

## Lost in the History of Modernism: Magnificent Embroiderers

The Dada fine artist Hannah Höch's subversive advice for embroiderers reflected her own art that rejected ideals of femininity and domesticity. Embroidery's marginalized position of, and connection to the home allowed women to develop expressive designs forbidden to painters and sculptors. Complex relationships between embroidery design, industry, socialist, communist and fascist ideologies existed. The identification of the provenance of Austrian, Italian and German textiles led to the determination of external influences that shaped and enhanced the object meanings. Held in British collections they were created by women who taught, ran ateliers and rejected the propaganda they were exposed to and became part of a larger resistance movement. Taking alternative viewpoints to apply the special accent of modernism to a traditional art form. These unique works communicate a political and social vision of an idealized world and express the impact of various political ideologies on women's lives. The works' received significant visibility in their day, but the decorative appearance excluded them from full modernist classification. It is readily apparent that these embroiderers achieved works of excellence during the inter-war period.

Keywords: design, embroidery, politics, industry, modernism

[Embroidery] is an art and ought to be treated like one ... you, craftswomen, modern women, who feel that your spirit is in your work, who are determined to lay claim to your rights (economic and moral), who believe your feet are firmly planted in reality, at least Y-O-U should know that your embroidery work is a documentation of your own era.

Hannah Höch<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

This story seeks to demonstrate how the influence of Höch became beneficial for embroiderers and attempts to illuminate their understanding of the period. While working as an embroidery and dress pattern designer at the Ullstein publishing houses, Höch was able to exert sustained encouragement to embroiderers. The highly regarded embroiderer, Emmy Zweybrück's relationship with the publishers is symbolised in an embroidered tulle textile celebrating the Ullstein publisher, Alex Koch's sixtieth birthday. The paper unfolds the complexity of circumstances surrounding the embroiderers and the ideological pressures they endured as applied arts were used in political propaganda. An earlier paper 'Politics and Trade in Emmy Zweybrück – Prochaska's influential textile designs in the Needlework Development Scheme,' introduced her works in the context of the scheme and the historical aspects.<sup>2</sup> This paper extends the debate, including works by other designers, for example Elsi Kay Kohler, in the context of modernism. It presents the relationship between embroidery design and socialist, communist and fascist ideologies during the periods when the regimes had their greatest peak of influence. In these modern works the artist always communicated a message with political or social context, depicting an ideal world, expressing

1 Madeleine Boucher, "Art or Craft?: Hannah Höch's Collages Embraced the Conflict Between Art and Craft, Dada and Commercialism," <https://www.artsy.net/article/madeleineb-art-or-craft-hannah-hochs-collages-embraced> (accessed 2014).

2 Sandra Heffernan, "Politics and Trade in Design: Emmy Zweybrück-Prochaska's Influential Textile Designs in Needlework Development Scheme Collections," *Textile* 5, no. 1 (2007), 46–61.

the impact of regimes ideologies on their lives through the traditional art form of embroidery. Exceptional circumstances after the conflict of World War One, the fragmentation of the Austro-Empire and the Russian Revolution brought political and socio-economic changes to life as it was known, while the modernist schools were forming. During a period of intense political activity and economic deprivation the embroiderers were open to different viewpoints on social and political issues. They presented unique responses in the special accent of modernism into their art. More so than any other medium, embroidery allowed for the blurring of old and new and for impregnating tradition with innovation and modernism. This article analyses the processes and meanings of embroidery to explain the complex relationship between designers, commerce, politics and society.

During the 1930s, in an unusual relationship with Scotland's thread industrialists, J & P Coats Ltd., the designers from Austria, Hungary and Germany produced hand and machine embroideries for education, exhibition and trade purposes contributing to Coats' Needlework Development Scheme (NDS) collection.<sup>3</sup> Coats were a textile thread industry leader wholly owning forty-three mills, including Mez AG in Germany, Cucirini Cantoni Coats in Italy; Harlander in Austria and the Anglo-Hungarian Thread Co. in Hungary. In collaboration with educators, Coats circulated and re-circulated the textiles between various education and amateur organisations throughout the United Kingdom from 1934–62. Coats' organizational framework for the scheme was immense and communication was taking place on an international level, encouraging an active, creative, cross-fertilisation of ideas between different cultures. Coats' role in the encouragement of such designs becomes less mysterious when seen in the light of the demands required to succeed in business in such difficult times, when ruthlessness and manipulation as a daily occurrence is considered.<sup>4</sup> In order to succeed, designers had to negotiate market forces to create objects that related to contemporary life and fashion. Coats' extensive communication networks connecting many countries in Europe with the British Isles ensured modernist textile design made an impact on British design.

