

EXPLORING RESILIENCE, RESISTANCE AND REGENERATION THROUGH THE EMBROIDERIES OF THE INCARCERATED

by

ANANDA HILL

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Fig 1. Fine Cell Work

“Sewing is a visual language. It has a voice. It has been used by people to communicate something of themselves — their history, beliefs, prayers and protests. For some, it is the only means to tell of what matters to them: those who are imprisoned or censored; those who do not know how or are not allowed to write of their lives. For them needlework can carry their autobiographies and testimonies, registering their origin and fate...As a shared language, needlework transmits — through techniques, coded symbols, fabrics and colour — the unedited stories, not just of women, but often of those marginalised by oppression and prejudice.” (Hunter, 2019, p276)

Embroidery is a global phenomenon, a form of decorative art rooted in textile practices that dates back as far as modern humans have created cloth. The art of stitching - whether by hand or machine, for practicality or pleasure, crosses the boundaries of time, place, gender, race and class; it is a practice intertwined with humanity itself. It can be surmised that this seemingly simple and often overlooked act of craft carries a weight of psychological, social and cultural value particular to the human condition, as many scholars are now attempting to unpick from numerous angles within the wider framework of the academic study of textiles.

This essay focuses on one subgenre of stitching, exploring examples of embroidery and needlework created by imprisoned, incarcerated or confined people throughout history and in the modern day as a means of demonstrating the mental, cultural and political value. I believe they also demonstrate the importance of these acts of making as forms of resilience, resistance and regeneration, themes which feature heavily in my own research and work as I seek to discover what craft, and specifically stitch, can bring to the human condition as a form of self-actualisation and expression.

Resistance will explore the socio-political motivations for the embroideries of Mary Queen of Scots in the 16th Century and Major A D Casdagli in the 20th Century in the context of craft as a means of political expression for wellbeing.

Resilience considers the importance of craft as a means of expressing and maintaining a sense of self and identity in restricted institutional settings, leading to resilience and survival, as demonstrated by the embroidered asylum jacket of Agnes Richter in 19th Century Germany, the Changi Quilt created by British WWII POWs in Indonesia, and a panel of embroidery by imprisoned suffragette Janie Terrero.

Regeneration looks at the cultural value and importance of contemporary initiatives such as Koestler Arts and Fine Cell Work championing needlework as a form of artistic expression and a positive means of generating income for inmates and ex inmates of the UK Prison system. If one's sense of self can be lost through imprisonment, and regained through stitch, how then can it progress to a brighter, more positive future?

RESISTANCE



Fig 2. Details from the Marian Hanging, Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury, 1570 – 85, England. Museum no. T.29-1955. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

The first and oldest piece of needlework we will look at here is a detail from what has become known as “The Marian Hanging”. It is a large textile hanging embroidered by Mary Queen of Scots and Bess of Hardwick (Elizabeth Talbot, Countess of Shrewsbury) between 1570 and 1585 during Mary’s imprisonment at Chatsworth House by her cousin Queen Elizabeth I. The hanging consists of over 100 individual panels of cross stitch in coloured silks and gilt thread on linen canvas, mounted on green velvet. Many of the motifs and images selected by Mary and her fellow embroiderers were copied from common 16th Century ‘emblem books’ which featured allegorical wood cut illustrations of flora and fauna along with explanatory notes. The language of symbolism was very popular and widely understood at the time and was a means of communicating moral and religious tales to a largely illiterate population. Some of the images Mary chose to convey, when interpreted within the context of their allegorical meanings, carry daring messages of her captivity and thoughts about her situation in a way she could not have expressed in her letters, which were read by her rival and

captor Queen Elizabeth. “Mary, with the skills of her professional embroiderers, set about restoring the royal textiles. They were propaganda, and politically expedient.”(Hunter, 2019, P25).

