

Humanitarian handicraft

History, materiality and trade,
c. 1840 – 1980



Claire Barber, Helen Dampier,
Rebecca Gill and Bertrand Taithe

HUMANITARIANISM
KEY DEBATES & NEW APPROACHES

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Edited by

Claire Barber, Helen Dampier, Rebecca Gill
and Bertrand Taithe

MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Introduction: the meanings and making of humanitarian handicraft

Claire Barber, Helen Dampier, Rebecca Gill and Bertrand Taithe

This book brings together scholars of various horizons, art and craft practitioners, and historians of humanitarianism in dialogue around the material remnants of craft initiatives in the past: the evidence of large and small schemes to sustain people, ideals and trade networks through the production and consumption of handmade objects. In search of tangible elements of the profound humanitarian and developmental investment in handicraft, we have chosen to focus on textiles. Textile work is the most vernacular form of craftwork and the most accessible at a lower initial cost; however, the products can also become high-end goods and prized commodities in humanitarian trade networks. By engaging with contemporary producers and artists, this book breaks new ground. It is also part of a wider conversation on material culture, the history of emotions and haptic sensibilities among historians and textile scholars.¹ In this collection, we treat emotions as historically situated practices, and consider haptic sensibilities in order to draw attention to texture and touch, or ‘the tactility of vision’ according to Deleuze.² This contributes to a nascent critical approach in humanitarian studies which helps to shift the perspective away from grand institutional narratives and encourage a sensitivity towards gendered and individual responses.³

In illuminating the role of textile objects exchanged in humanitarian and development projects from the 1840s to the present, the chapters of this book are concerned with the under-studied history of humanitarian handicraft trade, labour and charity markets: they give an early account of what were later named ‘fair trade’ goods. As remnants of this trade are to be found only haphazardly in archives, the book shines a fragmented light on the processes of cultural preservation and the transmission of craft knowledge by humanitarian agencies. Piecing together these material remains enables a greater understanding of the persistence of the workshop in such projects. It highlights the gendered humanitarian labour upon which they depended, and it raises questions about the makers’ creative agency. This volume considers how these historical processes have become materialised in

present-day humanitarian handicraft projects and the ethical and aesthetic implications of this. Though it does not intend to provide a straightforward master narrative of the march of globalised modernity – so many initiatives resembled each other but were ‘invented’ in ignorance of one another – it brings to the fore consistencies in cultural production which echo across a century and a half of humanitarian craft practice.

‘Humanitarian handicrafts’

The Save the Children Fund, founded in 1919, became a leading proponent of humanitarian handicraft. In one of its earliest reports, *Hungarian Handicrafts*, it introduces us to one of its model schemes: a work school for young women to produce domestic textiles in a form of tied labour. These were then sold to British supporters. This scheme was replicated in the Near East, Greece and Eastern Europe during this period.⁴ Save the Children’s prolific photographic record of these projects displays a repertoire of humanitarian practice with a long history and familiar aesthetic of humanitarian photography and textiles. This visual documentation is a constant of humanitarian handicraft initiatives, for makers had to demonstrate the act of producing in order to be authentic. Often founded in the aftermath of wars, conquests and disasters, these ventures were intended to correct, develop, respond to and educate for the long term. From these sources, it is instructive to reflect on the prevalence of these humanitarian handicrafts, but also their absence in the historiography of humanitarianism and the literature on socially engaged textile practice.⁵

Though handcrafted textiles are an important part of humanitarian aesthetics, ethics and campaigning – easily recognisable in the present in Oxfam projects and workshops with refugee communities – their embodied practice and artisanal technologies are new subjects in humanitarian histories more usually focused on establishing the origins of modern medical and scientific technologies.⁶ That histories of making textiles are not the usual subjects of study likely owes something to the condescension towards ‘mere’ textiles, as Liisa Malkki has observed in her rich anthropology of domestic craft production in Finnish international aid projects.⁷ Nor are the humanitarian ethics here the usual humanitarian ethics of neutrality and impartiality which have so engrossed historians, but the quotidian ethics of daily working practice, conditions and consumer choice.⁸ Liisa Malkki is interested in motivation and meaning. ‘What conceptions of help and want circulate in these social fields? And what forms of imagination animate and sustain them?’⁹

As she observes, ‘again and again, international aid seems to involve the domestic arts such as knitting or other handwork’.¹⁰ Our interest in this

collection is to explain this in an historical context, and to consider what the implications of this form of gendered craft production are for our understanding of the humanitarian imagination, relations of humanitarian trade and production, and the generation of meaning and social values. How, historically, can we approach embodied practice and the materiality of humanitarian handicraft, especially where, for the most part, the maker is hidden from view? What does it mean when the human hand of the producer leaves a trace on the object and what qualities of the maker, and consumer, are 'absorbed' by the humanitarian textile?¹¹ Whereas Liisa Malkki concentrates on domestic handicraft work for fundraising or gift-making in Finland, especially among female knitters, we focus on international humanitarian handicraft projects in workshops or industrial school settings.

Through a novel category of analysis, 'humanitarian handicraft' offers a new vector to illuminate this ubiquitous and long-standing feature of humanitarian projects, something of which can be grasped by considering the redolent if humble term 'handicraft' itself.¹² What did handicraft signify in moral economies of modern humanitarianism and developmental enterprises?¹³ It spoke of small-scale ventures, the domestic and the homely. It was a resolutely low-status activity, the purview of amateurs, whatever the employment status of the producer. It evoked a common inheritance of traditional skill and traditional threads of cotton, silk and wool, and signalled the commonality of humanity, ethical choices and connoisseurship. It also conjured the work of many hands and communicated the empathetic connections that existed once objects were passed from one hand to another: purchasing such objects put the consumer in touch with the predicament of the maker.

The chapters in this collection bring these issues into focus and offer new perspectives on the expansion of humanitarian programmes during the era of rapid industrialisation, imperial extension and social reconfigurations of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In exploring the production and performance of 'the local' within international projects and networks, we take inspiration from Janice Helland, Beverly Lemire and Alena Helland's wide-ranging *Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics, 19th–20th Centuries*.¹⁴ Their insight into commercial and touristic craft offers many points of comparison, especially on the changing emotional and social value of craft objects. John Brewer and Frank Trentmann's history of consumption likewise offers a model for investigating humanitarian handicrafts, particularly their insistence of avoiding 'talking about consumption either in terms of globally advancing homogeneity or in richly detailed terms of local specificity', favouring instead a notion of cross-cultural exchange whereby 'centre and periphery, modernity and tradition are not fixed and have no preassigned meanings'.¹⁵ Attention to the circulation

of material culture in humanitarian markets contributes to changing definitions of the international and the local in histories of humanitarianism, imperial benevolence and liberal internationalism while also acknowledging other forms of transnationalism. The emphasis on tradition and heritage in these projects complicates a historiography which has focused on the professional standardisation of large-scale relief practices in this era.¹⁶ It encourages a more interesting idea of humanitarian modernity which includes pre-modern artisanal and ‘folkish’ aesthetics and skill, and points to continuities with imperial and domestic ‘moral’ reform movements predicated on self-sufficiency and gendered labour.¹⁷

Once we train our eye on the maker, the object, the agent, the collector and the consumer in these schemes, a new constellation of questions about the history of humanitarian practice comes into focus. These implicate all of us who consume humanitarian handicrafts. Indeed, debates on the ethics of consumption are arguably one legacy of these projects.¹⁸ Thus, rather than focus on the dilemmas inherent in the contemporary humanitarian sector’s ethical codes, or the instrumentalisation of humanitarian ideals through entanglement with political objectives, we seek out the ethical choices which existed at the level of everyday encounters and everyday objects as more relevant to daily humanitarian practice.¹⁹ These choices intervened in ongoing debates over labour relations, feminist ethics of work and faith-based activism. They often entailed moral reformism and projects of self, and national, determination. Some of our featured histories explore these issues in imperial interventions and schemes in the white-settler colonies in the years following wars or conquest. Others are set in Europe, where state sovereignty was not in abeyance and relief workers and activists had to negotiate with national and municipal authorities, albeit often at a time of greatest need. In this way, we draw out a complex field of cultural production and ethical activity to consider the multifaceted capacity of craft practitioners and consumers to make meaning and create relationships. We seek to understand how handcrafted objects stimulated their own complicated affective responses of what Jo Labanyi calls ‘a kind of “thinking” done by the body and not the mind’.²⁰ Though affect, as she points out, differs from emotion in involving precognitive rather than cognitive processes, both occur in culturally and historically specific contexts and are informed by narrative and aesthetics.