The present research of embroideries and written material in university and museum collections was led by a forensic process in a material culture framework to identify the provenance and meanings of the textiles. The cross-referencing of information from these sources created typologies, which provided answers to the identification and provenance of the textiles and their artist and designers and the way their works are the embodiment of the times. For the purposes of clarity, 'designer' refers to artists who designed for exhibition and industry while being artists.

## Embroidery and Modernism

Embroidery played a significant role in the development of the modernist image. In the 1890s the German sculptor Hermann Obrist in collaboration with the manager of his Munich atelier, Bertha Ruchet, created embroidery designs stitched by Italian women.<sup>5</sup> Exhibited in Munich, the embroideries were the first modern art designs; later, the works became icons of the then emerging Jugendstil. Contemporary reviewers and artists rejoiced in the creative, subtle variations of colour and texture.

The situation for embroiderers varied from place to place and became less favourable at the turn of the twentieth century. Educational opportunities for women were limited and as they received the vote and were given a voice in political realms, their participation in public and artistic life was perceived as a threat. The impact of embroidery designs across the 1920s and 1930s was limited by male perceptions of artists and critics who wrote about art and design, for example, influential critics such as the German Karl Scheffler, a future Bauhaus lecturer, swayed opinion as he published anti-feminine art ideas.<sup>6</sup>

In 1914, in defiance of the gender divide in education, Emmy Zweybrück established her own embroidery atelier and school in Vienna, *Kunstgewerbliche Schule und Werkstätte*,<sup>7</sup> accepting advanced students of embroidery from abroad as well as from Vienna (Fig. 1).<sup>8</sup> Advertisements for the School were regularly placed in the German fine art and applied art journals.<sup>9</sup> Her private school for girls aged six to fourteen and fourteen to eighteen, was recognised by government and commissions were received from wealthy patrons of Vienna and abroad. Zweybrück quickly developed an international reputation as from 1916 her work frequently received favourable reviews in *The Studio*, *Die Kunst*, *Deutsche Kunst und Dekorative (DKD)*, *Stickereien und Spitzen (Stickereien)*. Zweybrück was said to use the arts to alleviate children's depression after World War I. A



Fig. 1. Emmy Zweybrück. Published in *Deutsche Kunst und Dekorative* 1925, 79.

5 M. Logan, *Hermann Obrist's Embroidered Decorations* (London: The Studio, 1896), 9 and 98–100.

6 J. Anger, "Forgotten Ties: The Suppression of the Decorative in German Art and Theory 1900–1915," in Christopher Reed (ed.), *Not at Home the Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 132.

7 School of Drawing and Applied Art.

8 Zweybrück graduated from the *Osterreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie Kunstgewerb* (Academy of Applied Arts) in Vienna studying in a curriculum steeped in the Secession.

9 A. S. Levetus, "The Zweybrück School of Drawing and Applied Art in Vienna," *The Studio: A Magazine of Fine and Applied Art* 92, no. 402 (1926), 181–3, <http://pbc.gda.pl/dlibra/doccontent?id=17152> (accessed June 2, 2017).

3 Sandra Heffernan, "Design from Artefacts: Issues in Aesthetics: Collecting, Education, Making and Marketing in J & P Coats' Needlework Development Scheme: 1934–62" (PhD diss., Glasgow School of Art, 2004).

4 Sandra Heffernan, "Stitch Kings: The Influence of J&P Coats on Textile Design Education," *International Review of Scottish Studies* 37 (2012), 97–120.

large student work by Helli Fritz portrays children looking forlorn with downcast heads.<sup>10</sup> It survives in an American collection.

Despite the difficult circumstances Zweybrück received international acclaim in 1925 when her works were included in the Austrian Pavilion at the 1925 Exposition des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes (Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts) and received more recognition in major design journals.<sup>11</sup>

### Embroidery in a Modernist Style

In the late 1920s the Wall Street crash heightened economic chaos and tensions, and political leaders were encouraged to promote their acceptance of modernism. Embroidery was used to enhance the luxurious impression and ambience of modern architecture. The S.S. Bremen, a north German Norddeutscher-Lloyd Liner was a symbol of Germany's recovery from the War and was used in advertising propaganda to signal the official acceptance of modernism.<sup>12</sup> Zweybrück was commissioned to design embroidered tulle cloths for the Bremen (Fig. 2).<sup>13</sup> The luxurious impression and ambience was enhanced by her nature inspired designs in a subdued monotone modern effect (Figs. 3 and 4). They were made at the Vereinigte Werkstätten (Cooperative Workshops), in Munich, which drew considerable support from the Third Reich. Dedicated to the production and sale of furnishing and homewares, the Vereinigte Werkstätten was promoted in magazines, eliminating the distinction between the fine and applied arts since the late nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

