROSES
OH RIVE OF LOSS
MY SOUL A BOTTLE OF
A BELL OF CLOUDED GRAPES
HAPPY HAD NOTHING TO GIVE
MY FINGERS. OR EYELASHES
UH POURED FROM MY HEART
COVERED IN DUST, WHICH
IS FULL VELOCITIES AND
I WOULD LOVE YOU ONLY WITH KISSES,
WITH POPPIES, WITH WREATHS
WITH GARLANDS OF
MY CHARIOT OF EMBER-RED HORSES AND YELLOW DOGS
I COULD LOVE YOU ONLY WITH WAVES OVER SHOULDER
AMID RAINBOWS OF SULPHUR, AND WATERFALLS
SWINGING ACROSS THE CEMETERIES WHICH
ABOVE THE GRASS GROWING OVER THE SUNKEN
RUNNING ACROSS THE
THE SMALL PAGES OF UNBORN
THERE I GREW A GREAT DEAL OF DEATH, THERE
IN MY HELPLESS AND DESOLATE
OF LOSS THE WATER THAT FELL INSIDE MY HEAD
WHILE MY HAIR GREW
I WOKE LIKE TIME. A BLACK UNCHAINED LUNG
AND JOURNAL VOICE, WITH THE CRY OF A BIRD IN THE
A SHADOW. A SHADOW MYSELF. LIKE WING WHICH PROTECTED MY
I DRESSED MYSELF
WITH A SAD VOICE
I STOOD OVER
FORGOTTEN DEATH AND
LIKE TEARS LIKE
AND YOU UNDRESSED
YOU CAME TO MY SOUL DRESSED
WITH A BRANCH
OF BLEEDING
ROSES

"Wedding Dress" by Kate Daudy. Image via Wikipedia.

Another similar design of hers, from 2010, is titled **War Dress**, the words drawn from Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est". She talked about the inspiration being photos of young soldiers that appeared in the paper when they died. The pictures were usually taken on each soldier's wedding day—with a beaming bride next to them. Her collaborative work with Grant White has also incorporated poets including T.S. Eliot, Louis MacNeice, and Pablo Neruda, their words cut out in felt and stitched onto garments that match the mood of each text. Even high fashion has muscled in on the act, **Valentino's SS15 Haute Couture** show featuring delicate dresses smattered with lines of love verse arranged on frothy layers of tulle, with references including Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Virgil's *Eclogues*.

Yet, for every imaginative literary flight of fancy, there's another garment giving voice to the dark, the frank, and the revelatory. Richter's embroidered jacket remains unusual, but she wasn't alone in turning to fabric to articulate what had been silenced elsewhere. Her work finds parallels in two British women living in the 19th century: Elizabeth Parker and Lorina Bulwer. Both endeavored to capture something of their unhappy existences in stitches through working on elaborate samplers: wide stretches of fabric embroidered with snippets of their life-stories. Parker became a nursery maid at age 13, and she later worked as a schoolteacher. **Her sampler**opens, "As I cannot write I put this down simply and freely as I might speak to a person to whose intimacy and tenderness I can fully intrust myself." It goes on to declare what she saw as all her errors and sins, as well as her mistreatment at the hands of the family she worked for.

Bulwer, by contrast, was a needle-worker who was **incarcerated** in the lunatic ward of Great Yarmouth Workhouse when she was 56. There she made several large-scale samplers that mixed family history with letters, protest, fantasy, and serious accusation. One part reads, "I HAVE WASTED TEN YEARS IN THIS DAMNATION HELL FIRE TRAMP DEN OF OLD WOMEN OLD HAGS". For both, under different circumstances, these samplers opened up a space for voicing and documenting their grim experiences—preserving the kinds of stories that the history books tend to forget.

Lorina Bulwer's sampler. Image via Wikipedia.

Contemporary examples abound too. Whether it's **Ruth Rae's journal dress**embroidered in red threaded writing (mixing poems with diary-style revelations and observations), or **Louise Bourgeois' coat** with "The Cold of Anxiety is Very Real" standing stark in black letters on its back, there's a rich history of women transforming clothing into a space for confession and brutal honesty. That, or commemoration. **Susan Jamison's "Drowning Dress"** is a tribute to Virginia Woolf. It has "Fare Well" stitched around the collar, with the flimsy fabric of the skirt adorned all over with metal weights, alluding to her suicide. Fabric offers up

a space to disclose the private, document the deeply personal, and venerate the lives of others. Women's words are preserved through women's work.

Some artists choose to foreground the past utility of these items; British artist Rosalind Wyatt's work, for instance, focuses specifically on the histories of those who once inhabited them or could have done so. Her project **"The Stitch Lives of London"** memorializes all sorts of narratives. For example, she stitched 19th century pauper Mary Pearse's tale on a pair of silk satin dancing shoes – ones that Mary would never have been able to afford. On a blue running vest, which belonged to Stephen Lawrence, a teenager who was murdered in a horrendous racist attack in 1993, she embroidered parts of an A-level essay he had written several weeks before his death. It's an extraordinarily powerful item, an elegy to someone who should have been wearing that vest for an awful lot longer.

Wyatt's work, like plenty of the pieces mentioned here, is often intensely satisfying to look at. The kind of items that launch a thousand Pinterest boards. Is there a risk of them merely becoming pretty objects though? Well, in many ways, that prettiness is precisely the point. In the right hands, it becomes subversive. Our expectations are upended. An embellished garment becomes a powerful, commemorative symbol. A delectable-looking coat makes a stark point about anxiety. A tailored wedding dress requires reflection on the awful loss of war. Flimsy garments are made into serious pieces of literature. Stretch all the way back to Agnes Richter, and suddenly a beautiful cropped jacket requires thought about mental health, erasure of voice, and the history of incarcerating women.

That jacket still has a tag on it. It reads, "memories of her life in the seams of every piece of washing and clothing." Not all of these clothes have specific memories attached to them. Plenty have never been worn, no sweat or creases to contend with. Others have had vast, varied lives – with more outings yet to come. All of them tell stories, though. They exist as messages, revelations, statements, whispers, and scraps of lives caught in the seams. They're about who has been given voice, and who has been denied one. They're about provoking questions, and preserving histories. Capturing them. Marking them. Threading them. Leaving them to be read by others.