Humanitarian histories of artisanal labour and craft revivals

Following Arjun Appadurai we treat handcrafted affective objects as ‘things with a particular type of social potential’.²¹ Taking the lead from Minoo Moallem’s cultural study of Persian carpets, we ask how the humanitarian

commodity was made ‘into a spectacle, in addition to turning the labour that produces the object into a spectacle – one that has the potential to both conceal and reveal’.²² The image used for the cover of this book reflects this performative dimension of humanitarian craft labour. In this instance, the weaver is turned towards the photographer, Elizabeth Wilson, a founder of the charity Hudfam (an early partner of Oxfam), while most surviving images tend to document artisanal production itself. In some contexts, such as lacemaking, the social or aesthetic value of the textile might be called upon to bestow value on its maker. In other contexts, the value of the making process (the ‘moral’ circumstances of production) might be revealed (at the same time concealing other circumstances) to bestow value on the textile, turning it into a humanitarian commodity. The chapters in this volume allow us to see the role of humanitarian handicrafts as humanitarian material culture, to be considered alongside the humanitarian photograph or narrative, which reveals and conceals the spectacle of labour and conditions our responses as moral or humanitarian. We wish to consider the relationships between these making processes, narrative, and object and explore how this has structured and symbolised humanitarian relationships, drawn out affective responses and helped to shape the humanitarian imagination.²³

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, these themes have come to the fore in modern textile enterprises which have emphasised the value of artisanal processes as a key political driver for the growth of local jobs, with emerging narratives of craft making frequently indebted to the particularities of locality and community. The 2008 great recession and collapse of textile markets prompted new thought on sustainable practices, shifting the factory as an efficient mode of textile production towards discourses of production through smaller-scale artisanal making. In 2015 the trend forecasting site WGSN developed *Defining Luxury* report, proposing a shift from ‘material to immaterial ... and more about the story and sentiment of something’.²⁴ Despite being difficult to define at the time, this was the beginning of concepts that appeared ‘novel’ in the textile industry, highlighting the allure of authenticity, whereby story and sentiment became of increased importance in contemporary textile markets.

This (re-)emerging feature of the textile industry has been explored through a series of perceptive case studies in Clio Padovani and Paul Whittaker’s book, *Sustainability and the Social Fabric*, which investigates a shift during the period of economic decline post-2008 from the predominant narrative of ecologically conscious textile consumption towards socially aware entrepreneurship and ‘social sustainability’.²⁵ In the examples they present, the fostering of authenticity through the story of the maker and the artisanal product becomes a helpful marketing device and

practical business strategy. The contributors to *Humanitarian Handicraft: History, Materiality and Trade, c. 1840–1980* provide earlier examples of the ideological and aesthetic underpinnings of authenticity in an exploration of the different social and cultural contexts in which these arose. Across these chapters, we find that textiles and their makers featured in a variety of humanitarian schemes usually aimed at one or more of the following: securing safe employment (typically for girls and women); preserving or fabricating cultural heritage including forms of cultural nationalism; improving labour conditions and social and economic position; generating awareness of the predicament of imperilled communities; and providing moral occupations or therapeutics for those in extreme crisis.

David Hopkin's chapter, which delineates the complex genealogies of lacemaking in Europe, makes clear how elite and expensive initiatives were able to develop a life of their own and how literary tropes were woven into the relationship between elite consumers of lace and impoverished female piecework labourers, even as debates on the ethics of homeworking raged. Only in literature could the bond between a leisurely class of amateurs trying their hands at lacemaking and some of the poorest members of society be magnified in a shared domestic idyll. Yet as Hopkin shows, literary imaginings had a direct influence on the revival of handmade lacemaking, notably through the Scuola Merletti di Burano. The three late nineteenth-century humanitarian craft-based initiatives discussed by Janice Helland in her chapter on the Home Arts and Industries Association, Donegal Industrial Fund, and Scottish Home Industries also reflect the expectation of fashion-conscious middle and upper-class audiences. The ability to use inventive methods to drive metropolitan trends for locally made crafts in rural Ireland and across the far reaches of Great Britain demonstrated an astute ability to recognise how locally made products could communicate emotionally to their audiences.

Stéphanie Prévost's chapter centres on 'a small piece of Armenian embroidery', as described in the catalogue of the Society of Friends' Library in London, made by the Quaker-run Ayntab Cottage Industry following the Hamidian massacres of Ottoman Armenians in the 1890s. Needlework traditions such as these were, and are, important in Armenian and diasporic collective memory. Yet this piece of embroidery is also tangible evidence of the shifting and ambiguous relationships which underscored Anglo-American relief in the region as well as suggesting the versatility of a textile craft which was far from static. In her close observation of thread and stitch, Prévost demonstrates how the 'hybridised' construction of Armenian lace was a material response to the dilemmas of the humanitarian marketplace. Many of these international philanthropic handicraft schemes in embroidery, carpet or lace shared direct lineages and networks, including

prominent connections with the British Home Industries movement of the late nineteenth century.²⁶ Eglantyne Louisa Jebb, for example, of the Home Arts and Industries Association, was the aunt of Eglantyne Jebb, the co-founder of The Save the Children Fund, which sponsored industrial schools to make craft for sale in various of its European projects. There also appears to have been a circulation of textile skill and design across Britain and Europe through the visiting of schools such as Burano and the sharing of samples and purchase of thread.

Quaker connections were an important part of the backcloth to these Home Industries in Britain and internationally. This included the Boer Home Industries established in South African by British relief worker Emily Hobhouse in the aftermath of the 1899–1902 South African War. This scheme was initiated with the support of the Quaker peace activist and writer Ruth Fry, who had founded a leather-working class for labourers in Failand in Bristol in 1895 and later worked with Save the Children. Another prominent Quaker, Margaret Clark, also assisted the foundation and running of the Boer Home Industries scheme and subsequently served as a founder member of Oxfam. Helen Dampier and Rebecca Gill take up the story of the Boer Home Industries' lace school in their chapter. They situate it within both competing ideals about women and labour and the emergence of cultural nationalism in South Africa and point to the dissatisfaction of some of the young women enlisted to make lace in rural isolation.

The role of lace in cultural nationalism is picked up in Wendy Wiertz's chapter on American philanthropic support for the depleted Belgian lace industry in the First World War. She notes how designs of Belgian 'war lace' included tributes from Belgium and reminders of American generosity. Using newly uncovered papers from the *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières*, she unpicks the relationship between lacemakers and the staff of local and international organisations and, like others in this volume, is able to detect the ambiguities of Belgian women's harnessing of traditional skill and the performance of civic diplomacy and international friendship. She shows how performances of gratitude to American donors coexisted with agentic negotiations for better pay and conditions borne of customary practice.

In the aftermath of the First World War, Quakers' textile projects were directed at national development and reconstruction in Poland and Russia. This was linked to their growing commitment to public acts of conscience, including bearing witness to peace through practical acts of reconciliation and reconstruction. In her chapter, Siân Roberts explores the importance of the handcrafted object as a carrier of humanitarian emotion and memory in these schemes. These were meant to connect relief workers with producers and consumers in ways that embodied contemporary British Quakers' notions of friendship, spiritual connection and personal care. She also demonstrates

how the textiles schemes offered their vision of a 'reconstructed' Polish nation and the domestic feminine identity of the Polish peasantry.

The politics of tradition and the shifting meanings and status of the artisan come into focus in many of these chapters. Bertrand Taithe's chapter dwells on the development of a new textile tradition of carpet making in French Soudan starting in the 1920s and tracing how it became a traditional craft at independence. These projects mixed North African techniques and European Catholic reformatory schooling methods. The missionaries behind this long-term initiative were intent on fostering development in an impoverished and brutalised part of the French empire while initiating social reform and reshaping gender relations. The carpets themselves are evoked through postcards of carpet making. These show how carpet makers engaged with their intended market, and how the carpet makers were themselves exhibited as examples of the achievements of modern missionary work, even if the carpet making itself was explicitly handmade and 'traditional'. Though the carpets failed to find a market as coveted luxury goods, the handicraft culture they fostered endured in Burkina Faso after independence.

Within demonstration projects aimed at creating or reforming an artisanal class – projects which existed across the political spectrum from reactionary to revolutionary – it is possible to detect the negotiations between makers and agents, and sponsors.²⁷ The attempt to capture something of the maker's affective experiences within projects designed to create artisans rests on fleeting traces in the archive, but also, as Prévost shows, in the textile fabric itself. In her exploration of the challenges linked to the cooperation of lacemakers in Russia's Vologda region between the 1920s and 1950s, Elizaveta Berezina reconstructs the rationale behind the reorganisation of crafts production under the Soviet regime. She traces how state initiatives, which concentrated on technical modernisation of workshops and improving the artistic quality of lace, displaced older forms of private voluntarism. She also considers the response to Soviet collectivisation of labour by female artisans affiliated to the Vologda Lace Cooperative Union, who did not always appreciate or endorse Moscow's interventions.

Returning to Poland, Nicolette Makovicky demonstrates in her chapter that the collectivisation of craft work in mid-twentieth-century Poland reshaped artisanal labour to suit the paternalist ideology of socialism. This represented an attempt to reform vernacular crafts into a contemporary expressive medium, bringing together ethnographers, art historians and designers with craftsmen and women to develop 'politically correct' designs on the basis of vernacular traditions. While scholars from across the former Eastern Bloc have examined the institutional changes which accompanied the ideological appropriation of 'folk arts' by communist regimes, few have documented the ways in which this process was experienced and negotiated

by artisans themselves. Drawing on fieldwork among contemporary lace-makers in the village of Koniaków, as well as archival documentation from the folk art cooperative to which they belonged during the communist period, Makovicky foregrounds the voices of the lacemakers themselves.

In her chapter on *Individuell Människohjälp* (IM), Maria Småberg shows how the commercial imperatives of selling in a Nordic humanitarian market contributed to reshaped economic prospects and gender roles in the devastated area of Vlasti in northern Greece. Through the archives of IM's sewing school, Småberg explores how discourses of empowerment and self-sufficiency, once tested in the late nineteenth century and interwar Europe, were reinvented and embodied in Greece in the 1960s. Once again, even as it shifted its business from humanitarian handicraft to fair trade, IM exoticised the predicament of the makers of these colourful wares in their marketing narratives, who were selling their traditional craft while reshaping their production and their stories to meet Swedish aesthetics and gender expectations.

