Le Fil raConte / Thread Tales

Natures of Thread

Threads can be spun from materials of animal origin (silk, wool) or plant origin (hemp, cotton, linen, sisal, raffia, rayon). They can also be made from mineral-based resources: synthesised from petroleum, gas or coal (synthetic fibres). There are also threads made of iron, copper, silver or gold. And why not also threads of light…

Techniques for Working with Thread

Threads of such different natures, from the coarsest to the finest, can be worked in an extraordinary variety of ways and require highly sophisticated skills: hand weaving, Jacquard or digital weaving, tapestry (high-warp and low-warp), braiding, embroidery, lace-making (with bobbins or needle), appliqué, patchwork, knitting, crochet, macramé, felting, mending…

Threads: The Domain of Women?

One might be tempted to answer yes to this question…

Western iconography often encourages us to do so. A few examples: Penelope at her loom; Ariadne guiding Theseus out of the labyrinth; Velázquez's painting *Las Hilanderas* (*The Spinners*), which depicts, in the foreground, working women spinning the wool that, in the background, will be used by Arachne, the young weaver, and the goddess Athena, who engage in a fierce competition to determine who can create the most beautiful tapestry. The Virgin Mary, in Annunciation paintings of the early Renaissance, is often depicted seated and sewing. We might also mention Vermeer's *Lacemaker*, as well as countless scenes from everyday life, not so long ago, in which women mend, darn, embroider, knit and crochet…

But men, too, have long engaged — and continue to engage — in working with thread and textiles. Let us not forget the weavers, such as the *canuts* of Lyon; couturiers, both celebrated and humble; tailors; alterations workers; and tapestry weavers, who overwhelmingly practised high-warp and low-warp tapestry-making from the Middle Ages through to the 1970s at the Gobelins Manufactory.

The Purposes of Thread Techniques

These are highly diverse.

First and foremost, of course, they are utilitarian. Woven or braided threads have accompanied human beings from birth to death, across all civilisations: swaddling cloths, sheets, clothing, shrouds, but also furnishing fabrics, carpets, tablecloths, towels, and so on.

Yet many "utilitarian" textiles have also been richly and elaborately decorated: tablecloths and secular and liturgical garments enhanced with embroidery and lace, as well as haute couture clothing. Carpets and wall tapestries have gradually also become recognised as art forms.

Since the Bauhaus and continuing to the present day, many contemporary artists have embraced all these techniques, transforming and/or diverting them from their traditional uses. Anni Albers, Gunta Stölzl, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Jagoda Buić, Olga de Amaral, Friedensreich Hundertwasser, Josep Grau-Garriga, Noa Eshkol, Sheila Hicks, and many others…

A new life opens up for thread, which has always — humbly or magnificently — told stories of human life.

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Grue couronnée sur ciel de feu - Tapisserie © Marie-Claude Deshayes-Rodriguez