Highlighting close connections between Zweybrück's atelier and Coats and their promotion of contemporary design is another Bremen tulle work that was promoted as 'from a set of cloths for the Bremen' in the Victoria & Albert Museum's 'Modern Embroidery Exhibition' in 1932. Information on the subtle modernist message accompanied the image in *Stickerein* and *Modern Embroidery*, a special number of *The Studio*.<sup>15</sup> The result of the exhibition was recognition of the merger in design of the varied characteristics of tradition and modernism by way of techniques and design.

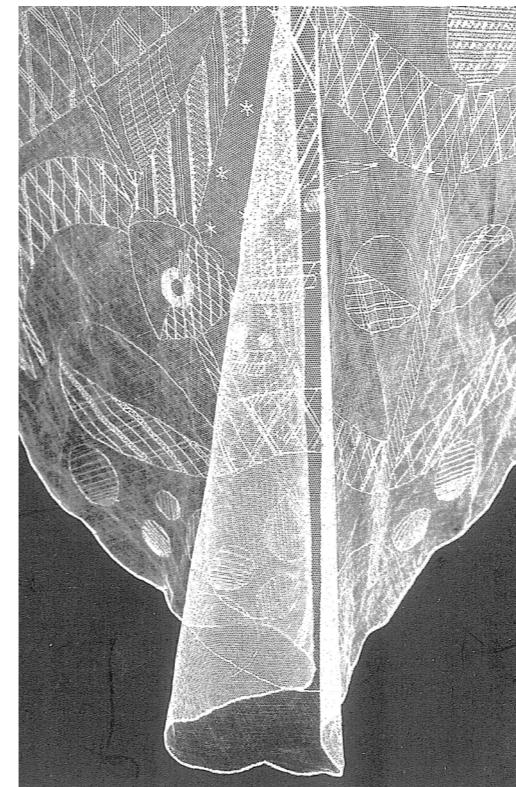


Fig. 2. Emmy Zweybrück's Bremen textile detail. Published in W.P., "Emmy Zweybrück: Tülldecke für den salon des ozeanexpress Bremen," *Stickereien und Spitzen* (1931), 42.

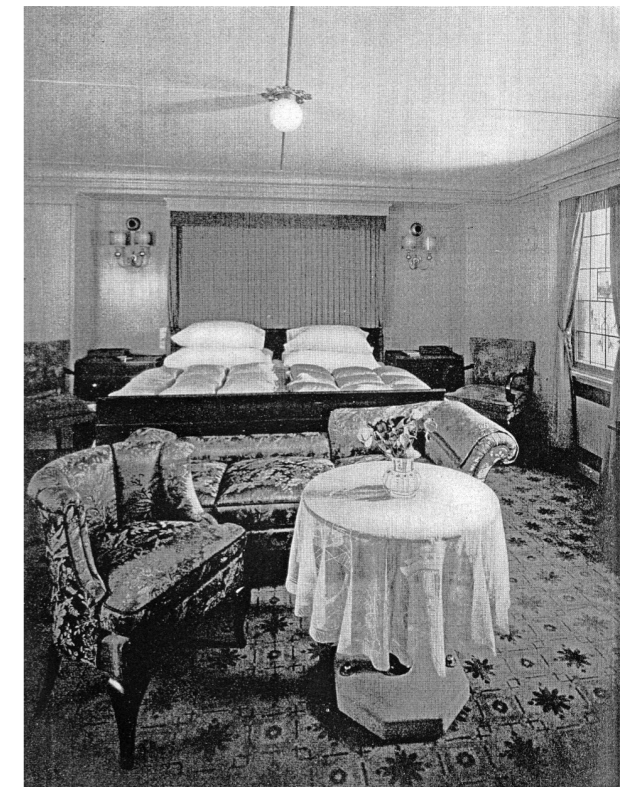


Fig. 3. Emmy Zweybrück's textile in the Bremen first class saloon. Published in Fritz August Breuhaus de Groot, *Der Ozean Express Bremen* (Munich: Verlag F Bruckman AG, 1930), 138.



Fig. 4. Emmy Zweybrück's textile in the Bremen first class bedroom. Published in Fritz August Breuhaus de Groot, *Der Ozean Express Bremen* (Munich: Verlag F Bruckman AG, 1930), 140.

