Le fil conte / Thread Tales*
by Margalit Berriet

"Text" and "textile" share a Latin root, ***texere***
— to weave, and to tell.
Both bring fragments together to create meaning.

*the thread both tells and becomes a tale.



Sandrine Torredemer_ 2026

Thread is sensual, and can be spun from cotton, silk, wool, canvas, metal, light, or plant fibres. For centuries, it has been used to tell, to express, to bear witness, to offer a style, a sense of belonging, or a unique identity — carrying the mark of its time and the particular, often innovative, craftsmanship of the hand that shaped it.

It is the thread, in all its forms and sources, that makes weaving, knitting and embroidery possible: garments, carpets and fabric; the ornamenting of places; the shaping of spaces through rugs spread for the wanderer and their animals; identity offered to the world's cultural diversity, to ceremony, and to every era's particular will to adorn the body. The Thread at times was bound to domestic activity, has been also an intimate tool —yet just as often a powerful medium for monumental work carrying cultural weight.

The Thread has a central place in contemporary art — from sewing, mending, patchwork and clothing, weaving, knotting, braiding, assemblage, folding, tufting and digital technique, Artists continually reinvent its role, generating also monumental conceptual installations, sculpting and drawing with it, it captivates through its presence, .

Skills passed from master tailors to apprentices, male or female, forming an important part of local economies and cultural heritage, while women more often practised sewing, embroidery and textile work in domestic or private settings.

Art historians such as Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock have argued that textile work has been inextricably bound up with women's labour in the domestic sphere, particularly in Western cultures: "to know the history of embroidery," as they put it, "is to know the history of women."



Dorothy Text to Textiles by Maria Walker

Furthermore, in many regions of the world, working with thread, in its many multipal creative forms, has also historically been — and in some places still remains — a field dominated by men. In many parts of Africa, sewing and tailoring have traditionally been practised mainly by men. In South Asia, the street or market tailor — respectfully known as Masterji in India or Darzi elsewhere — is still very often a man. In the Middle East, Southeast Asia and North Africa, souks and market stalls have also traditionally been male-dominated working spaces, particularly where heavy machinery is used.

Today that distinction is shifting: men and women alike are becoming prominent designers, entrepreneurs, master tailors or artists across the world, increasingly blends traditional technique with new, expressing also social, political and ethical values.

In contemporary art the thread has moved far beyond any handed-down boundary, embracing unexpected materials, from metal fibre to light to plant matter, generating techniques that range across also weaving, knotting, patchwork, braiding, folding, tufting and digital process.

These approaches continually reinvent the role of thread across every art form — and the expression *"Les fils racontent,"* "Thread Tales," or "every thread tells a story," captures exactly this.

Historically

In Greek mythology, thread symbolises inventiveness, creativity, patience and resilience: Ariadne's thread guides Theseus through the labyrinth, while Penelope's weaving becomes an act of resistance. For the Greek Moirai and the Roman Parcae, thread represents the course of a life, from birth to death.

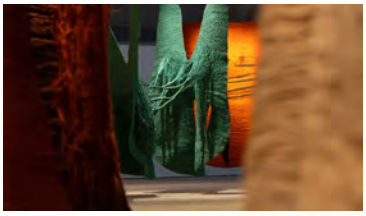


The three Parcae, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos spinning the thread of life 1808, © Christoffer Wilhelm Eckersberg



During the Middle Ages, the textile industry flourished through tapestry, embroidery and domestic craft. Needlework was at times dismissed as a lesser art in the Renaissance, yet the Bauhaus, in the twentieth century, challenged the artificial divide between fine and applied art, and the craft of the needle and the thread entered the arts on equal footing with every other form of creation and innovation.

From the 1960s onwards, **Fiber Art** transformed thread into a tool for sculptural and spatial work — **Magdalena Abakanowicz**, for example, turned it into an autonomous creative medium. She is a major figure in the revival of textile art and twentieth-century sculpture, standing at the intersection of the forces of the spirit and the power of matter.