“Virescit Vulnere Virtus” or “virtue flourishes by wounding” is boldly displayed as the central motif and is perhaps the most obvious statement that confirms the needlework as being politically motivated, but inspection of some of the notable images can also be read this way. A ginger cat toying with a mouse, hinting at the uneasy relationship between the captive Mary and red headed Elizabeth; a phoenix rising from the ashes, and a complex piece featuring a grapevine and a pruning knife – a stark reference to Mary’s belief that the “fruitless” and childless branch of the Tudor tree should be cut away to make room for her claim to the throne. We can interpret these messages as an attempt to assert what little power and agency she still possessed, even though speaking out posed a very real threat to her life and her supporters, many of whom were hanged for treason. In some cases, embroideries given as gifts to her supporters were used as evidence in their trials. Although these examples demonstrate bold political narratives, when viewed alongside the other embroideries, they are subtle, slipped in amongst more harmless and commonplace images as would have befitted the pastime work of aristocratic women. This is strikingly similar to the acts of resistance practised by modern day “craftivists” who seek to convey powerful messages in gentle, non-obvious ways, as they see subtlety as having a more lasting effect overall. The fact Marys embroideries have been preserved and survived so long is testament to this.

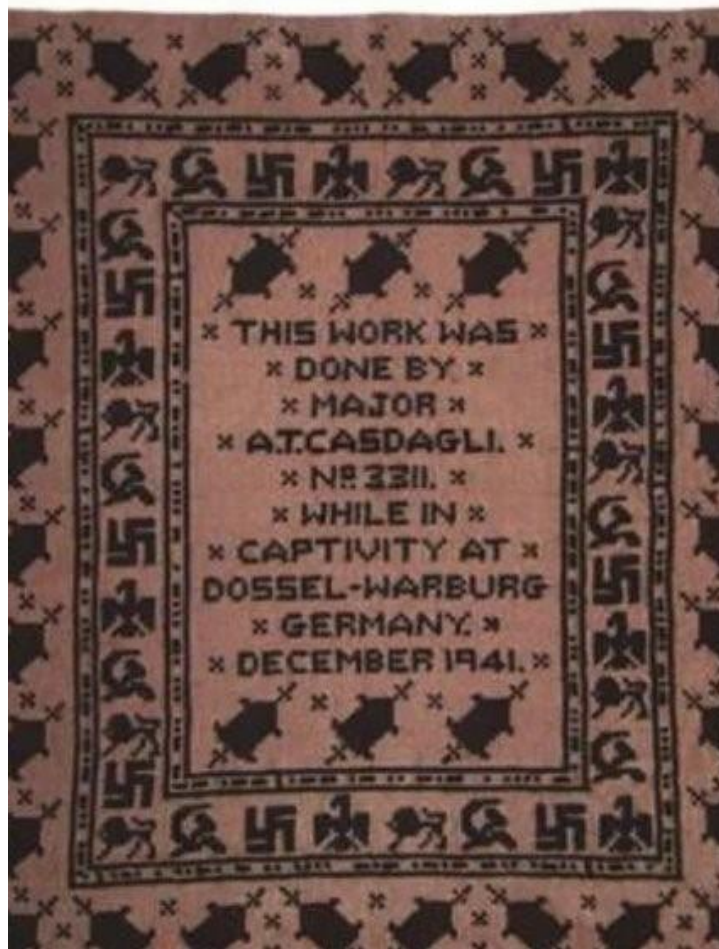


Fig 3. The Casdagli Sampler, 1941

Another piece of embroidery that carries a weight of socio-political meaning comes from Major Casdagli, a British Army officer captured and imprisoned by German forces early in the Second World War (1939-1945). The sampler was completed in 1941, "In order to pass the time, he 'borrowed' some red and blue thread from a disintegrating pullover belonging to a Greek general, and began working a sampler in cross stitch. The central field was a simple inscription stating: "This work was done by Major A. J. Casdagli no. 3311 while in captivity at Dossel-Warburg Germany December 1941." The text was framed by swastikas (Germany), eagles (USA), lions (Britain) and the hammer and sickle (Soviet Union). Around the outer edge, Casdagli stitched a border of irregular dots and dashes. Over the next four years his sampler was seen in various POW camps in Germany. It would appear his captors never deciphered the messages worked in Morse code: "God Save the King" and "Fuck Hitler." (BARKHAM, P (2011)

The sampler follows the common formula of embroidery popularised in Europe from the 15th century. This piece evokes the kind of practice needlework that would have been undertaken by schoolchildren in the 19th century. Although many men did stitchwork (notably sailors away at sea and soldiers) it was most commonly identified as women's work, and it could be inferred that its content could be overlooked due to the patriarchal assumption that a feminine craft was unthreatening. I believe it is likely this that allowed Casdagli to hide his morse code stitches amongst the more obvious and bipartisan symbology depicting the powers involved in WWII.