<sup>10</sup> Marge Hiller, letter to author, May 20, 2003.

<sup>11</sup> "Österreich auf der Pariser Ausstellung," *Deutsche Kunst und Dekorative* 57 (1925–26), 78, [http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/dkd1925\\_1926/0092?sid=eb07fa64d28f87eaed5373badc959e85](http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/dkd1925_1926/0092?sid=eb07fa64d28f87eaed5373badc959e85) (accessed June 2, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> John Heskett, "Design in Inter-War Germany," in Wendy Kaplan (ed.), *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Reform and Persuasion 1885–1945* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 257–86.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Schiebelhuth, "Neue Arbeiten von Emmy Zweybruck," *Stickereien und Spitzen* no. 31 (1930–31), 40–51.

<sup>14</sup> Anja Prößl-Kammerer, "Weaving for the 'Führer' Textile Art in National Socialism," *Textile Forum* 3, no. 3 (1996), 40–1.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Hogarth, *Modern Embroidery* (London: The Studio, 1933).

### Expressive Design with Subtle Messages

Zweybrück's ability to create innovative designs and willingness to allude to politics is evidenced in a work held in the Dundee University collection. In the emerging art deco style, the design from 1933 references Venice and appears to comment on the luxurious conditions enjoyed by the middleclass tourists travelling on liners (Fig. 5). A symbolic image of the SS Bremen cloth is included on the design's ship deck, along-with a peasant woman carrying a basket of fresh fruit. Perhaps a reference to the bountiful supplies of food enjoyed on-board by the middleclass tourists, compared with the 'mature fruit dispersed in traces' as in the text. This could be a reference to the pureness of the countryside where honest people worked hard, symbolism used as propaganda for power. It could also illustrate the contrast, which existed between the conditions of those in power, and the poverty of the rural poor, who endured hardship and a scarcity of resources. Edwin Redslob's aphorism surrounds the image:

May the sun bless over the holy distance,  
May the sails, glide, over free open spaces,  
May the gliding clouds, believe in the people who follow you,  
Mature fruit dispersed in traces.<sup>16</sup>

It was one of a series of designs including aphorisms by Redslob, who was Reichkunstwart (State Art Officer) in Hitler's national socialist regime.<sup>17</sup> In a different work, Zweybrück hailed Redslob as a hero, along-with her graphics teacher, Rudolf von Larisch.<sup>18</sup> Redslob was responsible for national art and culture questions and made numerous attempts to evolve a state policy for applied arts and design seeking to introduce a statute to improve recognition for applied artists.<sup>19</sup> At the time, German crafts people were under considerable threat as a result of the expansion of industry.

During this era Hitler recognized the potential for design to be a 'great improver', and national values and traditions were emphasized, while modernism was rejected.<sup>20</sup> Ideas of the blood and

16 W. Michel, "Gesticke Spruche von Emmy Zweybruck," *Stickereien und Spitzen* no. 34 (1933–34), 57–9, Dundee University (DUNUC ARTS), 255; NDS 790.

17 Josef Hoffman, *Austrian Applied Arts: Oesterreichisches Kunstgewerbe: Les Arts Decoratifs Autrichiens: Ein Führer durch das Österreichische Kunstgewerbe* (Leipzig, Wien, Troppau: Verlag Heinz and Co., 1930), 186–191.

18 Schiebelhuth, "Neue Arbeiten," 45. In 1933 Redslob resigned from the National Socialists and was dismissed by the Nazis. Later in the 1930s Redslob wrote articles for the American *Design* journal. He established an university and set about finding banished artworks after the Second World War.

19 Brandon Taylor and Wilfried van der Will, *The Nazification of Art: Art, Design, Architecture, Music and Film in the Third Reich* (Winchester: The Winchester School of Art Press, 1990), vol. of the collection Winchester studies in art and criticism.

20 Paul Greenhalgh (ed.), *Modernism in Design* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990), 15.

soil 'Blut and Boden' formed the foundation of the perspective. They propagated the myth of the woman as guardian, child-bearer and protector, and the German home as the centre for both the raising of children and the welcoming of the returning warrior.<sup>21</sup> A 1935 issue of the monthly *Die Dame* perpetuated these ideals. Folk embroidery was paradoxically acclaimed in Nazi Germany, and applied art evolved in line with the national socialist view of the world. Both Hitler's encouragement for the traditional and opposition to modern art created a design niche for embroiderers, which they could only accept, because of the animosity towards their designs in the modern design realm.

