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A Blockbuster Whitney Exhibit Shows How Feminists Reshaped The Macho Standards Of Art

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For 18th century American girls, embroidering a sampler served as a dress rehearsal for a life of repetitive chores. Stitching the alphabet into handwoven cloth required care and diligence that would not only serve the sartorial needs of a future family but also provided a template for household tasks ranging from cooking to cleaning. These lessons were often reinforced with needlework proverbs. “Do as you would be done by,” a girl named Hannah Brew stitched in 1756. “A fool and his money are soon parted,” embroidered Phoebe Smith a dozen years later.

The thread of these girls’ lives following their completion of their samplers has been lost to history. Those who know of their maiden “accomplishments” – as needlework was often called in the 1700s – most likely encountered the embroidered proverbs second-hand in the art of **Elaine Reichek**, who has studied samplers from the past as models for her own extraordinary work.

Liza Lou (b. 1969), Kitchen, 1991-96. Beads, plaster, wood, and found objects, 96 x 132 x 168 in. ... [+]

LIZA LOU

A couple samplers by **Reichek** are included in *Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950–2019*, an engaging exhibition currently on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. Executed with the consummate skill of her predecessors, **Reichek's** accomplishments additionally accomplish the task of questioning old distinctions between craft and art by juxtaposing the old-fashioned sayings with phrases used in text-based works by feminist artists Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger in the 1970s and '80s.

The contentious relationship between deeply interconnected creative endeavors – evoked in myriad craft-based works at the Whitney executed by artists ranging from Peter Voulkos to Liza Lou – is addressed from a scholarly perspective in *Craft: An American History*, a fascinating new survey of making from the seventeenth century to today by former Museum of Arts and Design director Glenn Adamson. Although the book and exhibition were conceived independently, and overlap only intermittently,

they bolster each other by revealing patterns through the complementary crafts of curation and storytelling.

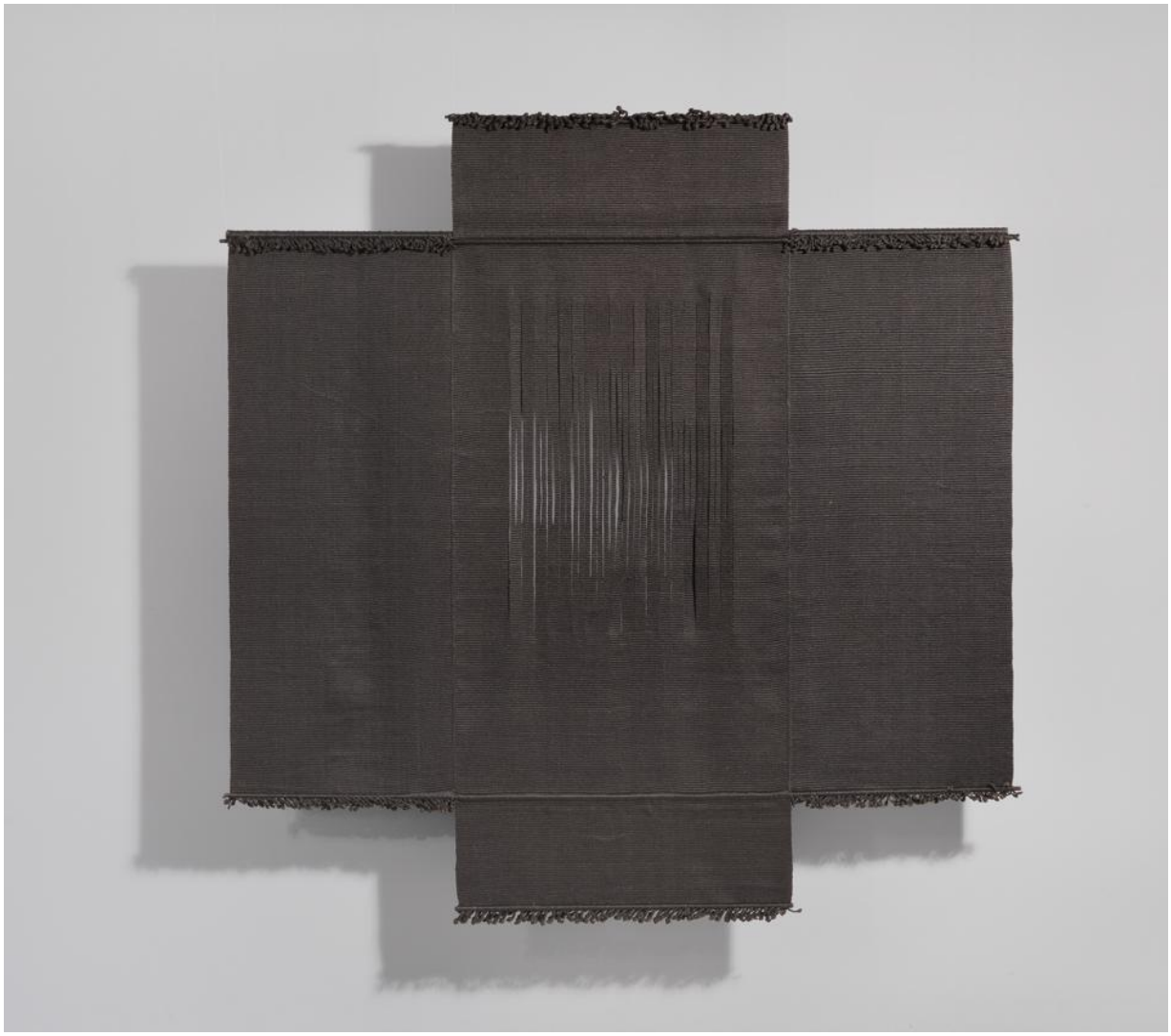
As Adamson observes, even the historical samplers of girls like Hannah Brew and Phoebe Smith could be more than just training exercises in marital servitude. “With their formulaic execution and inscriptions,” he writes, “samplers can seem somewhat disheartening, not so much evidence of young women’s creativity as the lack of options that lay before them. Yet, once the stitches were learned, embroidery could be turned to ends as imaginative as any painting.” The skills could even offer emancipation. Although the story of Betsy Ross designing the American flag “turns out to be uncertain at best,” Adamson notes, she was successfully able to deploy her sewing skills to create an upholstery business that thrived for fifty years.