The mental resistance put into his work may well have proved a life line in terms of his will to survive the trials of years as a prisoner of war. Casdagli himself said to his son that while charitable food parcels and letters from family saved his life, embroidery saved his sanity: "If you sit down and stitch you can forget about other things, and it's very calming." (TRC LEIDEN).

The notion of craft as an embodied practice has been much talked about as a benefit to mental health, as Shercliff states, the "scale and pace of hand-stitching match those of the body, grounding cognitive and emotional experience in a tangible process." (Shercliff ,2015) As prisoners are stripped of so many of their rights and forbidden normal activities that define a sense of self and a 'reason to live' the act of embroidery can do so much to fill the void that is left in the soul, particularly when confronting warfare and the weight of social pressure to 'do your bit' to withstand an enemy.

"To sum up some essential dimensions of craft: the inherent satisfaction of making; the sense of being alive within the process; and the engagement with ideas" (Gauntlett, 2011) If Casdagli felt this satisfaction and lifeblood from his work as Gauntlett suggests, he took trouble to pass these skills to others, sharing the benefits of needlework with other prisoners, perhaps recognising himself the benefits it could bring them all as a way of surviving and resisting the enemy. I will explore the act of stitching as a form of regenerative therapy further along in this essay.

RESILIENCE

"Identity resilience refers to the extent to which an individual possesses an identity structure that: facilitates adaptive coping in the face of threat or uncertainty, can absorb change while retaining its subjective meaning and value, and is perceived to be able to cope with threat or trauma without experiencing permanent undesired change." (BREAKWELL ET AL 2021)



Fig 4. Agnes Emma Richter, self-sewn jacket embroidered with autobiographical texts, 1895, Prinzhorn Collection, Heidelberg University Hospital

Of all the pieces I have selected, the jacket of Agnes Richter feels the most powerful and mysterious. In 1895 at the age of 51, Richter was detained in a psychiatric institution in near Dresden in Germany. Richter was a skilful seamstress and embroiderer, and as well as altering her prison issue jacket to closely fit her body, she stitched it repeatedly with words relating to her life, almost in the form of a disjointed diary, in her own handwriting. The text flows on both the inside and outside of the jacket but is largely indecipherable. Rediscovered in the 1980s, one could be forgiven for thinking it was a contemporary piece of Art Brut or outsider art, as it is so strikingly different to more formulaic and accepted styles of 19th-century embroidery. It is a hugely personal piece, offering insight into the mind of its maker and her life, contrasting to the strict form of the jacket and the literal, social and cultural confines it represents. As a wearable piece even more of her identity has been imbued in the garment from the marks and wear of her everyday presence within it. Journalist Katerina Papathanasiou of the *Vale Magazine* describes it as "one woman's creative fight to preserve her own identity in an environment meant to strip her of it." (PAPATHANASIOU, 2019) Other scholars have commented on how the garment is full of reference to the self, with use of the word "I" and possessive pronouns. (MICHLEY, V) This reiteration of the self, alongside snippets of her lived experiences and memories affirms her identity and existence. Stitching seems to have enabled Agnes to process her trauma and retain her sense of self in an otherwise blurred existence, as Miller says in his book "Stuff" the "reason...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)



Left: Fig 5. Quilt Embroidered by British Prisoners of War at Changi, Singapore (1942-1945), British Red Cross Museum, London. Right: Fig 6. Handkerchief embroidered by Janie Terrero at Holloway Prison, 1912. Museum of London.

Quilting has its own strong tradition within the world of embroidery, particularly for women as a signifier of domesticity and, in the western tradition, an expression of personal identities and family histories. When, during WWII, many of the wives and female family members of British ex-pats and military personnel living in Singapore were captured and imprisoned by Japanese forces in Changi Prison, they turned to stitching quilts to communicate under the guise of docile, feminine craft, however the “needle has long been a tool of subversion, used to stitch dissent into the very practice intended to eradicate it.” (HUGHES, 2020)