Both the Fascists and Nazis were concerned with showing the family as a supportive family unit. Founded in 1919 in Italy, Benito Mussolini's fascism became a major political force, which used the applied arts to 'domesticate' the revolution, promoting fascism in everyday life.<sup>22</sup> Three designs attributed to Zwëybruck in 1934 show a shift in style to an ecclesiastical and fascist appearance and a willingness to incorporate oblique political commentaries.<sup>23</sup> The work *Madonna and Two Angels*, inscribed *Unsere liebe Frau* (My beloved Lady) portrays the Madonna as a young women surrounded by her two angels in a reflective pose. The Holy Family embroidery simply titled *Bildstickerei* (Embroidered picture) in *Stickereien* suggests this work was produced in a commercial environment, where the anonymity of both the designer and design was the norm (Fig. 6).<sup>24</sup> The text included in the design *Es ist ein Reis entsprungen Aus einer Wurzel zart* (A rose has sprung from a tender root) is perhaps a biblical reference to the Christmas song. Italian Fascist government's 'Battle for Grain' campaign to increase production of wheat and other cereals. The text subversively adapts a line, *Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen*, from a German Christmas carol, simply substituting the



Fig. 5. Emmy Zweybrück's *Sonnensegun*, including Edwin Redslob's aphorism. Published in W. Michel, "Gesticke Spruche von Emmy Zweybruck," *Stickereien und Spitzen* (1933–34), 58.

21 S. Weißler, "Imprisoned within a Role: An Assessment of Arts and Crafts Production by Women under National Socialism," in Angela Odeekoven-Gerischer et. al. (eds.), *Frauen im Design: Berufsbilder und Lebenswege seit 1900 / Women in Design: Careers and Life Histories since 1900* (Stuttgart: Landesgewerbeamt Baden-Württemberg, 1989), 234–243, exhibition catalogue.

22 Denis Doordan, "Political Things: Design in Fascist Italy," in Wendy Kaplan (ed.), *Designing Modernity: The Arts of Persuasion 1885–1945*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 225–255.

23 Glasgow School of Art (GSA) F2; DUNUC ARTS: 996, NDS 733; DUNUC ARTS: 250, NDS 525.

24 W. Spring, "Vom Schenken," *Handarbeiten Aller Art* (1935–36), 35–8.



Fig. 6. Emmy Zweybrück's *The Holy Family*, courtesy of Dundee University, photo by Sandra Heffernan.

word Reis (rice) for Ros (rose). The simple modification would not be noticed at a glance.

Zweybrück's lively designs inspired by nature, folk, and ecclesiastical themes include elements unacceptable to the restrictive modernist agenda. Figurative, symbolic, colourful, and decorative designs reference traditional subjects, for example the Madonna, but are presented in a style acceptable to the dictates of those in power. Interestingly, the designs are not overtly fascist but subtly reference themes encouraged by those in power. Portrayals of women emphasised their traditional domestic roles and given Coats had prioritised the collection of ecclesiastical design it seems likely they would have indicated the type of work they preferred. Zweybrück's works were promoted in the German design journal *Stickereien und Spitzen*, which was approved by Hitler and Coats' Mez AG subsidiary company regularly posted full-page advertisements in this publication.

### Complex Connections

In November 1934, Zweybrück was appointed to Coats' Mez AG mill, Coats' German subsidiary, and hence the Harlander AG mill, near Vienna. Colin Martin, told of how the Harlander mill commissioned designs from her embroidery atelier in Vienna for promotional purposes in trade exhibitions.<sup>25</sup> These designs were used to advance Coats' commercial interests when negotiating with the national socialist regimes. Her design position at Coats offered employment in a difficult economic and political environment. The interplay of embroidery, design and industry manifested itself particularly clearly in Zweybrück's atelier work.

In 1938 Zweybrück visited New York and was interviewed by Emily Genaur, art critic of the World Telegram, in a discussion full of contradictions<sup>26</sup>. Zweybrück's comments reflect reluctance on her part to commit to such discussion. At a delicate time, Zweybrück was guarded in her comments regarding the influence of the annexation of Austria by the German Reich. She claimed the *Anschluss* meant little to Austrian artists. Genaur challenged Zweybrück's pro-fascist views, arguing that

<sup>25</sup> George Martin, (Colin Martin's son) personal communication, August 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Emily Genaur, "Italy a Leader?" *Art Digest* 12, August, 14, 1938.

'Mussolini's attempt to revive the spirit of ancient Rome had made Italy a leader in modern art.' Zweybrück denied any knowledge of the state sponsorship of the arts in Italy, but showed her approval of designs reflecting fascist ideals and values.

