The Modern Embroidery Movement, Cynthia Fowler, (2018)
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This meticulously researched, well-illustrated and lucidly written book provides a detailed critical history of the work and lives of a group of American women artists who chose to work in embroidery in the first half of the twentieth century. Featuring Marguerite Zorach among their number, whose work is most recognised by scholars for its contribution to American art, Cynthia Fowler shows how the lesser known Georgiana Brown Harbeson was the driving force. A ‘staunch feminist’ (p. 72) and energetic advocate for ‘painterly needlework’ in the ‘modern aesthetic’ her many articles and publications named and promoted the group which principally included Marcia Stebbins, Mary Ellen Crisp and later Marian Stoll. Although their work was stylistically diverse, ranging from the bold abstraction of Crisp’s 1930s Untitled wall hanging to Harbeson’s decorative designs for patterns for Needlework magazine, the women were united by a central belief in embroidery as a form of serious artistic expression that consciously demonstrated their training as painters and adherence to the principles of modern art. While this emphasis on embroidery as art could be seen to reinforce the secondary status of embroidery as craft, Fowler’s focus on the strategies the women employed in their work reveals how they negotiated the ‘art/craft’ divide signalling, she argues, a political critique of the hierarchy. The book builds on and extends Fowler’s doctoral thesis on Zorach, drawing on hitherto largely unseen material from a range of contemporary and archival sources such Needlecraft, the home arts magazine, exhibition reviews and embroideries in public and private collections including: The Cooper-Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Esther Fitzgerald Rare Textiles, London.

Paying close attention to the individual embroideries, their reception, and the social, political, economic and aesthetic context in which they were made and exhibited, the book is organised thematically to connect each artist to modernist concerns. It begins with an introduction to the movement’s concerns and an overview of its transatlantic parallels in Europe: work made by such artists as Gabriele Münter, Sonia Delaunay and Sophie Taeuber whose contributions have been better recognised by art historians. Harbeson coined the term ‘needlepainting’ (p. 2) to differentiate embroideries that were approached from a painter’s point of view, using thread or wool rather than paint, a needle in place of a brush. She advocated for ‘embroidery that embodied the principles of modern art’ not in terms of a style but in terms of a modern attitude characterised by, in Fowler’s words ‘an openness to experimentation whether in subject, style, or choice of medium, an openness that emerged when artists listened to their individual voices and followed their unique paths’ (p. 3).

This openness to experimentation within the field of modernism in the first decades of the twentieth century, and particularly during the interwar years, has been noted by others studying the work of professionally trained women artists, designers, architects, craftswomen, writers, advertisers who were emerging from universities, private courses, and art schools at this time (Barker et al 2017/18; Centre for Printing History and Culture 2018). Considering the work through the lens of current debates about craft, design, modernism and feminism, Fowler usefully locates the embroideries in relation to wider practices and themes, such as the ‘turn to craft’ in modern arts, embroidery as industrial design - Harbeson and Crisp produced designs for clothing, accessories, rugs and objects for home decoration – needlework as a means to ‘celebrate the identities of liberated women’ (p. 7), decorative arts as an ‘alternative to mainstream modernisms’, and ‘embodied’ feminine practice (p. 10-11).
Zorach, a major figure who produced complex, ambitious, large scale embroideries, is given a chapter to herself. However, in many ways the following chapter on the lesser known women tells us more about the lived experience of women forging careers in the art world at this time, the challenges they faced and the choices they made, including why they chose to work in embroidery. Fowler’s painstaking research reveals how embroidery both functioned as a legitimate art form and an important economic resource for them. Although they came from wealthy backgrounds, all the women depended on embroidery for income at some point during their lives. Harbeson supported herself and her sons from embroidery sales and designed patterns for Needlecraft after her divorce while Crisp, who had run a successful dress design business, supported herself and her husband during the Depression with income from her embroideries; she also designed embroidery kits that were sold from department stores throughout the country. In addition to her painting, Stebbins had a career as a professional designer. Stoll, who was financially independent, made a good living from commissions via a network that included Lady Ottoline Morrell and Aldous Huxley in the 1920s. Such adaptability depended on training and the women’s professional education ranged across fine art, design and decoration. Multi-talented and extraordinarily versatile, Harbeson had studied fine art, mural painting, textiles, costume and design with such European modernists as Lucian Bernhard. Crisp and Stebbins attended the Art Students League, Crisp going on to study applied arts at the Grand Central School of Art, while Stoll trained in applied arts in Vienna and Munich. Aligning her work with art rather than ‘stitchery’, Stoll’s extraordinary Surrealist-inspired works employed embroidery in an imaginative process with simple stitches and a freestyle approach.