The women, organised by Ethel Mulvaney, negotiated for fabric and thread from the Japanese guards, and defiantly set to work making the quilts during their first 6 months imprisonment. A small message on the back indicates they wished the quilt to be donated to the British Red Cross at the cessation of hostilities – but it was a clever way of documenting those women who were alive and present at the camp, should it be passed to the Military Hospital, where the men who were imprisoned separately might see it. Each woman quietly sewed her own patch for the quilt, a small respite from the overcrowded living conditions, imbuing the small fabric squares with secret messages only their loved ones on the outside might know as a means of identifying them. There are embroidered flowers, depictions of their lives and symbols of hope and defiance, alongside their names or initials. The quilts did indeed make it to the hospital, allowed by the Japanese guards due to their harmless nature, and provided welcome news for the male family members of the women who had survived. Ultimately, this brave act of stitching to preserve identities gave all the prisoners the communication they desperately needed to allow hope, which surely created a resilience that mentally aided them in surviving the privations of the camp until the survivors were released at the end of the war. (Hunter, p53. 2019)

Examples of defiant feminine stitching can also be found among artifacts surviving from the Suffragette Movement. Suffrage, the radical early 20th Century first wave of western feminism, saw women take to the streets and challenge societal norms with protests and violence, their famous motto 'Deeds not Words' emblazoned on their hand made banners. They did not hesitate to use typically feminine crafts to convey their message and record their experiences to prove that strength and femininity could coexist. When arrested and imprisoned, dedicating themselves to hunger strikes, playing the 'cat and mouse' game of hunger strike-release-reoffend, many turned to stitch to help preserve their sense of identity and purpose while they fought their battle. One famous example is that of Janie Terrero. Born in 1858 in Essex, militant suffragist since the age of 18 and member of the Womens Social and Political Union, she was arrested in 1912 after taking part in window smashing and imprisoned for four months in Holloway Prison. Inmates were forbidden from speaking to each other, brutally force fed, and denied all usual forms of communication, and so Terrero and others turned to embroidery – which was encouraged as a silent group activity, to record their experience. Like the women of Changi, they stitched their names, emblazoned delicate lace handkerchiefs with their political colours of purple, green and white, and details of their arrests alongside pretty, floral motifs. It is clear their resistant spirit shone through in the end, as they kept fighting eventually securing women the vote and opening the doors for later feminist movements, something women, and society still benefits from to this day; proof that feminine stitch can be just as powerful as the masculine pen. (Hughes, 2020)

REGENERATION

It is interesting to consider the views of Professor Prown on material culture when analysing the needlework of prisoners, as he believed all objects made by humans reflect 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) The direct, indirect and subconscious nature of this theory should be contemplated, as we saw with the jacket of Agnes Richter and others, the pieces have the potential to reveal much about the mental impact on prisoners, both positive and negative, and what it says about contemporary prison and criminal justice culture as a whole – does it harm or heal?



Fig 7. Fine Cell Worker

Arts charity Fine Cell Work (established in 1997 by Lady Anne Tree) specifically teaches needlework to current and former inmates in the UK as a means of both creative expression and as a practical skill that can offer stability and financial independence for prisoners wishing to rebuild their lives during and after doing time. Lady Tree spent decades campaigning for prisoners to be allowed to receive payment for work undertaken in their cells, until finally the law was changed in 1992, opening the door for social enterprises like Fine Cell Work to provide a more positive and meaningful existence for prisoners. Neidderer and Townsend suggest that craft “has become recognised as a way of thinking, living and working...craft offers a human dimension and openness through experimentation, which has relevance to and influence on society at economic-political, creative-technical and human-social levels” (Niedderer & Townsend, 2011). I think this is encapsulated by the determinedly creative and inclusive rehabilitation work undertaken by Fine Cell Work, and their manifesto “rebuild meaningful, independent, crime free lives” through engagement in “paid, purposeful, professional, creative activity.”



Fig 8. Going, J. Detail from embroidered blouse. HMP Styal. 2022

As part of my research, I spoke to an inmate at HMP Styal in Cheshire, who had turned to embroidering clothes from the prison charity shop with a lone needle and scrap threads acquired from a craft session. Speaking of a plain linen blouse, altered by hand and dyed with brown hair dye before decorating the collar with embroidery she said it is a “reflective meditation of time passing, not as is so often measured in institutions by the repetitive blocks of four short lines side by side and a fifth crossing diagonally to represent 5 day units, but as representing a continuous path along the prison journey: the passing of days dynamically as opposed to marking time passed. Each stitch a step carrying the individual along this path, continually moving along an unbroken line. As each row runs its course a turn along a new & parallel path is symbolised by another colour...always moving forwards over new ground.” (Going, J, 2023).