The economic crises in Austria and the harassment suffered by artists, made it more and more difficult to maintain an art school and an art studio under the premises of the aesthetic values, which were held in Vienna. Professor Heller, who organised an exhibition of Emmy Zweybrück's paper works in Vienna in 1989, suggests 'her work for Coats-Mez was in a certain way a contradiction against her self-understanding as an independent artist or craftswoman'.<sup>27</sup> Advertisements for her school appeared in *Handarbeiten Aller Art* as late as August 1939. It is likely it closed in the sense of it being a true atelier and school, but remained open for Coats' commissions.<sup>28</sup>

### Anonymously Depicting an Idealised World

Elsi Kay Köhler, a qualified architect, created designs that drew on the changing cultural conflicts existing in the process of modernization of Germany (Fig. 7). The image of the glamorous or threatening 'new woman', as presented in the media, was a distorted picture of reality.<sup>29</sup> The newly modern women had an ambiguous role in German mass culture, as the patriarchal vision for women fused with the growing consumer market where women were encouraged to redefine their bodies as commodities. The Weimar republic encouraged the consumer leisure culture of the *neue Frau*, using the print media to 'project' images of women posing as for beauty advertisements; the bobbed Dietrich hair-style was fashionable after her 1930s movie *Blue Angel*.<sup>30</sup> Coats promoted *neue Frau* styled images on the covers of *The Needlewoman* journal in 1935. From the late 1920s, Köhler's sophisticated works were promoted in key design and embroidery publications. Köhler resided in Leipzig until 1929, then moved between Leipzig and Vienna, until 1933–4 when she took up residence in Vienna, following Hitler's appointment as Chancellor. However, her works in the NDS were always attributed to Zweybrück.



Fig. 7. Elsi Köhler's *Madonna*. Published in Hans Schiebelhuth, "Bildstickerei," *Stickereien und Spitzen* (1929–30), 72.

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Heller, personal communication, February 8, 2002.

<sup>28</sup> Following Zweybrück's death in 1956, the *Los Angeles Times* honoured her contribution to design education and industrial design.

<sup>29</sup> Maud Lavin, *Cut with the Kitchen Knife: the Weimar Photo Montages of Hannah Höch* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1993), 56–7.

<sup>30</sup> Shearer West, *The Visual Arts in Germany* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2000), 175.

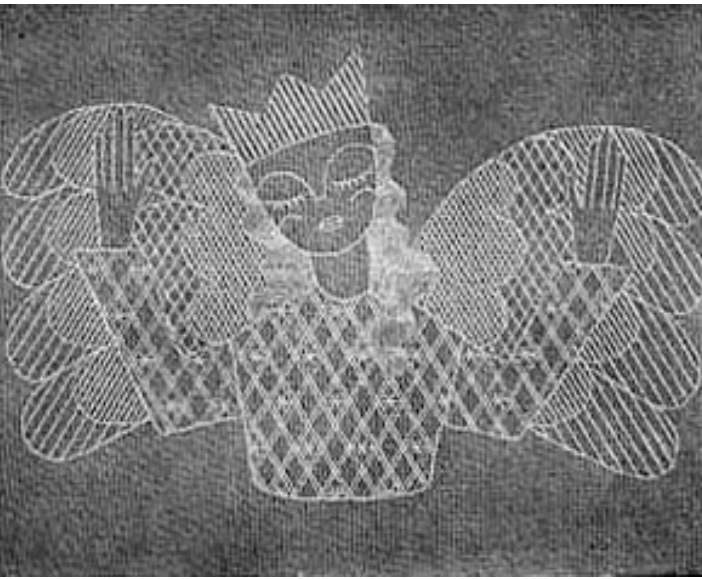


Fig. 8. Elsi Köhler's Angel's head. Published in Elsi Köhler, *Embroiderer Designers Sketchbook* (London: Pitman, 1952).

Köhler's 1929 *Madonna* has a colourful exuberance with both the Madonna and child in a protective pose (Fig. 8). The Madonna appears as a 'pure' woman with a fixed penetrating gaze, in the style of an icon, protected by the arms of the child. Decorative beads, sequins, silver and gold threads embellish the image, at a time when fine artists shunned such lush decoration. Another work, *Angel* features a black angel-like figure and appears to comment on the racist views of the ruling political regime.<sup>31</sup> Köhler worked in Scotland after her survival of the Nazi era, and there she undoubtedly would have feared harassment and have elected to erase her artistic past. Uncomfortable with the displeasure and cool reception the Scottish people demonstrated towards her artwork, while faced with the prospect of having to encourage their embroidery design, she would

have happily disowned her 'too modern' designs. Later in 1946, Kay Köhler, was employed as 'expert-in-charge' at Coats NDS in Glasgow and addressed the prestigious Friends of the Royal Society of Artists, in London. In *Embroidery as an Expression of National Characteristics* she appears to have compromised her own 'modern' beliefs while discussing the stylization and use of distorted figures in the German church embroideries, stating:

Just before the war, German embroiderers were making very modern church embroidery designs of distorted figures. The technique and colour were pleasing, but the designs were distasteful to religious people in that the distorted and top heavy figures were not the result of childhood's *naïveté*, but of a queer debased mentality which has not been confined to embroidery design only.<sup>32</sup>

### Oblique Messages in Religious Embroidery

While considering the intersections of historical layers, we must keep in mind the physical hardships endured as well as the negotiations of political, social and artistic challenges. Religion was at the periphery of National Socialist ideology and opposition to organised religion existed. In strongly

31 DUNUC ARTS: 253; NDS 745.

32 Elsie Kay Köhler, "Embroidery as an Expression of National Characteristics," *Journal of Royal Society of Arts* (1946), 59–71.

Catholic areas women refused to relinquish their habits and faith to meet the demands of the Nazi order and were often backed by the priest or a parson in their resistance.<sup>33</sup> An example of the way women interpreted the situation is shown in Käte Luise Rosenstock's embroidered net panel *St Francis* shows a heavily stylised saint figure surrounded by animals, birds, fish and flowers.<sup>34</sup> Rosenstock's designs received recognition in 1925 and featured regularly in the German journals, including her designs of a commercial nature perhaps produced for Coats' Mez AG. This suggests a professional link between Köhler and Rosenstock.

A stole by a student from the Stadt Schule für Handwerk und Kunstgewerbe (City School of Crafts and Arts) in Münster, features naïve figures with sacred emblems and includes the text "das wort bei Gott und am anfang war das wort" (the word was God and at the beginning was the word), referencing the opening chapter lines of the Gospel of John in the Bible. The young students, living in a chaotic and confusing world, would have been exposed to extensive propaganda in the schools. In an inhospitable climate, education for women was opposed by the National Socialists, who limited them to the study of 'appropriate' subjects at universities.<sup>35</sup> Another Munster student work portrays the Madonna crowned in thorns and crucified several times. Resonant of the misery suffered by Jesus, it alludes to his crucifixion and concludes with an excerpt from the Hail Mary (Fig. 9).<sup>36</sup> The student works from Münster are all the more interesting as they show the students' rebellious intent, when their own personal freedom was suppressed.

The women were creatively designing within contradictory limitations: on the one hand suppressed by the paternalistic views of the modernist era, but on the other encouraged in Central Europe by Fascist, and Nazi regimes to produce religious designs. The German ecclesiastical designs provide



Fig. 9. Student work from Stadt Schule für Handwerk und Kunstgewerbe, Munster. Courtesy of Robert Gordon University Archive, photo by Sandra Heffernan.

33 Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 190.

34 GSA F18.

35 Jennifer Loehlin, *From Rags to Riches: Housework, Consumption and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg 1999), 33.

36 Robert Gordon University: NDS 808.



Fig. 10. Embroidery made at Berlin's Verein für Deutsches Kunsthandwerk. Courtesy of Edinburgh College of Art Library, negative.

examples of the oblique referencing of political and social situations. A fascist presence existed in the familiar patterns of everyday life as design was used to influence people.<sup>37</sup> Embroidery threads were marketed by Coats throughout Central Europe labelled with emblems of power and production: sickles, guns, and shovels. The fascist support for handicraft ensured a market for Coats' threads.

During the 1920s and 1930s Sir James Henderson, Managing Director of Coats from 1932, was resident in Italy, and would have dined with Mussolini's officials while negotiating deals for Coats.<sup>38</sup> The Fascist regime allowed companies to market a wide range of acceptable politically inspired images.<sup>39</sup> Coats would have been aware of this when they displayed the works in trade exhibitions. During this era classical forms and themes pervaded Italian political designs. Christian symbolism, myths, fables and the power of ancient Rome themes feature in the work of designers, nuns, fascist supported schools and industry workrooms. A NDS work showing oblique reference to political events was created at a time when Mussolini proclaimed the birth of a new Roman Empire. It appears to reference the Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1936 (also known as Abyssinia). It was made at Berlin's Verein für Deutsches Kunsthandwerk (Association for German Arts and Crafts) (Fig. 10).<sup>40</sup>

37 Doordan, "Political Things," 225.

38 Heffernan, "Stitch Kings," 97–120. Later, Henderson was the only non-Catholic to receive the highest papal honour award.