The last four chapters focus on collaboration and the women’s shared subject interests in the city, nature and portraiture. Including artistic collaboration and collaborations with industry, the first of these examines Zorach and Crisp’s artistic partnerships with their husbands, identifying the women’s contributions within the context of the variously complex power relations that can operate between husband and wife, even when working in a professional context. Harbeson’s work for James Lees and Sons, manufacturer of knitting and needlepoint kits, throws light on a rarely discussed area of design activity. Developing the influential Minerva Line of embroidery patterns, Fowler shows how Harbeson created designs across a variety styles, from Colonial revival to ‘ultra modern’, valuing the skill of amateurs and hobbyists. The depiction of New York as a futuristic city dominated by skyscrapers is a familiar modernist trope. Examining a selection of embroideries by Zorach, Crisp and other women, Fowler finds a rather different representation, one that ‘maps’ the city in terms of neighbourhoods, communities and the quieter moments of everyday life. Imagining the city as ‘a viable space for living’ even during the Depression, she argues that these embroideries provide an ‘alternative to masculinist constructions’ and a ‘more inclusive perspective on urban life’ (p. 138). The subject of gendered responses to place continues in the following chapter on Nature as Symbol where Fowler contends that the women ‘consciously’ employed natural imagery to imagine release from the restrictions of gender constraints (p. 157). Zorach’s embroideries and Harbeson’s designs for Needlework magazine suggest possible freedoms in nature for women, while Stoll’s dream landscapes offer the potential for inner transformation through engagement with ‘imagined locations’ (p.154). The final chapter, Embodied Portraits, explores the contribution of modern embroidery to reimagining portraiture as psychobiography. It focuses on Zorach’s compelling portraits, including two made in the 1940s as presents for her children. Touchingly intimate depictions of everyday life, they show the artist’s son and daughter at home with their families taking equal share in parental duties. Her daughter Dahlov’s identity as an artist (who worked at home), however, is conspicuous by its absence, signalling a tension between the role of professional artist and mother that, as Fowler observes, remained unresolved for Zorach. The chapter concludes with a consideration of Georgiana Harbeson’s 1933 designs for needlework patterns featuring two
American Indian women, Pochahontas and Sacajawea. A probable commission from Needlecraft, Fowler contextualises the designs in contemporary anglo primitivist constructions of American Indian culture, at the same time arguing that Harbeson’s representation of the women as ‘actors in history’ (p. 188) transcends the pervasive stereotype of women as passive victims of history.

Fowler asserts that this is a ‘recovery project’ (p. 12). It is, and it is an important one that is highly suggestive and meaningful for multiple readerships including those interested in craft in an expanded field, wider understandings of modernisms, and the politics of women’s creative practice and how limitations and strategies of subversion are enacted, experienced and play out. Additionally, as Fowler acknowledge, this is an area where much work remains to be done by historians and, I would add, practitioners. In the book’s conclusion, for instance, she reminds us about the importance of hobby and amateur practitioners in sustaining continued interest in modern embroidery when it became overshadowed by weaving in the 1940s. These women’s work and stories need to be recovered, alongside the ongoing interaction between amateur and professional practice (Hackney et al 2016; Hackney 2013; Hackney 2006). Current interest in the aesthetic, political, social, technological and environmental significance of stitch is high, as evidenced by a wealth of publications and the work of key practitioners such as Alice Kettle, whose current project tells stories of migration through stitch, and Hannah Maughan whose innovative work was recently recognised by the Embroiderers’ Guild with a Beryl Dean Award for Teaching Excellence (Kettle 2018-19; The Embroiderers Guild 2018-19). Yet the UK Embroiderers’ Guild struggles to recruit young people. This book is a powerful reminder that, in the hands of determined, creative, thoughtful, resourceful women, embroidery is a tool for the creation of important art, self-expression, political craft, or life-improving design; it is a means, that is, to subvert lazy assumptions and forge new paths.

References


Professor Fiona Hackney works on dress and fashion culture, interwar print media, crafting, co-creation and social design. Recent publications include: the *Edinburgh Companion to British Women’s Print Culture between the Wars* (2018). Her monograph *Women’s Magazines and the Feminine Imagination: Opening Up a New World for Women in Interwar Britain* will be published by Bloomsbury.

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