The notion of passing time is commonly noted among those who take to stitch in prison. “Stitching makes that time go, once I’ve got my head around a new kit and settled into it, blimey, three hours could have gone by, just like that...Whatever problems I have going on, they’re always forgotten when I stitch.” (Bob, Fine Cell Work stitcher). It strikes me that time itself is not the enemy so much as prolonged awareness of the deprivation prisoners experience, being isolated from so much that defines us as human. Stitch clearly presents a grounding and positive influence on them, allowing them to pass through the justice system with a sense of self intact, and the ability to apply real skills when reintegrating in society.

The idea that art can aid healing, even if it cannot rid the world of all evils, is commonly held by practitioners of art therapy. That art and creative practices offer a way of processing trauma and difficult life events is summarised in “Art Heals: How Creativity Cures The Soul” by doing something with the suffering and allowing creativity to engage “breaking points” and “fashion fresh life from them”. McNiff also considers that the “big transformations are rarely planned and arrive in their own time, often contradicting the artists intention.” (McNiff, p23, Art Heals).

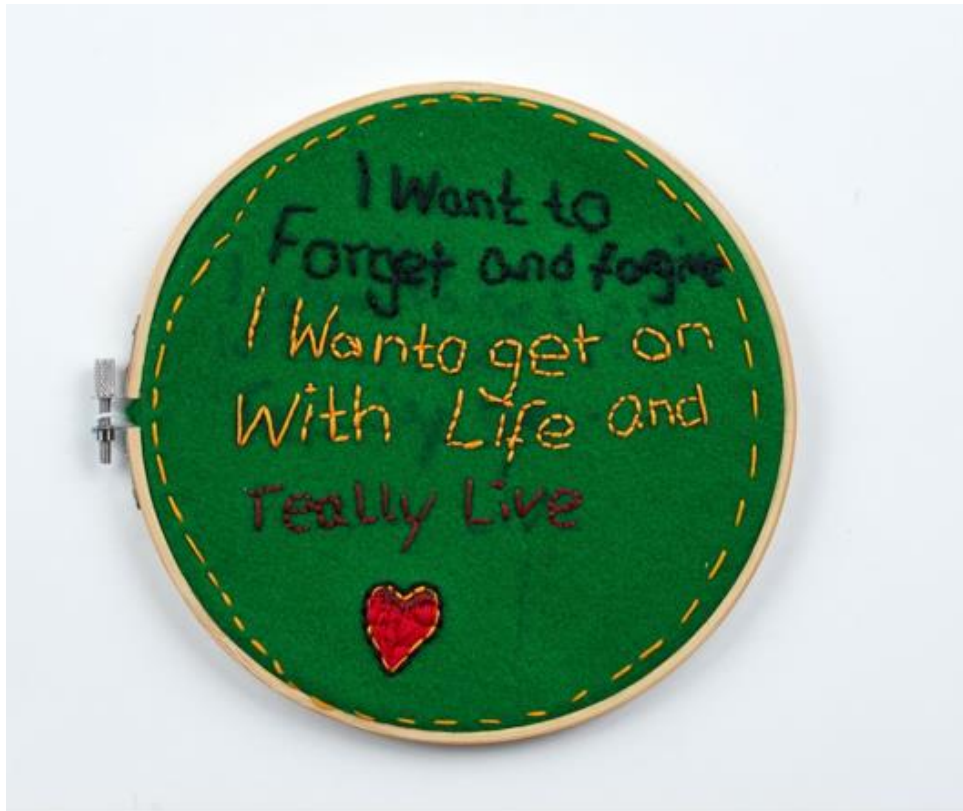


Fig 9. How I Felt, HM Prison & Young Offender Institution Low Newton, Lamberth. Highly Commended Award for Needlecraft, Koestler Awards 2018

Koestler Arts is perhaps one of the best-known UK prison arts charities. Their aims are also centred around helping prisoners change their lives by participating in the arts, as well as diversifying the range of artworks on show to the public with a wider selection of voices and talent.