On these questions of traditions, revivals and reinventions, Viveka Torell and Anneli Palmsköld have observed how,

In all its new contexts, craft is a cultural expression connecting contemporary bodily activities to the past and to craft traditions. This connection is either made implicitly by using craft techniques developed historically, or explicitly by emphasising that craft traditions are a heritage that may be meaningful to connect with today.²⁸

The meaning of tradition offers a point of departure for a final chapter which records our conversation with contemporary textile artist Catherine Bertola and textile writer and curator June Hill, both of whose work chimes significantly with the themes of the present volume. Catherine Bertola, in a series of installations which have explored her material engagement with the tactile and sensorial quality of spaces, has responded to (culturally) hidden histories of women's labour throughout her artistic practice.²⁹ June Hill's writing on felt response to textiles as 'an arousal of affectiveness' has been an important inspiration for us to consider 'the role of materiality as a means of expressing ... feelings' in humanitarian crafts.³⁰ In a recent exhibition, she has curated histories of women's craft collections, including that of the relief worker and Balkan activist Edith Durham and the Quaker and collector of 'imperilled' Greek textiles, Louisa Pesel.³¹ Our conversation reflects how the authenticity of humanitarian handicraft rests on the provenance of both tradition and of sentiment, connecting craft to communal histories of plight or precarity. At the same time, it records our personal encounters with the range of affects generated by humanitarian textiles and of the differing historical meanings of craft processes for groups and

individuals (and thus of what is concealed as much as revealed of historical circumstances and structures in contemporary revivals). Through this, we hope to contribute reflection on the implications of the affective and material histories of humanitarian handicrafts for such schemes in the past and the present.³² To foster this cross-disciplinary exchange we have opted for dialogue rather than synthesis to capture our different haptic responses to textile objects and the open-ended and, at times, disjointed meeting of assumption and value.

In her Afterword, Jessica Hemmings applies a collage-like technique to respond to this collection by placing the historical examples and contemporary textile-related ventures in close juxtaposition. Hemmings' use of the word 'tack' provides a key to her method: building an interrelationship between works and initiatives that is resourceful, responsive, intuitive and loose in construction. This personal and creative approach provides a space for inserting a wide range of contemporary works that on the face of it may feel incongruous, including the Zimbabwean author and filmmaker Tsitsi Dangarembga, 2021 Turner Prize winner Array Collective, American installation artist Liza Lou and African-American artist Faith Ringgold. There is an impetus discovered in these examples to communicate ideals through the crafted objects, but as Hemmings notes, in reference to Lisa Lou's social initiative, 'The reality is awkward.' We are shown in these examples that the transformation of textiles as a symbol of hope is not so easy to 'tack' down, for the handcrafted object has the potential to perform in unexpected ways to different audiences, at different times, as relived in this collection.

Contemporary connections

Walk into an Oxfam charity shop in the United Kingdom today and you will see piles of handmade rugs, fabrics and handicrafts with explanatory labels telling stories of artisanal production in a humanitarian context.³³ Look at footage from current humanitarian agencies around the world and you will see women at work in textile schemes post-conflict or in refugee camps.³⁴ Consider photographs in the archives of relief agencies, often taken in these same locales a hundred years ago, and find Armenian refugees in the Middle East after the First World War, working at old-fashioned spinning wheels or at embroidery. Similar photographs can be found of women spinning and weaving in villages after the South African War (1899–1902) and of Home Industries lace schemes in Ireland, as well as in the archives of missionary projects. These are familiar, and speak of long histories, but are rarely placed in same frame of reference.

Indeed, images from the archives of Near East Relief, which founded workshops for the victims of the Armenian genocide (see [Figure 0.1](#)), echo our book-cover image, taken over fifty years later. They highlight how humanitarian subjects in difficult conditions might be able to transcend their situation but also reveal a consistent focus on artisanal hand production and

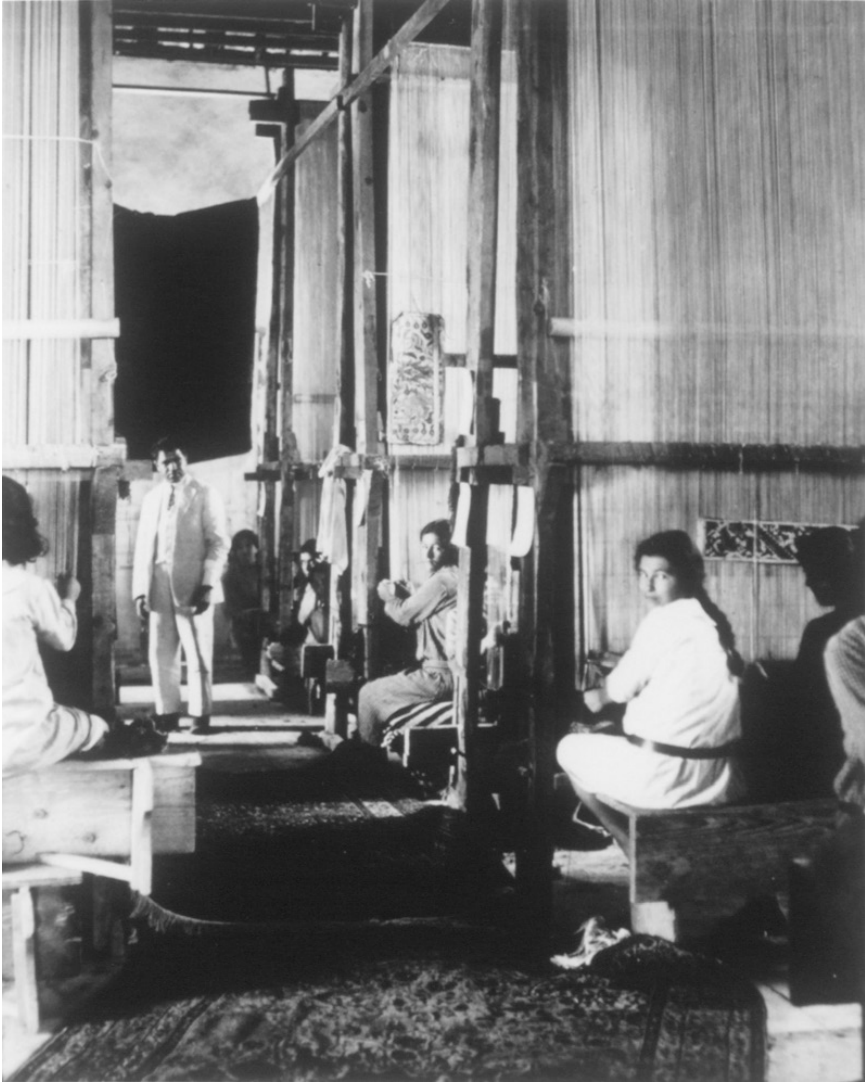


Figure 0.1 Armenian refugees making carpets in a workshop run by Near East Relief, c. 1922

aesthetics. One hundred years later, near Van, the heartland of historical Armenia, another relief agency, the Hisar Anatolian Support Society, was created in 2010 with the stated objectives of providing an income-generating skillset and of preventing child marriages. Like its predecessors, it trained refugees (Kurdish internally displaced people) in the art of Kilim rug weaving.³⁵ As recipients of Coca Cola funds disbursed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), girls learnt to make carpets for the international market and honey for their local market.³⁶ In a documentary film of 2014, the workers of the project, aged thirteen, with an average of six years' weaving experience, displayed their dexterous weaving skills while boasting how they were breadwinners for families of ten to thirteen members. They dyed their yarn in locally harvested bark decoctions and identified to the camera the rugs and their origins. The relief work was led by a Kurdish man from Hakkâri, the photographer and artist Enver Özkahraman, whose intention was to preserve Kurdish cultural heritage while providing paid work opportunities to young artisans.³⁷ For the refugee workers interviewed by Sultan Soner, 'Generally for the workers of the workshop Van is not a place to live in without the workshop. The workshop is considered as a place where small strategies are founded to be able to live within dominant values.'³⁸

Despite their sensitive cultural identity at a time of conflict between the Turkish state and Kurdish nationalists, the organisation and their rugs managed to make their way to the marketplace of the United Nations World Humanitarian Summit of 23 May 2016 in Istanbul on the other side of Turkey. The marketplace was aimed at professional humanitarians only as one needed to be accredited to gain access to the heavily bunkered UN conference. The stall was central and focused on production and on the life stories of the producers. Among the designs on display were daring and jarring 'tribal conflict kilims' which represented the circumstances of their displacement. Other rugs were more conventional copies of museum pieces.³⁹ In the complex political context of 2016 Turkey, the rugs and the intention of their children-artist creators provided a potent reminder of both the sustaining and the subversive potential of handicrafts anchored in folklore and traditional skill.⁴⁰