39 Doordan, "Political Things," 227.

40 Edinburgh College of Art, NDS 553. This work appears to be lost. The image is from a remaining photographic negative.

Later, newspaper articles in Scotland in 1948 and again in 1962, suggested the Italian fascist styled works were considered to be of a discomforting nature. These attitudes would have contributed to their exclusion from design history. The designers would have been exposed to fascist propaganda and embroidery training at school. The fascists committed to racial purity, the family, and tradition encouraged embroidery, even though it contradicted their drive for technology. The fascist women's organisation *Massaie Rurali* with a membership of over one and a half million women in the 1930s, offered embroidery training.<sup>41</sup> According to historians, the decorative design of fascist appearance is outside the confines of modernism.

### Communism, Nationalism and Industry in Hungary

In the 1930s, a different situation existed for embroiderers under Communist rule in Hungary. National independence and identity were strong motivating forces. In spite of powerful industrial progress folk culture was encouraged within national culture propaganda. Embroidery design was already influenced by migration and colonisation, commerce, travel and publications. However during the late 1920s and 1930s, Coats held classes for their mill girls, who learnt to make tablecloths and doilies. The dissemination of colonial design by Coats was seen as a threat, as recorded in 1934 by Máriska Undi:

This dangerous invasion of western decorative forms- with which came the influence of western architectural and decorative style- was propelled by western thread trade manufacturers, who wanted a better market for their productions and threatened to swamp the home style of decoration altogether.<sup>42</sup>

Undi was recognised as the leading embroidery designer in Hungary. Earlier she was an active member of the influential *Gödöllő* colony, a campaigner for dress reform, publisher of Secessionist designs and lecturer at Budapest School of Applied Arts. In 1932, she was commissioned by the German Ministerium für Cultus und Unterricht (Ministry of Education) to publish peasant designs from her ethnography collection. The booklet series was translated into English and published until 1945.

The influence of the Austrian, German, Italian and Hungarian women is evident in 1930s British designs, in particular works by leading artists Rebecca Crompton and Kathleen Mann. The interwar years were considered significant period of development in self-expression and spontaneity in

41 Perry Willson, *Peasant Women and Politics in Fascist Italy: The Massaie Rurali* (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 126 and 129.

42 Maria Undi, *Kalotaszegi Irások Himzese* (Budapest: Ministerium für Cultus und Unterricht, 1934), 53.

British embroidery design.<sup>43</sup> The influence continued for many decades as the NDS works and publications circulation was extended in Britain and beyond.

## Conclusion

Women such as Zwegbrück and Köhler made an important contribution to design education and led successful design careers during a period of political and cultural oppression. They skilfully developed a design relationship between visual style, political and social comment during a period of intense conflict and hardship. Their textiles were the embodiment of turbulent times. Restrictions on women and the applied arts by the Bauhaus helped to create dissenting, marginal, fragmentary design movements, as typified in these NDS embroideries. Abstract, geometric forms, primary coloured, produced by technology, with no figurative or symbolic elements are considered by many historians to characterise much design of the Modern Movement. Abstraction eliminated figurative, decorative and symbolic elements in favour of the manipulation of form, and rejected tradition and historicism as a source of a design. Figurative, decorative embellishment and the intrinsic pattern of textiles were at odds with both the functionalism and simplicity of modernism.

Suppressed at the time this style of design was subsequently overlooked by recent constructs of modernism. Paradoxically the spaces between art and industry merged. They challenged a widely held view of embroidery as an applied rather than expressive medium. These modern designs had an immediate and significant impact on British textile design.

An uneasy relationship existed between Coats' collecting and marketing. Coats' market forces played a role in shaping the production of the designs referencing political and social events or themes acceptable to the ruling political regimes. Complex and multiple strategies contributed to the creation and dissemination of these designs into British culture. However the skill and artistic talent of the women designers ensured the works were successful both as trade items and works of art. The support of publishers and artists such as Höch ensured the embroideries received significant visibility in their day, but the decorative appearance of their works excluded them from full modernist classification. It is readily apparent that these embroiderers achieved works of excellence in an alternative modernist style during the inter-war period.

## Acknowledgements

With gratitude to the archives, museums and universities who willingly allowed me access to their collections. With gratitude to Alison Coleman for providing the German translations in this research.

<sup>43</sup> Tanya Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain in the Twentieth Century* (London: Yale University Press, 1996).

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