Magdalena Abakanowicz, Crossing-Boundaries, hube

Earlier still, in the early twentieth century, conceptual artists such as **Marcel Duchamp** and **Lucio Fontana** had paved the way by introducing thread and rope directly onto canvas.

When contemporary artists let thread speak, they often turn to human and socio-political concerns: thread becomes a means of expressing cultural or individual memories, of embodying performance and gesture, and of building social or environmental messages in three dimensions — extending far beyond its traditional boundaries as both medium and concept.

As a way of holding the complexity of memory and heritage, thread serves as a literal and metaphorical line connecting places, times and generations.

As Léopold Sédar Senghor wrote, humanity is like a vast carpet composed of as many different threads as there are people — each unique, apart, independent and distinct, yet each woven and connected to the others, composing humanity as a universal carpet. Civilisation, he argued, can only be universal by being a dynamic synthesis of the cultural values of all civilisations and all peoples. The beautiful tension of woven material expresses precisely this plurality of geographic and personal journeys.

Around the world, in areas of conflict, thread and tale enhance storytelling through puppet shows and installations — from small, hidden traditions of **Black puppetry** in American history, to puppet art in Gaza, to living traditions in India, Japan, Brazil and Mexico: sewing to tell, to remember, to transmit what could not be said in words.





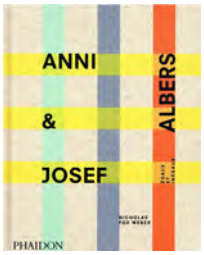
Puppetry, in its origins, was largely ceremonial or religious.

Under the influence of a cultural and educational movement seeking experimental methods for teaching through artistic activity, a serious thread- and string-puppet theatre began to develop worldwide from the mid-twentieth century, drawing on from a rich ancient traditions from across the globe.

In New York, in 1963, **Peter Schumann** founded the Bread and Puppet Theater in protest against the Vietnam War; in its 1969 piece *The Cry of the People for Meat*, the company staged the nuptial dance of Mother Nature and Uranus.

Embroidery, too, has helped South African women — collectively, as with Evelyn Twala — tell unspeakable stories of gendered trauma; their embroideries become a canvas for pain and loss, but equally for hope, resilience and resistance.

Pascal Monteil, a cultural storyteller, expresses himself through embroidery. Working with old hemp canvas and brightly coloured wool, he stitches stories in which literary, poetic and historical figures coexist, bringing different temporalities together and provoking unexpected encounters.



Anni and Josef Albers, German-born American textile artist, designer, lithographer and art theorist who was part of the Bauhaus movement and later taught at Black Mountain College. Fled Nazi Germany to the USA, both led the way into the modern world of textile and architectural art — a world where creativity intertwines with thread, and imagination weaves intricate tapestry and fabric, opening a space in architectural contemporary academia - previously closed to women.

They claimed that the Arts can profoundly transform our world and should stand at the heart of human existence: "*Works of art teach us what courage is. We must go where no one has ventured before us.*" (Anni Albers) They experimented with new materials such as cellophane and artificial silk, opening an endless field of artistic research and mixed-media exploration with thread, and became, in 1949, the first textile artists to hold an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, presenting techniques and histories of weaving drawn from South America.



A student of Josef and Anni Albers, the American artist **Sheila Hicks** has worked with weaving and painting since the 1960s, bringing a rigorous hand to her materials to generate contemporary textile art while defining spaces entirely her own



— much as the contemporary Japanese performance artist **Chiharu Shiota** does, using thread to build monumental installations that transform it into powerful three-dimensional spiderwebs. Both explore aesthetics and ethics as one, evoking the non-linear thread of memories and emotions through the complicity that threads generate between each other — an "image" of the complexity of existence and relationship, of multiple identities present within one self, of the interconnection between all living things, and of the passage of time and light made tangible.