The literature on textile history, practice and theory is alive to these layered meanings and draws out contemporary artistic and practitioner commentary on the dilemmas of socially engaged projects and 'craftivism'.⁴¹ Jessica Hemmings' edited collection, *Cultural Threads: Transnational Textiles Today*, raises many of the issues we seek to explore historically in our collection, particularly the interactions between craft and cultural storytelling in advocacy and activism.⁴² As Alice Kettle's textile project with

contemporary refugees acknowledges, a lack of critically situated knowledge can lead to misunderstanding of refugees' own needs and historical relationship to textiles.⁴³ The contemporary textile artist Claire Wellesley-Smith's *Resilient Stitch* provides practical working examples of community workshop-based production, where she considers autobiographical experiences in the moments of textile making. This offers an opportunity to express the feelings emitted in and through the textile, drawn from her appreciation of the therapeutic outcomes of the making process and the resonances she elicits with historical examples such as textile workshops for shell-shocked soldiers in the First World War.⁴⁴ Claire Hunter's *Threads of Life* likewise offers an emotionally affirmative account of the significance of textiles for the author/practitioner which ranges across historical and contemporary examples.⁴⁵

Contemporary writing on textiles and socially engaged textile projects can be enchanting, and often moving, precisely on account of its ability to capture the emotional history of cloth.⁴⁶ In textile scholarship, historians and curators have started to explore the emotional history of cloth. In their introduction to the special issue of *Textile* on 'Emotional Histories', Alice Dolan and Sally Holloway open an inquiry into the 'physical proximity of textiles to the skin, and their ability to embody individual emotions and collective experiences'.⁴⁷ For Lesley Millar the textile is as if skin itself, for 'Textiles are membranes, filtering and cross-pollinating ideas, they are holders of memories and act as unforgiving witness'.⁴⁸ The contemporary literature thus reminds us to be attentive to the transformative potential of craft when historical structures and circumstances might otherwise appear unchanging. In turn, historians can usefully demonstrate some of the long-term, and unexpected, social and political outcomes of humanitarian craft projects and the changing and multifaceted understandings of the moral and social good being produced. Insight into the maker's experience thus prompts us to think historically about the relationships between creativity, agency and the production of sensory knowledge. Following Lydia Maria Arantes, we understand textiles as a hylomorphic model of form creation which involves agency in making.⁴⁹ This act of creation can simultaneously be an act of preservation: in this way humanitarian handicrafts can function as tangible and intangible heritage and be at times a form of emotional and political resistance.⁵⁰ As Mino Moallem observes, handmade textiles can be 'mnemonic objects that help people remember what was lost or transformed'.⁵¹ Their preservation or revival can intersect with both progressive and conservative reform movements, as well as textile makers' own desires to preserve and make known their history, often in contexts of war, displacement and extreme crisis.

The hands that make

Taking an emotional and material turn in humanitarian and refugee history enables us to read textiles for symbols and meaning, but also to consider the biography of the craft object to understand its changing value and affective quality.⁵² Textiles carry specific meanings and produce knowledge beyond function through their unique structures and characteristics that invite tactility through associations with narratives and labelling.⁵³ The story of the hands that make, whether belonging to the uprooted Armenian embroiderer, the impoverished Belgian laceworker or the reluctant handloom weaver in South Africa, are usually made known through visual genres (including conventions of humanitarian photography, merchandising and display) and narratives (most notably the human story on a label). This relationship between object, narrative and process was clearly evident in the *Humanitarian Handicrafts* exhibition the editors of this volume hosted in 2019, of which a selection of photographs appears in these pages (see [Figures 0.2–0.5](#)).

The story of the threads that bind generations, communities or national cultures contribute to processes of traditionalisation and revival, as observed by Viveka Torell and Anneli Palmsköld, and by Mathilde Lind.⁵⁴ These processes are explored across many of the chapters, notably in Siân Roberts' discussion of the role of humanitarian handicraft schemes in transmitting national identity and in the work of Maria Småberg and Bertrand Taithe on reshaping gendered roles and skills. The intentions here were to conserve, invent or revive craft skill, find safe and 'refined' work for girls and women, or secure and reform employment practices and social relations. Making known the 'spectacle' of the particular moral and historical circumstance of craft production imbued the commodity with particular social, emotional, ethical or aesthetic value as it entered the open or the charity markets, as David Hopkin shows, over a long period. In turn, the 'spectacle' of the humanitarian commodity, and its exchange in the form of an ethical trade, had the potential to attest to the humanity of both producer and consumer. Yet, as Bertrand Taithe's chapter shows, the imposed (social, economic and textile) patterns could be transformed by the occasional engagement between producers and consumers, and the subtle subversion of the humanitarian fabric emerges in this collection when the 'hands that made' refused the intended purpose. Writing of a Scandinavian weaving project in South Africa, Philippa Hobbs gives a lucid description of both the performativity of voice and the hylomorphic manifestation of agency through these acts of creation, describing 'the strategies by which weavers borrowed, then transformed, the emancipatory and other iconographies they encountered,



Figure 0.2 Oxfam exhibits at the *Humanitarian Handicrafts* conference and exhibition, June 2019, University of Huddersfield



Figure 0.3 Soma Artisans exhibit at the *Humanitarian Handicrafts* conference and exhibition, June 2019, University of Huddersfield

developing their new syntaxes through individual initiative and creative alliances at the loom'.⁵⁵

Many of these humanitarian projects were developed, and often initiated, by women. The role of gender in this collection concerns the relationship of participants to this material culture – as makers, sponsors and consumers. Inquiring into how particular qualities of the maker were absorbed by the object and vice versa, we arrive at an embodied relationship with the textile, which saw the making of new subjects and subjectivities, often at the junctures of international activism and local nationalism. Certainly, one thing that is suggested in this volume is that the humanitarian project of civilising mission or of salvaging citizens was a participatory project and that national identity in contested spaces (Armenia, the Balkans, South Africa) was not a prior given which was symbolised in objects but was made in relationship with them. Here we can usefully draw on art historians' work on the Arts and Crafts movement and the domestic industries. They have explored, for example, the relationship between women's role in lacemaking and their political identity formation.⁵⁶

Textile making is a form of cultural production which includes the making of the humanitarian self, to follow from Liisa Malkki's observation.⁵⁷



Figure 0.4 Janakpur Women's Development exhibits at the *Humanitarian Handicrafts* conference and exhibition, June 2019, University of Huddersfield

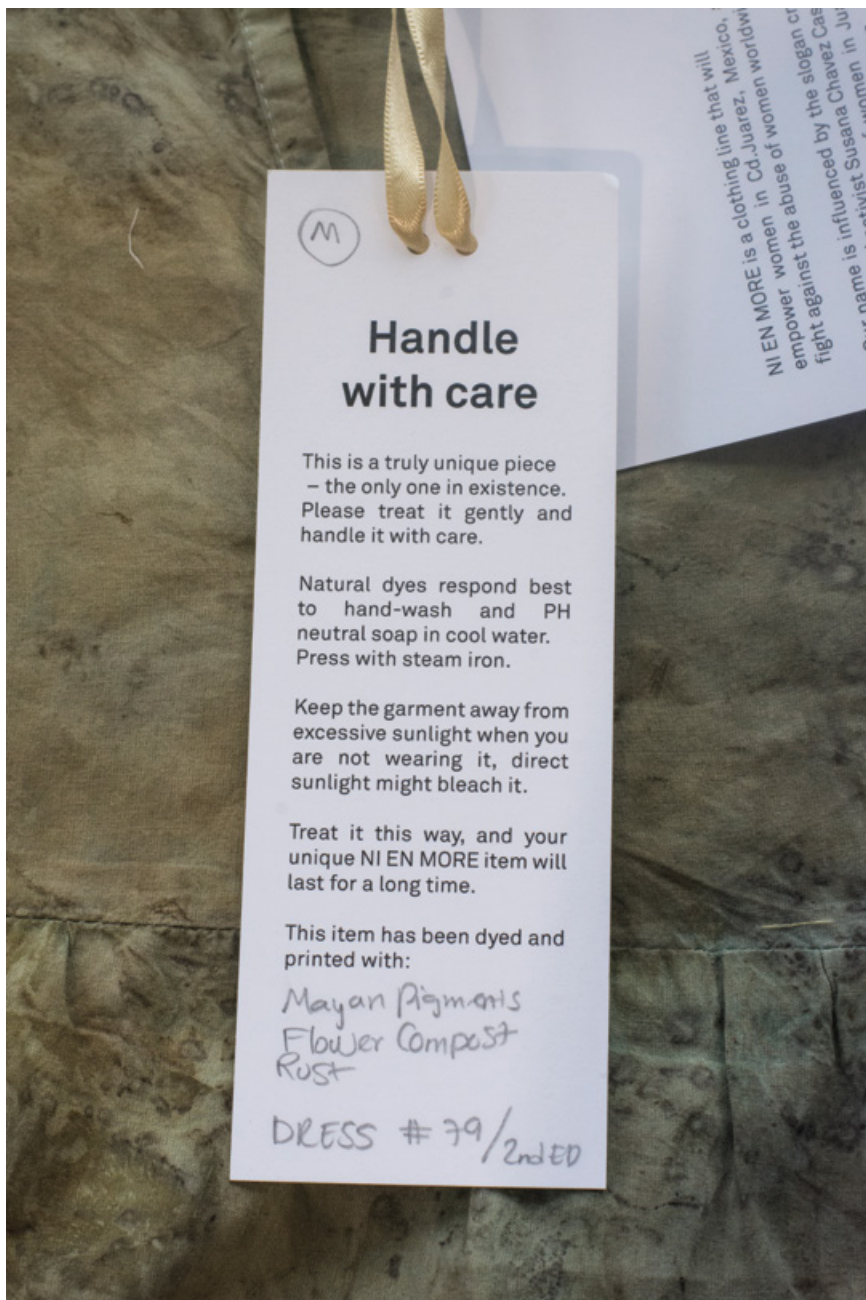


Figure 0.5 Ni En More exhibit at the *Humanitarian Handicrafts* conference and exhibition, June 2019, University of Huddersfield

It is significant then that some of the key proponents of craftwork and its trade took on the crafts they promoted for themselves. Emily Hobhouse learnt needlework and how to weave, while Elizabeth Wilson was a domestic handloom weaver as well as a keen proponent of folk culture and an early advocate of fair trade through the charity Hudfam.⁵⁸ For both Hobhouse and Wilson, weaving and sewing served to put them in touch with material continuities in women's history, allowing them to link past and present through bodily experience and felt connections. The project of making the humanitarian self encompassed both recipients of aid converted into producers and the agents and cultural brokers who facilitated the production or trade of their products. Beyond the commercial demands of a trade, there are nuances in this encounter and it could prove mutually transformative throughout. As Wendy Wiertz demonstrates in her chapter on the production of Belgian 'war lace', the workers were not simply refashioned and were neither passive nor even just compliant. Their sponsors (*commanditaires* to use the French term which evokes a commercial order) and cultural brokers in turn could engage with making and creating craft in a project of self-definition. Makers, agents, traders and consumers could be part of this transformative process by embracing the value and authenticity of the craft.

