

## PIC 2.2

### VALUE IN CREATIVE PRACTICE

#### Exploring the Historic and Social Value of The Red Dress by Kirstie Macleod



Detail of The Red Dress (2022) Kirstie Macleod, photographer Dave Watts. (via Selvedge)

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“...clothing and cloth hold time differently: they retain our imprint over continuous time...” cloth receives us”. It comes to life with motion, is animated and transformed by the body and its movements...We might even say cloth is a kind of memory, embodied and material.” (Barnett, 2015)

“343 Embroiderers. 46 Countries. 1 Dress\*” are often the first words read when encountering The Red Dress, a global collaborative embroidery project by UK artist Kirstie Macleod. This simple quantifying statement can be explored to reveal the value of this intricate piece of textile art as a means of uniting humans (predominantly women) across socio-economic, cultural and geographical borders, bringing them together to tell their stories and share and preserve unique cultural skills in a dialogue that transcends language. (Macleod, 2022)

\*at the time of writing, the numbers continue to increase as the project evolves.

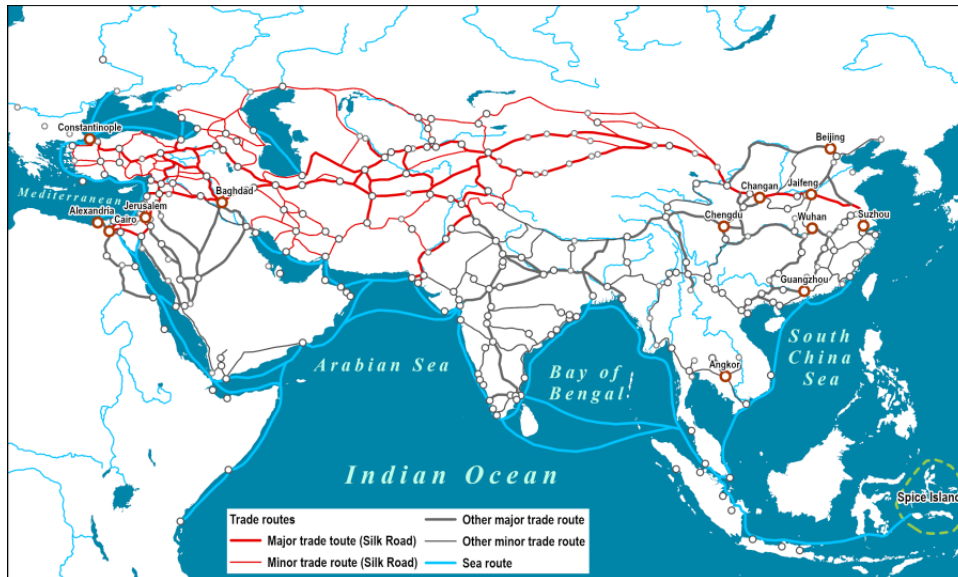


Macleod, K, *The Red Dress* (2022). Fashion and Textile Museum, London.

As the opening quote of this paper expresses, there is an embodiment of memory in material, especially cloth. The dress comprises of many sections of burgundy silk dupion which were sent by Macleod to artisans all over the world to add their own unique embroidery to before being returned to the UK and assembled as 'The Red Dress', which is now on a worldwide exhibition tour. The piece has currently been worked on for 13 years, preserving something of each of its embroiderers and their moment in time. For some of the artisans it was a way to express part of their life story or a cause they were passionate about, or a way of displaying the skills of a craft honed over centuries and unique to their culture. For others it was about coming together as a community with different women from all walks of life. All were willing participants, either paid or voluntarily, working together to create a piece of clothing that defied the exploitation that is rife in the fashion industry and countering the modern disconnect between people and cloth. It represents the high value of craft as a way of forging and expressing human social connection, preserving skills and memory, as commentary on social justice, and on a deeper level, the intrinsically human activity of engaging in material culture. (Macleod, 2022) In my own practice I gravitate to working from a sense of place rooted in storytelling, preservation of cultural memory and a commitment to sustainability that offers connection to past material understanding as well as being socially beneficial to future generations, I see many of my values embodied in this artwork.

