

Weaving Histories from Below

Deadline: Jan 15, 2024

Brenda Schmahmann, University of Johannesburg

Weaving Histories from Below: Needlework in Africa and the writing of gendered and subaltern histories.

We are developing a volume on needlework and the writing of gendered and subaltern histories, and are calling for chapter contributions. We already have excellent submissions on South Africa but are looking for chapters on needlework from elsewhere on the African continent.

The aim of the proposed volume is to reflect on how needlework can offer new critical perspectives from which to write gendered and subaltern histories. Here “needlework” is being used to refer to a broad set of practices, including, for example, sewing, textile-making, fashion, embroidery, beadwork, weaving, tapestry making, spinning and yarning, wirework, knitting, and crochet.

There are four broad threads of interest that have shaped our interest in needlework’s historical and expressive possibilities:

Firstly, the deep biases and lacunae within the colonial and post-colonial archives tend to pose challenges in accessing the voices of subaltern communities. Black women, who have historically been triply marginalised on the basis of race, class and gender, often remain invisible in such records. Understood in light of this marginalisation, needlework has potential to yield insights about those whose perceptions might otherwise be unheard.

Secondly, needlework has provided a means for bearing witness or for the expression of trauma and the representation of events of momentous import. Artists in Africa – like those elsewhere – have responded to the precedent of the Bayeux Tapestry (which recorded events leading up to the Norman conquest of England in 1066) by representing significant events that have shaped African histories and people’s lives. But women have also used the medium to reflect on their everyday experiences or on their personal challenges and insights.

Thirdly, needlework has been used by many African women (and men) to navigate between tradition and modernity, and to negotiate identities in a transforming world shaped by capitalism and migrant labour. Religion has had impact on needlework also. For example, Christian missionaries and their teachings have historically had impact on dress as well as gendered understandings of sewing as women’s work. Understood in this light, needlework is a marker of historical processes and how they have been negotiated.

Fourthly, embroidery has enabled agency. This is not simply through the many self-help projects and collectives deploying needlework that have been set up to generate an income but also

through its being deployed as an expressive medium by those outside the mainstream artworld. At the same time, artists working in mainstream art contexts have recognised in needlework possibilities for engaging powerfully and subversively with gendered norms and constructs of femininity as well as questions of identity and belonging.

Proposals

We welcome proposals for chapters of 6000 words (inclusive of notes and references) on needlework from anywhere in Africa (except South Africa, which is already represented) with a focus on one or more of the following themes:

- Needlework as forms of autobiography and biography
- Needlework as a marker, maker and negotiator of identity, whether individual or collective.
- Needlework as testament or documentation of historical events and processes
- Needlework as narratives of migration and expressions of diasporic networks
- Needlework as resistance and disruption
- The relationship between oral histories, story-telling and needlework
- Needlework and the making of memory: how does needlework embed, record or remake political, social and cultural memory?
- Needlework as therapy and rehabilitation
- Needlework and the politics of gender

As authors will be able to include a maximum for four images in a chapter, contributors are encouraged strongly to focus in depth on selected examples.

Those interested in authoring a chapter are requested to submit 1) a proposed title and abstract of between 350 and 500 words 2) a short biography (max 200 words) including your current affiliation, and 3) a statement confirming that the proposed work has not been previously published. Please send to all members of the editorial team by the deadline of 15th January 2024.

Applicants will be notified about the outcome of their submissions by mid-February 2024, with a June 2024 deadline for a full first draft. If you have any questions or would like further information, please feel free to contact us.

Dr Annie Devenish – History Department, University of the Witwatersrand
annie.devenish@wits.ac.za

Professor Sophie Dulucq - I Département Histoire, l'université Toulouse dulucq@univ-tlse2.fr

Professor Brenda Schmahmann - South African Research Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture, University of Johannesburg brendas@uj.ac.za

Dr Marie Opplert – IFAS Research marie.opplert@frenchinstitute.org.za

Reference:

CFP: Weaving Histories from Below. In: ArtHist.net, Nov 27, 2023 (accessed Jun 28, 2025),
<<https://arthist.net/archive/40710>>.