Authenticity and aesthetics

A striking feature of the handicraft projects examined in our chapters was the assumption that the objects they produced – lace, carpets, embroideries – were rooted in tradition. These local, regional, national and cultural traditions sometimes reinforced each other and were sometimes at odds with one another, for instance Kurdish rug making within a Turkish polity, Flemish lacemaking in Belgium or, in contrast, Polish lacemaking in a new socialist Poland. In some cases, such as in Hobhouse's South African lace scheme or in missionary carpet making, this involved the invention or the grafting of tradition from one locale to another. Most of our chapters thus inquire into the production of authenticity. Stéphanie Prévost, for example, highlights the 'mediated authenticity' of Armenian embroideries for sale in British charity markets which foregrounded the neediness of the makers, and which, driven by retail demand, proposed the incorporation of new stitches and coloured threads. Maria Småberg shows how Swedish designers influenced traditional Greek textile making to ensure its products fitted their market.

The volume as a whole suggests that the objects produced by humanitarian handicraft schemes were imbued with authenticity through the plight

of their makers, and in their rootedness in the place and space of their victimhood and cultural imperilment. It is this suffering or precarity which gave meaning to the handicrafts produced by makers within humanitarian projects and generated the potential to create affective connection through touch as (in imagination at least) the textile passed directly from the hand of the maker to that of the buyer. The revealing of suffering validated the moral claims of both the humanitarian handicraft schemes and the objects they produced, just as it concealed other histories and other predicaments. An authenticity rooted in craft tradition which stressed alterity or adapted existing vernacular styles relied upon the provision of contextual information stressing vulnerability, risk, development needs or insecurity. The authenticity of the story, often a collective narrative attached to an entire people, but almost always individualised to stimulate an affective response, was the most significant marketing ploy.⁵⁹ The authentication process thus tied the individual and the object to the place and culture of production. Makers could both perform these moral claims and creatively challenge or reimagine them. To take a contemporary example, Gillian Whitlock has argued persuasively for the potential power of handmade objects, in this case embroidery produced by an Afghan asylum seeker to Australia, to challenge situations of marginalisation, dehumanisation and oppression. Her emphasis is on the embroidery – *embridry*, in the words of one asylum seeker – as tactical, strategic, ‘testimony to an embodied intimacy that contests the dehumanization of ... the asylum seeker’, and in itself a form of agency contesting the asylum seeker’s situation: ‘Its broken English and hybrid aesthetics [of *embridry*] enable the subject to testify to the limits and exclusion of compassion.’⁶⁰

Stories of struggle and suffering and the retail of often wilfully imperfect items or attempts otherwise to maintain uneconomical labour served to conserve or reconstruct structures and values deeply set in rural or village nostalgia. This emphasis on the values of pre-modern cultures and ‘ways of life’ was often associated with the protection of young girls, the redefinition of their place in society or the elevation of domestic craft to economically significant roles in the home. It entailed the pursuance of virtues assumed to exist in a more stable, perhaps pre-modern, society, such as the dignity of labour and the benefits of cooperation. These projects aimed at preservation entailed, of course, a sequence of choices and exclusions. They gained traction at the point in history when peasant society was transformed and when urban industrial society became the condition of the majority. The production of humanitarian handicrafts and the attempt to create artisans implied a critique of industrialisation, capitalism or ethnic persecution rooted in a conservative approach rather than a revolutionary agenda. In some cases both could be combined as Elizaveta Berezina and Nicolette Makovicky

show in their chapters. In other cases, humanitarian proponents of their own imagined villages could defend a lost culture with the building blocks of ethnic hegemony.⁶¹ The workshop was low-cost, easy to start, safe for women and girls, and imagined to be pragmatic. Yet promoting this domestic work in workshops also contradicted some of the great lost battles of nineteenth and twentieth-century social contests, evoked in the 1843 poem the ‘Song of the Shirt’ by Thomas Hood.⁶² The emphasis on the traditions of the needle or the loom, or on high-end products with aristocratic credentials such as lace, luxury carpets or fine embroidery, did not absolve humanitarians from this association with sweated work – especially when the training and schooling resembled child labour.

Many of the initiatives considered in this volume proved to be temporary and imperfect solutions to ill-defined problems: their economic viability reliant on manufactured markets rather than genuine demand and their aesthetics resting on shared values that had to be heavily promoted but which did not necessarily take root. Nevertheless, these initiatives were often reiterated and in a sense this resilience over the long term illustrates also that there was and is a space for humanitarian handicraft, however fragile, in the cut-throat garment market when it could assert its provenance. The intrinsic qualities of the product remained the human qualities that are woven into the textile, betokening the apparently transparent process of being passed from hand to hand, from maker to consumer. In this sense aesthetic choices were also ethical choices, and the valuing of the colloquial, the rustic and the handmade became part of the morality of the everyday, something that had become well understood since the anti-slavery campaigns.⁶³

For consumers, such products offer the possibility of performing or, more cynically, broadcasting one’s ethics. Sometimes overwhelming ethical loading or excessive storytelling devalued the goods retailed, as they risked becoming sentimental artefacts of social enterprise, imbedded in the aesthetics of an (imagined) past and destined to fail in the market. As Jessica Hemmings pragmatically asserts in the Autumn/Winter 2022–2023 issue of *VIEW*, ‘For organisations motivated by sustainability or social goals first and foremost, that’s where the value resides. But if a product is lacking the aesthetic or the design consumers are ultimately drawn to, it might just as well end up in landfill.’⁶⁴ Many humanitarian handicraft goods can now be found in junk shops – devoid of their ethical matrix and authenticity, with nothing to frame them, they are often unworn and meaningless: just another waste product of globalised trade. Yet the value of the humanitarian handicraft for the maker, collector or consumer can also fluctuate and accrue. This can range from the strained obligations of young women learning lacemaking in an isolated school in South Africa to the careful curation of ‘Koppies lace’ decades later in heritage institutions. To take a different

example, for some Armenian diaspora textiles made by their forebears in the aftermath of genocide are mnemonic and affective objects, the accumulation of resistance, emotional survival, witnessing and conservation. As Hrag Vartanian writes, ‘My mother’s family retained the memories of these makers of identity – the craft skills, which varied from city to city at the time and thereby captured the colours, textures, and forms of a place they could never return to.’⁶⁵ Curiously and creatively, the contributors to this volume take inspiration from these stories of humanitarian handicraft to begin to unravel how narrative, object and process relate.

Notes

- 1 See Stephanie Downes, Sally Holloway and Sarah Randles (eds), *Feeling Things: Objects and Emotions through History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 2 Jo Labanyi, ‘Doing Things: Emotion, Affect and Materiality’, *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 11:3–4 (2010), 230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2010.538244>
- 3 See Rob Boddice, *The History of Emotions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018); Dolores Martín-Moruno and Beatriz Pichel (eds), *Emotional Bodies: The Historical Performativity of Emotions* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019); on the ‘emotional turn’ in humanitarian studies, see Brenda Lynn Edgar, Valérie Gorin and Dolores Martín-Moruno, *Making Humanitarian Crises: Emotions and Images in History* (London: Palgrave, 2022); Dolores Martín-Moruno, ‘Introduction: Feeling Humanitarianism in the Spanish Civil War and Republican Exile’, *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, 21:4 (2020), 445–457. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14636204.2020.1842092>
- 4 Emily Baughan, *Saving the Children: Humanitarianism, Internationalism, and Empire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2021).
- 5 It is notable that these schemes were significantly explored as structuring relief work by Hertha Kraus in her manual for would-be humanitarian workers in 1943 but that historians of Save the Children would make no mention of the centrality of production projects. Hertha Kraus, *International Relief in Action, 1914–1943* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944); Nell Mann, ‘Training Programs for Refugees 1’, *Occupations: The Vocational Guidance Journal* 19:4 (1941), 250–254.
- 6 On the technological shift, please see Tom Scott-Smith, ‘Humanitarian Neophilia: The “Innovation Turn” and Its Implications’, *Third World Quarterly*, 37:12 (2016), 2229–2251. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2016.1176856>; Kristin Sandvik, Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert, John Karlsrud and Mareile Kaufmann, ‘Humanitarian Technology: A Critical Research Agenda’, *International Review of the Red Cross*, 9:893 (2014), 219–242. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383114000344>