Throughout history one of the key identifying features of human community and the evolution of culture has been the crafts that were passed down the generations, taught from person to person, traded between cultures and carried on long migrations. As anthropologist Daniel Miller states "The reason why we make things is because they ... extend us as people ...creating a mirror in which we can come to understand who we are" (Miller, 2010). We could identify this sentiment with any point in our history, the crafts we created enabled dialogue and understanding between differing groups, our shared passion for making and developing the technologies and aesthetics of craft opened windows into ourselves that allowed curiosity and appreciation of other cultures to flourish.

Since modern humans first evolved, a trail of craft objects can be traced between each emerging culture, their distinct styles even giving names to the people whose identities have been lost to time, their objects providing a footprint of their trade and travels. We see these patterns emerging around 2900BCE in the cord-marked pottery of the Corded Wear and subsequent Beaker cultures of Europe, the ceramic surviving where textile that helped create it does not, with only its faint iconic signification hinting at the possibility of a rich textile culture existing alongside. (Witkowska, 2006).



The Silk Road, a textile trade route operating from the second century BCE until the mid-15th century. (transportgeography.org)

Dating back sometimes as far as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium BCE examples of the ancient decorative textile practice of embroidery have been found in China, Japan, India, Europe, Russia, Egypt and Peru (TRC 2016). Distinctive styles of embroidery can be tied to various cultures around the world, the heritage of specific skills and techniques preserved and taught by many generations of artisans. Hand embroidery is a craft that links us generation by generation to our ancestors, as well as often being a visual representation of that which was important to the maker much as a painting would be – with patterns that connect us to our spiritual past or social structures and figurative objects such as flowers that can represent hidden and specific meanings. As it is most often identified as a women's craft I believe embroidery offers an immensely valuable connection to our female ancestors, women whose voices, skills and intelligence have so often been silenced, diminished and dismissed. Prown summarises it well when discussing material culture, as "human-made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them and, by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which these individuals belonged.' (Prown, 1982) These women exist in the stitches taught to their daughters, granddaughters, sisters and friends. The Red Dress is a wonderful iteration of this immense tradition on a globally unifying scale as we can see in the map below detailing the locations of the contributing artisans, and specifically when exploring some of the individual pieces such as that of Vietnamese embroiderer Ly Ta May.





Macleod, K. 2022. Map of artisans who contributed to the Red Dress.



Ly, TM 2021. Detail of Mien cross stitch on the Red Dress. Vietnam.

Artisan Ly Ta May contributed a form of her communities traditional cross stitch to the Red Dress “she loves how it connects her to women in her community, in Taphin village, but also to other Mien women further afield. It also connects her to all her female ancestors who have come before her.” (Macleod, 2022) In her case, she is part of a “landless” community who identify themselves through their textile culture and richly embroidered clothing, it is their way of preserving values within a nomadic culture and visually expressing who they are.



Left to right: Details of embroidery by Nina Hilton 2022 (Norway), Ille Rosenberg 2022 (Estonia), Fansina Artisans 2015 (Egypt)

Themes within the dress frequently centre around symbolism of memory, such as flowers, birds, and animals that represent a cherished homeland or remind the artisan of relatives and ancestors. Other common motifs are symbols depicting faith, identity or moral values. Some motifs are more personal, figurative depictions of people or abstract images that reflect personal journeys through hardship. Some chose to embroider words of poetry or emotive and powerful words such as the “solidarity, love, friendship, pride, trust, liberty, peace” by the Congolese women who wanted to show the best of themselves while acknowledging the difficult lives they had before they took up embroidery. (Macleod, 2022)



Detail of embroidery by Artisans supported by Kisany, DR Congo. 2018

Within the various pieces of pattern work one can identify styles considered traditional from Northern Europe, South America, Africa and South East Asia sitting alongside more contemporary global iterations of the craft, distinctly different but complementary, and a fascinating insight into the aesthetic tastes that have arisen to define cultural groups in the past and possibly a window onto how styles will develop together in the future as we move into an era of global community.





