

Heirlooms

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Among the hard-edged shapes layered up and abutted into architecture, pools, sideboards and shelves of books and pots, suddenly: threads! Hoary wools and silky cottons elegantly implying blinds, soft panelling and patterned wall hangings to shield a view, dampen acoustics and excite the eye.

Perhaps textiles are good at softening harsh spaces and baffling noise because thread is something unruly – animal hair, plant bolls, hydrocarbon chains – spun into a line. It submits to human will, setting a good example. And when a thread is pulled taut, what was pliable becomes stiff and straight, a sharp edge and a strong steady something in itself. It is disciplined. Even when hanging loose, if following the lead of a needle, it can be made to pierce dense weaves and penetrate skins, and in doing so, hold things together. It is constructive. But then again, under the influence of gravity and friction and other occult forces, the moment you put anything

string-like – a silver chain, a ribbon, a lanyard – into a bag or pocket, it regresses as close to its original tangled and confused state as possible.

Thread crosses and re-crosses the threshold between order and disorder. Barely controlled life dangles by a thread just above a state of chaos. The irony of the tapestry is that many enjoy the knotted and scrambled back of the tapestry as much as, if not more than, its front. The public face of the tapestry is a tidy, intentional picture. The back is its material truth and a place of merry serendipity.

A thread can be followed through the labyrinthine histories of arts and crafts, up to the high turrets of populism and down into the vaults of mythology and conceptualism. In medieval psalters Eve is portrayed working with spindle and distaff, presumably spinning all humanity through her lineage. Women wove beautifully in the shadow of Bauhaus architects and painters; and in the seventies they stepped into bright galleries to knit and crochet provocative declarations. And I like to think that the cool, grid-plotting conceptualists had hanging in their hallways those owls and spiralling geometries of metallic thread wound round pins banged into hessian-covered boards.

Have children always coiled wool around cardboard rings to make pompoms? It seems an ancient and most accessible trick. But also a feasible leap to the jacquard loom, with its punch cards governing which warp threads are raised for the weft to pass beneath, creating patterned cloth of gorgeous complexity. From this, Charles Babbage extrapolated the first number-crunching machine, for Ada Lovelace to then realise these numbers could represent all manner of variable elements, that the punched holes might correspond to musical pitches, spatial positions, prices... To data. And so we are delivered to now, where computers, for better or worse, manufacture and control our environments. And yet even the slickest smart house makes room for plush, voile, waffles and knits – warm ease for eye and touch. Beauty persists in the balance, and the moths continue to eat the heirlooms.