- 7 Liisa H. Malkki, *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press 2015), Chapter 5.
- 8 Bertrand Taithe, 'Humanitarian History?', in Roger Mc Ginty and Jenny H. Peterson (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Humanitarian Action* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 90–101; Hugo Slim, *Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 9 Malkki, *The Need to Help*, p. 2.
- 10 Malkki, *The Need to Help*, 'Introduction: Need, Imagination, and the Care of the Self', pp. 1–22, 10.
- 11 Ewa Klekot, 'The Craft of Factory Labour', *Journal of American Folklore*, 113:528 (2020), 205–227, 223; Frank Trentmann, 'Materiality in the Future of History: Things, Practices, and Politics', *Journal of British Studies*, 48:2 (2009), 283–307, 289.
- 12 As Paul Greenhalgh noted a long time ago, the terms handicraft and craft were often synonymous until the former was gradually debased and regarded as more homely and of lesser status. 'The History of Craft', in Peter Dormer (ed.), *The Culture of Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019 [1997]), p. 23.
- 13 The concept of moral economy refers to E. P. Thompson and its adoption by historians of humanitarianism to refer to 'altruistic meaning for economic transactions'. See Norbert Götz, "'Moral Economy": Its Conceptual History and Analytical Prospects', *Journal of Global Ethics* 11:2 (2015), 147–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2015.1054556>
- 14 Janice Helland, Beverly Lemire and Alena Buis, *Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics, 19th–20th Centuries* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).
- 15 John Brewer and Frank Trentmann (eds), *Consuming Cultures, Global Perspectives: Historical Trajectories, Transnational Exchanges* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), p. 2.
- 16 See, for example, Kevin Grant, 'Anti-Slavery, Refugee Relief and the Missionary Origins of Humanitarian Photography, ca. 1900–1960', *History Compass*, 15:5 (2017) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12383>; Keith Watenpugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015).
- 17 Bertrand Taithe, 'The Making of the Origins of Humanitarianism?', *Contemporanea*, 18:3 (2015), 489–496.
- 18 On a contest of the 'novelty' of consumption ethics, see Terry Newholm, Sandra Newholm and Deirdre Shaw, 'A History for Consumption Ethics', *Business History*, 57:2 (2015), 290–310. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00076791.2014.935343>
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- 20 Labanyi, 'Doing Things', p. 224.
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Literary visions of craft and cooperation in the European handmade lace revival, c. 1840–1914

David Hopkin

Why, in a collection dedicated to humanitarian handicrafts, does lace loom so large? Because the history of lace is bound to the history of efforts – private, municipal, state, ecclesiastical – to remedy poverty.¹ In the early modern period, the foundation of a lace manufacture was often a response to a local crisis in women's employment. It was designed to save them morally as well as economically because material deprivation might force them into a life of vice. Such initiatives were introduced in Valenciennes in 1661, in Bailleul in 1664 and in Bayeux in 1676; these all became important centres of lacemaking.² Female religious orders and lay sisters were involved in all three of these initiatives, and the same orders or their descendants would continue to teach lace skills in their various establishments, both in Europe and in colonial empires. Private charity also played a part, and lace would remain the philanthropist's textile of choice right through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. But precisely because lacemaking was connected to such endeavours, it never shook off its association with poverty.

None the less, because of its origins in these moralising and spiritual institutions, handmade lace, whether produced with needle or bobbin, was deemed a special textile. In the high-flown visions of the novelist Sarah Grand, 'No fabric of art has been so intimately associated with every phase of human joy and sorrow as lace ... It is the most aristocratic of possessions, consecrated by religion, and at one time the monopoly of royalty.'³ More plebeian consumers wore it on special occasions or as a marker of a particular status. Today its use is even more restricted to ritual episodes in the life cycle – baptism, first communion, marriage. Lace is preserved, passed on, collected and exhibited, whereas other more everyday fabrics are discarded. Lace is, in short, valued – not just for its intrinsic qualities but for the meanings it has come to embody. These associations also explain why lace holds a particular place in the history of humanitarian interventions in the marketplace.

One of its moral purposes was to bridge the chasm between the impoverished domestic lace producer and the fashionable lace consumer, divided by geography as well as status and class. Lace was almost always an export product. Itself an early modern invention, lace was a typical manufacture of that early modern form of capitalism, the putting-out system. In almost all lace-producing regions, the system worked in a similar way: a merchant supplied the pattern and the thread to thousands of dispersed female workers. To do so, the merchant relied on intermediaries, who may themselves have used subcontractors. The lacemaker, either working in an institution or at home and using her own tools, produced the lace and sold it back to the merchant, via the intermediary, at piece rates. In some regions, and in particular Flanders, convents which doubled as lace schools might take on the role of intermediary, in other regions lay sisters, such as the *béates* of the Haute-Loire, fulfilled this task; but most intermediaries were private, commercial agents. A personal relationship between the lacemaker and the merchant was not impossible, but it was atypical. Over the course of the nineteenth century, as various forms of social legislation were introduced to protect workers, and especially women workers, merchants strenuously denied that lacemakers were their employees at all, rather insisting that they were independent artisans. In practice, lacemakers were tied to particular merchants because the bulk of their wages were advances for work yet to be done. Merchants in turn might have close connections to fashion retailers, but often lace would pass through wholesalers before reaching the shops. Thus, there were many links in the chain that connected – or rather separated – lacemakers in the hinterland of Bruges or Caen, or the uplands of the Auvergne or Slovenia, to the fashionable consumers of Paris, London, New York or Chicago. Given the high cost of handmade lace on the one hand and the visible penury of lacemakers on the other, it was assumed by outside observers that these middlemen drew all the profit.

Humanitarianism has been defined as concern for ‘distant others’.⁴ Lacemakers were distant from their consumers geographically, but more importantly they were distant socially. Lacemakers did not usually wear lace: they were recruited from among the poorest social strata while their product was a luxury, purchased by royalty, the aristocracy and the princes of the Church. Yet the associations with opulence were not intrinsic to the textile. The raw materials – historically, linen was the preferred thread, though cotton, wool, silk and others have been used – were cheap; so were the tools – the pillows and bobbins. Therefore, the price to the consumer was, in theory at least, driven by the cost of the labour: the skills acquired over years as an apprentice in a lace school; the hours, weeks, sometimes months and years of painstaking and debilitating work that were represented in a single piece of lace. ‘If each piece could tell its tale of torture, very

little lace would be worn', states one of Grand's characters, but her point, of course, was that, to the connoisseur, lace could speak.⁵ The lacemaker was distant but simultaneously present through her craft. The aesthetic qualities of her product were enhanced by knowledge of the sacrifice made in its production:

A life perhaps was slighted, who can know?
A chance of happiness let slip – yet, spite
of all, there still emerged, however slow,
this thing, not easier than life, but quite
perfect, and, oh, so beautiful⁶

Literature and the relationship between lacemakers and consumers

The poet responsible for these lines, the Austrian Rainer Maria Rilke, was a serious collector of lace. He valued it because the lacemaker's labour and art were a form of sacrifice: it made material the relationship between the consumer – titled, rich, leisured – and the producer – poor, ill, maltreated, exploited. This chapter will primarily examine the imaginative literature concerned with lace, not just as a phenomenon in itself but because it inspired interventions in the market designed to protect or nurture textile workers. As Lynn Hunt and others have shown, fiction played a vital role in the history of 'human rights'; in a similar manner, literature moulded the values and practices of humanitarianism.⁷ The lacemaker, a recurrent figure in European literature from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, helped perform that task. One of her literary roles was to depict the right relationship between rich and poor and, in particular, between rich women and poor women (see [Figure 1.1](#)). The consumer and producer should not be distant; they should be brought together, or rather brought *back* together because these works presuppose that there had been, in the past, a virtuous connection between the two which had been perverted by the intrusions of capitalism in the shape of the merchant and the middleman.

As Elaine Freedgood has shown, this right relationship also depended on the assumption that women of the leisured classes were themselves textile workers of a kind, filling their idle hours with handicrafts.⁸ Histories of lacemaking written in the nineteenth century maintained that lace was a *gesunkendes Kulturgut*, that the skills to make lace developed first among ladies-in-waiting at royal courts, and from there passed to the plebian classes as an act of charity. There is little evidence for this origin myth, but it underlay the belief that the rich and the titled should possess an innate appreciation for the lacemakers' skill and obviously know how to



Figure 1.1 ‘Lace. The Maker. The Wearer.’ Engraving by Francis S. Walker to accompany the article ‘Lace and Lace-Making’ in *The Illustrated London News*, 29 April 1882, pp. 5–7. The article coincided with the wedding of Prince Leopold, Duke of Albany, to Princess Helena of Waldeck and Pyrmont. The article concluded ‘The wearers of lace ... must naturally feel some interest in this pretty manufacture, which employs the quick fingers of their hard-working sisters in many a rustic home.’

distinguish the high-quality handmade ‘true lace’ from machined ‘false’ or ‘imitation lace’ that, in the nineteenth century, was pouring out from the factories of Nottingham and Calais.