Anonymous Refugees, 2019. Traditional Palestinian Cross Stitch, Lebanon.

Considering a global future and the place craft may hold within that, it is important to acknowledge the difficulties still faced by many of the artisans living in regions that have been affected by war or oppression. Craft has always found a way through borders, particularly those rendered in cloth, which can often be overlooked as an unthreatening but necessary everyday encounter, despite its huge importance as protector of our skin, decorator, signifier and comforter from the day of our birth. Globally, sewing and embroidery is often seen as women's work, as such the decorations rendered on clothing can be dismissed, but within the stitches their thoughts can be expressed, hidden in plain sight. Feminist artists often now use stitch as a means of subversive activism, taking what is seen as a passive pastime or low skilled labour and using it to quietly but defiantly spread word of their views or celebrate their triumphs. The inclusion of logos and motifs that represent social causes demonstrate this form of gentle and collaborative activism in the Red Dress, it therefore could be considered to fall under the banner of "craftivism". (Corbett 2017) A lack of understanding, or misuse of the hidden power of wearables and the value of decorative embroidery can result in socio-political strife, as former First Lady of the US Melania Trump encountered when she wore a jacket decorated with the words "I really don't care, do U?" on a 2018 visit to children incarcerated as a result of her husbands immigration policies. (BBC News, 2018)



Detail of embroidery by Shirley Steenberg, 2019 (Canada); Eliza Burt, 2022 (Poland); Laila Garzon Deguer 2020 (Argentina)

The positive impact of craft practice has been highlighted in many marginalised groups who undertook work on The Red Dress not just as a means to express themselves but also through the tangible skills they have acquired and the opportunities this provides for their livelihoods and independence. The value of financial empowerment offered to women is easy to appreciate for its

direct repercussions; raising families out of food poverty, providing access to education and residential security, but the benefits are also measured in improvements to mental health, sense of community, resilience and even healing from trauma among women who have suffered war, injustice and discrimination. Nicole Ellesen, founder of Belgian Social Enterprise Kisany which is dedicated to building an economy of skilled artisans in DR Congo and Rwanda says the piece “From Darkness to Light” was created by “6 women as part of the Aproade group in Kigali, Rwanda. They told me that it was the first time that all of them had worked on 1 piece together, a very bonding experience. All these women have lived through the genocide and lost families, relatives, children.” (Ellesen, 2022). The traditional Ayachuco embroidery from Peru was created by Martha Carrion, she says “blankets and braids are created in a context where the image of women began to strengthen in economic activities, we seek that the embroidery that women in the communities do is strengthened and considered as a job that generates income for the family.” (Macleod, 2022)



“From darkness to light”, Kisany Artisans, 2018, Rwanda; Floral motifs, Martha Carrion, 2019 Peru.

While some of the artisans who worked on the dress were solo makers, many were women working as part of a community, collaborating in their work and sharing this time together to connect, tell stories and make friends – a demonstration of the value of craft practice “as a positive influence on personal and communal well-being when used as a vocational, leisure and social activity.” (Townsend and Niedderer, 2020). Many of the women who participated commented in their statements on the happiness they felt working on a craft project with so many others, whether they were in the room together or just interacting with the work they had produced from the other side of the globe. “I’m one of many nationalities and cultures of the world, through one red dress we come together to share cherished beliefs and cultures, tell our stories, we come in unity, love, peace, respect, expression, healing, and empowerment.” (Steenberg 2022).