The presence of thread invites visitors on a journey through visual and physical languages that are always personal and collective. It allows a certain sensual body freedom of expression, drawing the viewer into a practice that is often, itself, bodywork.

Olga de Amaral, the Colombian artist also a pupil of Anni Albers, became a leading figure in fibre art, transforming textiles into monumental works in which gold, fibre, light and colour engage with individual and collective history and spirituality — revealing the sculptural, poetic and spiritual potential of thread.

These examples reflect how textile art has become an essential field of contemporary creation, extending a tradition long celebrated in its own right.

The artistic language of textile art has become a way for art to speak in a voice of its own, drawing on endless new technique in which stitches combine to form both individual and collective work — as in the

art of quilting, where layers of fabric are stitched together into patterns that tell stories and evoke memories of slavery, loneliness, womanhood and brotherhood.



bisa butler, I Am Not Your Negro, 2019
(quilted and appliquéd cotton, wool and chiffon

The artist **Bisa Butler,** with her colourful quilts, has said she is honouring Black children and adults whose stories might otherwise have been forgotten or overlooked. Uniting Rastafarian imagery, Ethiopian iconography and West African motifs, **Mr Melançon** draws his designs from across the African and Indian diaspora: his Mardi Gras suits, rising nearly thirteen feet in the New Orleans parade, belong to a hundred-and-fifty-year-old tradition of painstaking craftsmanship in embroidery, weaving, sewing, marionette-making and costume — strings and delicate beadwork, billowing ostrich feathers, and the art of thread combined to bring monumental puppets and extraordinary costumes onto the streets of New Orleans, celebrating past and present at once.



ST.SUPER SUNDAY,
MARDI-GRAS

A therapeutic dimension of textile art offers a sense of accomplishment and a form of meditation, allowing individuals to step away from the busyness of daily life and immerse themselves in a personal process. The rhythmic motion of stitching and weaving becomes a means of self-care, stress reduction and emotional healing.

To conclude

Textile art goes beyond mere aesthetics, raising questions about industry worldwide and addressing urgent societal issues — ecology, human rights, and the mass employment bound up with fabric production. Textile artists engage with these social, political and environmental themes, using their work as a platform for dialogue and advocacy, addressing questions of identities and raising awareness of climate change.

The art of textile also allows people, around the world, to earn a living — men and women alike master the tailor's craft, offering self autonomy, beauty, fashion, and countless ways to be different.

Whether sewn, embroidered, woven, tufted, knitted, crocheted or knotted, thread offers artists countless gestures through which to build a deeply human and personal languages — a form of expression, and a form of art.

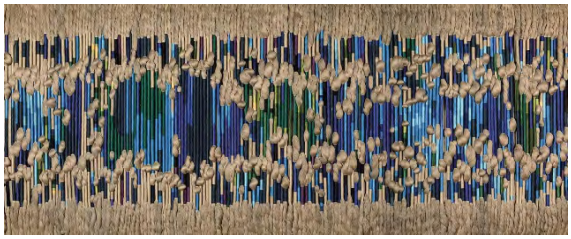
Annette Messager, Louise Bourgeois, Sheila Hicks, Joana Vasconcelos and many others have each used thread to tell in their own way.

In 1961, the American sculptor **Sue Fuller** wrote to Whitney Museum of American Art curator Lloyd Goodrich, inviting him to her exhibition of "new strings" — loops of blue and red thread. Her note also evokes a lock of hair from a Victorian love letter.
… A thread to tell…



Sue Fuller,
letter to Goodrich

In this exhibition we have united a group of women telling — with a thread — about themselves, about spaces, about creating new ways to tell, to see, to portrait ; uniting aesthetics and ethics, uniting threads of every kind, to say.



Sheila Hicks soie, lin, coton,
assemblage monté sur huit panneaux,



Spinner,
Athenian red-figure oinochoe
C5th B.C.,
British Museum



Banquet détouré (c) Th. Chapotot Pascal Monteil

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