Early nineteenth-century imaginative literature contended that the domestic lacemaker and aristocrat should be brought together in the most literal of senses. In Caroline Barnard’s 1817 children’s book *The Prize: Or, The Lace-makers of Missenden*, the new squire’s wife resurrects the village lace school established by her ancestors, as a means to support the local poor. At its annual award-giving ceremony the prize for the best lace is won by the most modest and generous pupil, the support of her crippled grandmother and mother, and a moral guide to her wayward sister. Social harmony is restored to the village through a revived personal relationship between the great and the small, the lace consumer and the lace producer.⁹ As in other English literature of the period, such as Henry Richmond’s

Annals of the Poor, the positive effects of this relationship were not just one way: the lacemaker reminded the wealthy and powerful of their duty to the indigent, while her Christian abnegation served as a model for those higher up the social order.

James Hollings' 1835 poem 'The Lace Maker' also made an idyll of domestic manufacture, under the benign protection of the squire's hall. Lacemaking, in this village of the conservative imagination, hardly counts as labour, for the young woman lacemaker passes her time with her family and neighbours, gossiping and singing, with no desire for social advancement or indulgence. Hollings contrasted her fate with that of the mill girl, imprisoned within factory walls, enslaved by the machine and a prey to vice. For Hollings, cottage industry was a healthy form of production, both physically and morally. The lacemaker remained under the eye of her mother and the authority of her father, not to mention the village parson and squire. The promiscuous mixing of sexes in the new factories, far from such paternal(ist) oversight, inevitably led to sexual predation and crime. New forms of capitalism undermined the family, the basis of the social order, and separated one rank from another.¹⁰

Writers would continue to invoke this domestic idyll: as late as 1906, a thesis on lace revival in France opened with the statement that 'It is accepted, and completely indisputable, that the best and most natural way of working for women is working at home.'¹¹ Domestic lace production *should* be a good thing: a distraction from idleness, a lesson in cleanliness, a contribution to the household budget, a stimulant to taste and, if not coquetry, then at least some feminine pride. (The virtues of cooperation and collective life, which were significant, as well as picturesque, elements of lacemakers' work culture, and which seem to have been so important in Russia, do not loom large in Western European literature.)¹² However, from the Hungry Forties onwards, the idyll was more often presented in ironic terms. The virtues of domestic industry, compared to the factory Moloch, were still advanced, but writers were only too aware that the reality of lacemakers' lives did not match the ideal. Lacemakers had to work twelve, fourteen, sixteen or more hours a day to earn a bare sufficiency; they had no time to care for their house, their children or their husband. Their homes were neglected, their health was destroyed, and their poverty made them prey for exploiters, economic and sexual. Consumers and producers had become distanced, and the consciousness of the rich needed to be awakened by presenting lacemakers again before their eyes.

For instance, in 1840 the German feminist writer Louise Otto-Peters, shocked by a tour through lacemaking regions of the Erzgebirge, confronted the lace consumer directly in her poem 'The Lacemakers':

See the women making lace,
Pillow lace, a work of art;
You rich and famous – do not scruples
Linger in your inner heart?
While they decline, you feast and spend,
And savour life in luxury,
Meanwhile these women starve and die,
Released, at last from misery!¹³

Otto-Peters wrote from her own position as an outraged observer to advance her moral argument. Others adopted the voice of the lacemaker herself to make their plea to the ‘rich and famous’. In Frans Carrein’s 1859 Flemish play ‘Eliza the Lacemaker’, the eponymous heroine sings over her pillow that her lace:

... shines just like a diamond
On her to whom fate was favourable:
Whether duchess or baroness,
She flaunts herself with it at balls and banquets;
While I, poor martyr,
Suffer in body and soul.¹⁴

The contrasting fates of the producer and consumer crystallised in *fin-de-siècle* literature around the theme of the bridal veil: the consumptive lacemaker works herself to death to complete the aristocratic commission. The lacemaker will not live to wear such a garment, except perhaps in a ‘wedding of the dead’, when she will be dressed as bride in her coffin.¹⁵

Not every writer advanced the claims of the poor on the rich in quite such Gothic terms. Often these discursive lacemakers declined the opportunity to make a political point, rather expressing contentment with their humble lot and wishing their royal and noble customers well. This tone runs through the poems of Carrein’s contemporaries in the mid-nineteenth-century revival of Flemish literature such as Marie Doolaege, Napoleon Destanberg and Pieter Frans van Kerckhoven. But even when not accusatory, the effect of these poems relies on the chasm created between producer and consumer by capitalistic production – ‘Our art is always for others’ as van Kerckhoven put it.¹⁶ The poems are themselves an acknowledgement of that rupture, while the words in which these imagined lacemakers address queens and countesses are an appeal that it might be bridged.

By acting as patrons to lacemakers, the rich saved not only the poor but also themselves. The power of the lacemaker’s gratitude was made legible in Aimé Giron’s 1894 novel *Une lieue de dentelle*, which was often awarded as a prize in French Sunday schools. The setting is the department of the Haute-Loire,

the main centre of the French handmade lace industry, and the heroine is Cesette, a lacemaker, milk kin to Luc, the son of the baron de Chambran (her mother had been his wet nurse). The Chambran family continue to buy Cesette's lace in recognition of this relationship. Luc, however, is a prodigal son who gambles away his family's fortune. When ruined, he invokes the clause excluding from his losses all the land that can be encompassed by Cesette's lace. Cesette, anticipating this moment for six years, produces four kilometres of ribbon lace of a pattern described as a 'pater', in other words a paternalistic prayer replicated over and over in physical form. Her example of 'dedication, loyalty, and selflessness' recalls Luc to his own moral self, and thus saves his soul. For a moment the novel toys with a marriage between the pair, but such a *mésalliance* would not have suited the social vision of Giron's Catholic milieu, and Cesette weds a farmer of her own class instead.¹⁷

Handmade lace revivals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

In literature the direct patronage of lacemakers by local grandees was commonplace; in reality such encounters were rare. The relationship between impoverished lacemaker and aristocratic lace-wearer had to be imagined on both sides because of the intermediaries who kept the producer and consumer separated. However, the influence of this literature is evidenced by the numerous attempts to overcome the divide. Nothing bespeaks the special status of handmade lace more clearly than the initiatives taken by the 'rich and famous', real baronesses and duchesses, to emulate their literary namesakes in their attempts to save the industry. Other forms of textile production that relied on the putting-out system gave way, sooner or later, to the factory, as capital was concentrated in spinning and weaving machines. Lace was more complicated to mechanise, but by the time Fanny Bury Palliser wrote her *History of Lace* in 1865 – the most important work on the subject published in the century – 'Almost every description of lace is now fabricated by machinery; and it is no easy task, even for the practised eye, to detect the difference.'¹⁸ Lace too should have given way to its steam-driven rival.

Therefore, while it may have made sense in the seventeenth century to invest in handmade lace as a remedy to localised crises affecting women's employment, that was no longer true, even by the 1830s. And yet, across Europe and increasingly also in European colonies, we see the same pattern: in the face of women's poverty, patrons erected a lace school, brought in nuns or equivalents to teach lace skills, and (re-)established a lace industry. They were attempting to actualise the direct relationship between producer and consumer that had been imagined in literature, and to imbue the materiality of lace with moral qualities.

The most dramatic example of such a revival is provided by the Flemish linen crisis. Flax spinning employed hundreds of thousands of women and girls in Flanders, but the industry was effectively wiped out in the mid-1840s by the introduction of British machine-spun thread and woven cloth, a crisis made worse by its conjuncture with the European potato famine. In a relatively short period, many spinners had been converted into lacemakers: the Catholic clergy usually provided the impetus, cajoling local landowners into providing the land for a school. The exponentially expanding female religious orders supplied the teachers, while the newly founded Belgian state contributed much of the upfront capital. By 1851 more than seven hundred new schools had been opened in the provinces of East and West Flanders, providing training, work and occasionally some minimal education to tens of thousands of young women.¹⁹ Even at the time, and especially given the concurrent collapse of handmade lace in nearby established centres such as Antwerp, Lille and Valenciennes, critics wondered at the economic wisdom of this policy: it effectively condemned entire generations to an occupation that would ensure their own poverty.²⁰ None the less, due to these initiatives the handmade lace industry survived in Belgium until after the First World War.

The Flemish lace revival was the largest example of its kind, but in the late nineteenth century it was not the best known: that accolade must go to the Burano Lace School, the 'bright star' of the handmade lace revival.²¹ Lacemaking on this island of the Venetian lagoon had been moribund before the freezing winter of 1872 deprived its fishermen of their sole livelihood. In response, Countess Andriana Marcello, lady-in-waiting to the Crown Princess Margherita of Italy, set up a lace school. Burano's historic specialism had been a needle lace, but the secret of its manufacture was all but lost. The countess sought out an aged lacemaker, Cencia Scarpariola, who still recalled the techniques taught in her youth. She passed them on to the daughter-in-law of the island's mayor, who in turn was employed as a lace mistress in the new school. Under aristocratic and royal patronage – the new Queen of Italy (which since 1866 included Venice) sometimes oversaw the lacemakers herself – the school grew until by the turn of the century it provided work for eight hundred women and girls. But while the past was a source of inspiration, Marcello understood that lace was a fashion item which had to respond to modern tastes with new designs. She employed leading textile designers to renew the repertoire of Burano lacemakers. Burano lace was much sought after in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, worn by royalty such as Queen Emma of the Netherlands, as well as by the Pope.²²