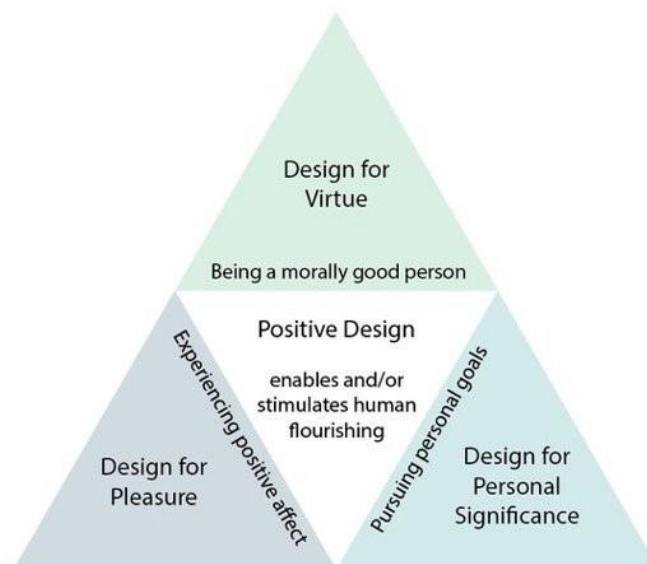


Macleod, K, Photographs left to right: Bristol Womens Voice Event, 2022, UK; Kisany Artisans, 2018, DR Congo; Embroidery Circle in Aguacatenango 2020, Mexico

The value in an individual item may be easy to overlook, but in the Red Dress, the combination of the work of so many reminds the viewer of huge amount of human effort that has gone into it. A small whisper becomes a choir of loud voices all telling their story, asking to be noticed. In *‘Fewer,*

*Better Things'* craft historian Glenn Adamson comments that details "usually pass us by without our noticing, but they form the rich texture of our surroundings. When we become aware of that specificity... as it has built up over time through the actions of others, we are also conscious of being part of a community." (Adamson, 2018, p.88)

A machine may now be able to replicate or produce similar looking embroidery at a cost-effective rate, but many believe that this would leave us culturally bereft of skills and a deep connection to material culture that have existed for millennia. "What ordinary people once made, they buy; and what they once fixed for themselves, they replace entirely or hire an expert to repair...when such experiences recede...How does this affect the prospects for full human flourishing?" (Crawford 2010). I believe the Red Dress therefore also offers a joyful resistance to the devolution of the human senses and connection to craft and its positive impact on our lives. In discussion with Glenn Adamson, textile designer Scott Bodenner says "we have left a more careful consideration of materials behind, for price and production speed...However, I think we miss it. I think people want it back – they just don't have it." (Adamson 2018 p45) I believe there is hope that we as a species are craving this reconnect with material understanding, and projects like the Red Dress demonstrate this. The testimonies of the artisans who participated are overwhelmingly moving and positive on so many of the social levels we have investigated – they have preserved their histories, continued and shared handcraft skills from past generations, earned money through craft that benefits their communities, healed from trauma and made connections with new people – this wealth of value cannot compare to that which a machine obliterates. However, this is not to say the roles of machines should be overlooked or dismissed entirely. Some of the larger embroidery houses commissioned to work on the project undoubtedly deploy the use of new technologies to achieve faster and more precise results. I believe, as do many other craft theorists, that there can be a place for the skilled operation of technology in a hybridised future of craft and design, particularly in regard to finding sustainable solutions to modern problems, while retaining the social positives and unique cultural expressions and connections that craft provides as detailed in Desmet and Pohlmeier's Positive Design Framework .



Desmet and Pohlmeier 2013 Positive Design Framework

In conclusion, The Red Dress has demonstrated the value of embroidery as a craft that provides a wealth of human and social benefits across modern day communities as well as reaching back into



the past as a form of cultural skill preservation, it is an activity that has provided social, mental and economic benefits to its contributors and continues to do so. The positive connection that has touched the lives of these 343 and counting artisans will hopefully extend beyond them to their immediate communities, inspiring others to continue maintaining our human connection to craft. As Gauntlett says, “making is connecting.” (Gauntlett 2011)

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