The personal autonomy that Ross achieved is a trajectory of craft as significant and as fraught as that of creative expression. Learning a craft has liberated people – including women and minorities – while simultaneously binding their futures to circumstances beyond their control such as the industrialization of their trades under capitalism. In fact, the threat of mechanization probably exacerbated the conflict between craft and art, by entrenching the values of skilled workmanship and functional utility. Traditional craftspeople militated against artistic dilettantism with guilded protectionism. Modern artists rejected crafty ornamentation as conceptually vapid, and purposeful practicality as anathema to the dictates of art for art’s sake.

This conflict did not serve anyone well. The deleterious effects were especially apparent in the 1940s through the 1970s, when artists such as Voulkos and Ruth Asawa were held suspect for trying to use craft techniques in their sculpture. Trained in ceramics, and skilled at throwing pots, Voulkos pushed functional forms into the realm of abstraction, infuriating his fellow ceramicists. Asawa, on the other hand, trained as an artist but found her principal means of sculptural expression by learning a traditional technique for crocheting metal baskets for eggs in Mexico. Her work was shunned by the art establishment for years, even though her sculptures were never even once used for transporting eggs.

While not yet entirely gone, the animosity between art and craft has diminished for a number of reasons. Craftspeople have become less skeptical of artists as artists have demonstrated skill and commitment. Their ire has turned instead toward the unwashed masses stocking up at Hobby Lobby and selling on Etsy.

As for the art world, the embrace of craft largely came about through the artistic use of “craft”. In other words, artists came to use craft conceptually, not only deploying traditional techniques but also scaffolding meaning on historical references.



Lenore G. Tawney (1907-2007), Four Petaled Flower II, 1974. Woven linen and steel rods, 87 1/2 × 85 ...
[+] LENORE G. TAWNEY FOUNDATION

In the ‘70s, for instance, feminist artists began using the domestic arts and decoration as a political statement: a provocative stance against the male domination of “pure” art forms such as Minimalism. Staking this ground conceptually, artists such as Lenore Tawney came also to explore the potential of techniques such as weaving aesthetically, and the aesthetics gained legitimacy within the art establishment because the conceptual grounding tied the work to existing artistic standards. With her contemporary samplers, crafted in the 1990s, Elaine Reichek furthered this approach while simultaneously closing the gap between conceptual craft and other forms of conceptualism including the text art of Holzer and Kruger.

If the conceptual deployment of craft has given craft-based art a place in museums and galleries, the acceptance has diminished the conceptual impact. Simply put, using craft techniques is no longer provocative. However, this shift should not be construed as a loss. The expectation that craft techniques will be seen in an art museum like the Whitney allows the techniques to flourish, to facilitate new artistic expression, and to make new meaning.

Jonathon Keats