

ONLINE TALK: SEW SIMPLE

Event description

Sewing takes many forms, from the simple running stitch to elaborate embroideries of crewelwork and bargello. Even the words we use for these types of sewing differentiate their level of skill and complexity - to sew or to embroider - sewing as functional and embroidery as decorative. However, the beauty and significance of plainer forms of sewing are often overlooked. The association of plain, although descriptive, can demean its importance and the value that sewing has, and continues to have, in forms of making. For this monthly online talk, we bring together historians, textile makers and designers to explore the role of simple sewing from the nineteenth-century to today, centering around the significance of simple sewing in Britain but often reaching out to other parts of the world. Our speakers will draw our attention to the role of plain sewing in people's lives, especially in those of women and girls. Encouraging us to consider simple sewing's potential to create artistic textile works and the mindful act that these forms of sewing provide.

List of speakers

Barbara Burman

Barbara Burman is an historian, formerly based in the University of Southampton and the University of the Arts, London. Her research centres on dress and textiles in Britain. She is currently completing a book on the social and cultural significance of plain sewing past and present. For this book she set up Our Sewing Stories, a project in which women have written their own accounts of what stitching and making mean to them today. Other publications include the edited *The Culture of Sewing: Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking*, (Berg, now Bloomsbury, 1999), inspired by her earlier oral history project on home sewing. She led the *Pockets of History* research project, and curated the accompanying exhibition, then co-authored with Ariane Fennetaux *The Pocket: A Hidden History of Women's Lives, 1660-1900* (Yale University Press, 2019), a book that combines social history with in-depth study of material culture. Her new book, *The Point of the Needle*, will be published by Reaktion Publishers next year, 2023. She traces her interest in all things stitched and woven to her mother who made all her own clothes and taught dressmaking and tailoring. Barbara is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and on the editorial panel of *Costume*. A passionate gardener, Barbara lives in a village near Cambridge.

Overview of talk:

Barbara reflects on how we might retrieve the overlooked history of plain sewing and its hugely significant place in people's lives, particularly in the domestic space and waged labour of women and girls.

She outlines the role of oral history as an important contribution to this project. It can elicit an individual's subjective experience of stitching more readily than more formal records, valuable as these are, forming a unique archive in its own right. Barbara highlights insights that have emerged from her two oral history projects in which a total of a hundred women have told their sewing life stories. These autobiographies reveal an intimate history of real-life stitching practices, feelings and motives. From the tearful account of sewing a buttonhole badly in 1918 to the remarkable thoughts of a six-year-old who sewed for the very first time during Covid-19 lockdown, these stories underline the richness of making itself, the diversity of stitching's impact and help to fill out some of the gaps in plain stitching's neglected narrative.

Claire Wellesley-Smith

Claire Wellesley-Smith is a textile artist, writer and researcher based in Bradford, West Yorkshire, UK. Her projects are situated within arts, heritage, and community wellbeing. The ability of textile to transform and connect over time informs her studio, community, and research practices. She researches, writes, develops, delivers, and evaluates long-term socially engaged arts and heritage-based projects with community and care focussed organisations. Her recently completed doctoral research project *Crafting Resilience: Cultural heritage and community engagement in post-industrial textile communities* with The Open University was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. She has written two books, published by Batsford. *Slow Stitch: Mindful and Contemplative Textile Art* (2015) and *Resilient Stitch: Wellbeing and Connection in Textile Art* (2021). Both feature her durational project *Stitch Journal* a daily reflective stitching practice now in its ninth year.

Overview of talk:

Claire speaks to her experience of working on her durational project *Stitch Journal* (2013-), a daily reflective stitching practice now in its ninth year. It offers a way of thinking, remembering, and processing the different aspects of her textile practice. She will reflect on community-based projects that have used regular stitching as a method of exploring heritage, place and belonging.

Ekta Kaul

Ekta Kaul is a London based award winning textile artist known for her narrative maps that explore place, history and belonging through stitch. Her work is held in several permanent collections including at the Crafts Council, Liberty of London, the Gunnersbury Museum and those of private collectors. She has received awards from the Crafts Council and was the winner of 2021 Cockpit Arts Textile Prize. Ekta is passionate about supporting creativity and regularly teaches at institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum, Kettles Yard, West Dean College UK. Her work is currently on display at 'Eternally Yours' an exhibition exploring ideas of repair and mending at Somerset House, London.

Overview of talk:

Ekta will discuss how her work explores making maps of meaning through simple stitches.

Vivienne Richmond

Vivienne Richmond is a historian specialising in non-elite textiles, dress and needlework, and an advocate of visible mending. Formerly Head of History at Goldsmiths, University of London, her publications include *Clothing the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge University Press, 2013/2016) and she curated the exhibition *A Remedy for Rents: Darning Samplers and Other Needlework* from the Whitelands College Collection (2016-17). She is co-editor of *Textile History*, the journal of the Pasold Research Fund, and co-editor-in-chief of the forthcoming (2024) *Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of World Textiles*.

Overview of talk:

Showcasing the collection of Whitelands College, Roehampton University, including small-scale garments and exquisite darning and plain-sewing samplers, Vivienne Richmond will discuss needlework education in nineteenth-century Britain, North America and the British Empire. At a time when needlework syllabi forbade the instruction of embroidery to working-class girls, the work of Whitelands' students, championed by John Ruskin, demonstrates the great potential for beauty and artistry in even the most utilitarian stitching.