In the above piece by a stitcher who participated in the 2018 Koestler Awards we see naïve and childlike simple freehand stitches in bold primary colours. Presented in its hoop, we are connected to the embodied process of making more so than if it were appliqued to a larger piece. It is interesting that as embroidery is no longer taught routinely to children, the skill of these more contemporary pieces contrasts strongly with the older examples already represented – this raises questions of what else might have been lost from society when material intelligence is no longer valued as highly as academic intelligence. The title offers a contextual pun, referring both to the sentiment expressed in the text and the materials used. It could be inferred that the colours have been chosen randomly from what was available, but with the red selected specifically for the heart motif offering the connoted signification of love.

When planning the 2022 Koestler exhibition “Freedom”, the artist and activist Ai Weiwei visited the Koestler Arts building, and taken aback by the range and quantity of artwork produced, he adapted the concept of the exhibition to be as inclusive as possible in order to showcase “how humanity responds to when put in extreme circumstances”. (Ai Weiwei, Koestler Arts, 2022) The ex-prisoners whose work was featured were then employed by Koestler Arts to act as exhibition tour guides, offering their own personal insights into their works, having their voices heard and participating in the range of dialogues surrounding the theme. As one anonymous exhibited artist says, “Every prisoner should be given a brush and told to make a mark – perhaps then less would return.” The

permission for expression of potential through creativity is one of the most important and positive things charities like Koestler can give. Rather than condemning a person to believe they are nothing more than a criminal, which often leads to a vicious cycle of harmful or antisocial behaviour, it opens the door for an alternative life and allows those on the other side to see a little more into the circumstances surrounding crime, and the personhood of those who commit it.



Fig 10. "Cell E; Freedom" Ai Weiwei & Koestler Arts. Exhibition Space, Level 1, Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre, London. 2022

In my opinion, this selection of embroidered works demonstrates the intrinsic nature of craft and creativity as a vital part of the human self - something that we seek out no matter the circumstances. That we reach to express ourselves in this manner when confronted and challenged by the external world of politics, the internal world of our psyche, or with the communities we rely on for survival seems to speak volumes of its inherent value as something that contributes to how we operate as a society.

My own work as an artist who specialises in embroidery as a form of communication hinges on the potential found in stitch and craft in general to give people emotional expression as an outlet for resistance in the face of an uncertain world. The empowerment of this creative resistance then leads to a sense of strength and resilience, allowing ultimately for opportunities of positive regeneration towards a more confident, self-reliant and materially intelligent population. It is my hope that by facilitating and creating these artworks I can encourage, in my own small way, thoughts and conversations that lead to a happier and healthier existence on and with our planet.

It is clear to me that supporting people to access such forms of creativity are vital in preserving a sense of identity and encouraging healing and meaningful regeneration of our societies. The ability to engage in creative expression ought to be a protected human right, without it, we deny ourselves something that is intrinsic to our ability to flourish as a species and a community.

Anything that brings a person a safe, embodied way of experiencing and expressing their world surely helps to build something good, no matter their background.

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Fig 4. Agnes Richter (1844–1918) – Handmade linen jacket embroidered with autobiographical text

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Fig 6. Terrero, J (1912) Suffragette Panel, 1912

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Fig 9. How I Felt, HM Prison & Young Offender Institution Low Newton, Lamberth Highly Commended Award for Needlecraft, 2018

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Fig 10. "Cell E; Freedom" Ai Weiwei & Koestler Arts. Exhibition Space, Level 1, Royal Festival Hall, Southbank Centre, London. 2022

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Image: Agnes Richter (1844–1918) – Handmade linen jacket embroidered with autobiographical text

Image: Fine Cell Work <https://finecellwork.co.uk>

Image: How I Felt, HM Prison & Young Offender Institution Low Newton, Lamberth Highly Commended Award for Needlecraft, 2018

Image: Terrero, J (1912) Suffragette Panel

Image: The Casdagli Sampler, 1941 <https://trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles/individual-textiles-and-textile-types/samplers/casdagli-sampler>

Image: The Changi Quilt for the British Red Cross (1942-1945) www.redcross.org.uk/stories/our-movement/our-history/changi-quilt-secrets-and-survival

Image: The Marian Hanging, V&A www.vam.ac.uk/articles/prison-embroideries-mary-queen-of-scots

Image: Going, J (2023) Embroidered Blouse, HMP Styal, Wilmslow, Cheshire