The progress of the Scuola Merletti di Burano was widely reported in the periodical press and in the institution's own promotional documents. Its

history mattered, in commercial terms, because the appeal of Burano lace lay not just in its quality but the support it gave to the deserving poor. Lace was credited with doubling the rate of marriages on the island, while the number of illegitimate births declined to one-sixth of its former number. For Cora Slocomb, Countess di Brazzà, Burano lace was ‘most beautiful, because it is consecrated to the redemption of humanity by the noblest means – by teaching the poor to become good and useful through the training which is given to their brains and hands’.²³ The example of Burano – and its success in commercial, moral and aesthetic terms – was a constant refrain among those who sought to protect and revive the domestic lace industries in the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century: people like Alan Cole of the South Kensington Museum, Fernand Engerand, the conservative deputy for the main Normandy lace region, and Pierre Verhaegen, the most important spokesman for the Belgian lace industry.²⁴ Burano was where Emily Hobhouse sent her protégée to learn lace skills.²⁵

Whether directly inspired by Burano or not, almost every region that could claim a lace heritage (and some that could not) would witness an attempted reintroduction in the decades preceding the First World War. In 1874 the Venetian lace merchant Michelangelo Jesurum set up a lace school on Pellestrina, another island in the Venetian lagoon, and this was followed by others, such as Cora Slocomb’s own lace schools in the Friuli region (1891) and the ‘Aemilia Ars’ school in Bologna (1898).²⁶ Also in 1874, the sub-prefect and mayor of Argentan in Normandy attempted to revive the needle-lace industry of that town, in response to the post-war Depression, even though no commercial lace had been made in the town for fifty years.²⁷ In the early twentieth century the journalist Johannès Plantadis led a semi-successful campaign to have lace skills taught in girls’ schools around Tulle in the Corrèze, even though lace production had ceased in that region with the French Revolution.²⁸ Lace schools returned, after an absence of decades or even longer, to Malmsbury (1907) and Downton (c. 1910) in Wiltshire and Winchelsea in Sussex (1894).²⁹ One could point to many more examples.

The French lawyer André Mabillet de Poncheville, surveying these various initiatives in 1911 with the intention of saving the lace industry in his home region of French Flanders, argued that ‘lace has always been rescued through the patronage of the aristocracy and the upper classes, spurred on by their queen’. Even in Republican France he cited the efforts aristocratic women such as Sophie de Lonlay, who founded the *l’Œuvre des dentellières bretonnes* near Concarneau in 1904, Mlle de Marmier whose *L’Œuvre du travail au foyer dans les campagnes de France* (later named *l’Aiguille à la campagne*) was founded in 1895 in Ray-sur-Saône, and the *Association dentellière lozérienne*, founded in 1904 by Mme de Las Cases in Marvéjols.³⁰ While there are instances that counter Poncheville’s assertion (Plantadis was a committed Republican, for example), the pattern does largely hold true.

We have already encountered Countess Andriana Marcello in Italy; her imitator Cora Slocomb was an American who married into Italian aristocracy, a similar trajectory to Harriet Lathrop Dunham, Marchioness de Viti de Marco, who was active in promoting the lace industry in the Abruzzi.³¹ The lace school in Malmsbury was under the patronage of Lady Suffolk, the lace school in Downton was under the patronage of the Countess of Radnor ...

There were many such rescues and resurrections of local lace industries in the final decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth. Aristocratic ladies and women of fashion were the most visible activists on behalf of lacemakers, although their enterprises were often supported by the clergy and by the local authorities. The role each played in relation to the lace industry varied, but as they drew inspiration from each other either directly (the female connoisseur's tour of European lace districts is a sub-theme in the literature of lace) or through widely circulated accounts of Burano and other success stories, their activist repertoires overlapped.³² In almost every case they sought the patronage of even greater ladies, queens and princesses. Some were keen to train up new, young lacemakers, while others aimed to provide work for the aged. Some focused on improving designs and the quality of production through exhibitions, prizes and drawing schools. Some aimed to educate consumers on the tiny points of difference that distinguished 'true' handmade lace from its mechanised 'false' rival. Most wanted to eliminate the middlemen who were roundly blamed for the appalling rates of pay in the handmade lace industry. A direct relationship would be instituted – or, as patrons imagined, reinstituted – between lace producers and consumers, bridging the social chasm generated by capitalist production.³³

A core element in this renewed connection was the show, the performance, that lacemakers put on for their patrons and customers. Lacemakers enacted their own labour for chic audiences in galleries and exhibitions. Even when such enterprises relied on mail order rather than personal introductions, they sent out portraits of their workers so customers could know the workers they were supporting. Articles on Burano were accompanied with pictures not only of Queen Margherita but also of Cencia Scarpariola (see [Figure 1.2](#)).³⁴ Lace merchants sent postcard images of lacemakers alongside gifts of the lace to European royals, in the expectation of their patronage (see [Figure 1.3](#)).³⁵

It would be easy to caricature such initiatives as conservative, done to lacemakers rather than with them. They were, undoubtedly, an attempt to overcome antagonistic class relationships and reassert vertical bonds – of duty on the one side and obligation on the other – that were supposed to have characterised social relations in face-to-face communities before industrialisation. Landowners' interests were hardly disguised: if women could earn money in their village homes, their menfolk would be less likely to abandon the land, a point made repeatedly by Fernand Engrand and other

Ricordo della Scuola Merletti di Burano la sola sotto il Patronato di
S. M. la REGINA MARGHERITA

Dis. A. D'Este illustr. Burano (Venezia)



Cencia Scarpariola la sola che ricordasse
l'antico punto famoso

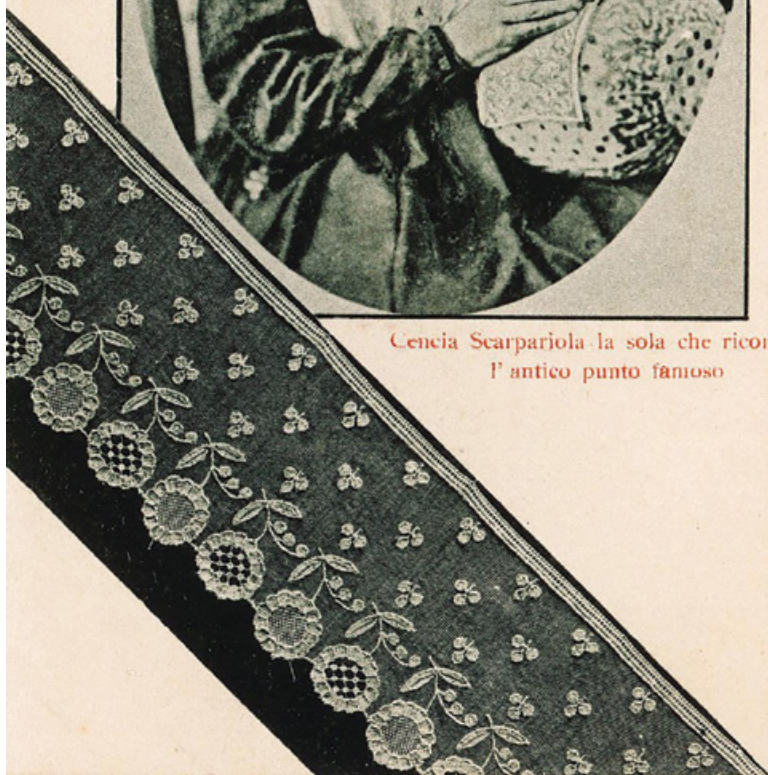


Figure 1.2 Italian postcard celebrating the Burano Lace School, 'the only one under the patronage of Her Majesty Queen Marguerita'. The featured lacemaker is Cencia Scarpariola, 'the only person who could recall the famous old lace point'.



Figure 1.3 Postcard ‘Twelve Bedfordshire Lacemakers. All over 80 years of age. Combined ages 1,007 years.’ In 1913 this picture was sent by the lace merchant A. A. Carnes to Queen Mary, Queen Alexandra, Queen Maud of Norway and Empress Alexandra Feodorovna of Russia. According to a report in the *Bedfordshire Times* on 21 April 1916, Queen Alexandra hung the picture in her own room.

conservative politicians as they struggled against the rural exodus.³⁶ It is also true that attempts to corral lacemakers into associations were often resisted by the women themselves. Even on Burano there were constant conflicts between the school and lacemakers who declared themselves independent of its hegemony.³⁷ Lace merchants also resented the trespass of charities into their commercial sphere and denigrated the well-meaning but amateur attempts of grand ladies to organise their industry. Yet the lace associations were also influenced by more radical intellectual currents, including feminism and socialism. They opened up new possibilities for female entrepreneurship, while some were organised along cooperative lines. As part of the larger ‘arts and crafts’ revival, they were often at the forefront of design innovation.³⁸

Humanitarian interventions in the lace industry in fiction

The attempts to revive lace were accompanied by their own literature. Susanna Meredith had herself established a lace school in Cork in the famine year 1847, a period when, as she put it, ‘Ladies burst the bonds of conventionalisms, and

went regularly into business, to procure remunerative occupation for the destitute of their own sex.’ In 1865 she published a work that combined a history of philanthropic lace initiatives in Ireland with fictionalised stories about lace patrons and their relationship with the poor. Meredith had mixed views about the moral impact of the lace revival. While one of her stories celebrated the efforts of a clergyman’s niece to introduce crochet lace, another deplored a lacemaker lured into vicious ways by the easy money derived from lacemaking. Meredith was also uncertain about the long-term effects of this kind of intervention: her own school had closed its doors in 1859 because her pupils’ ‘[p]rejudice against business life, and the distinctions of social grades, stood mightily in their way’.³⁹

Charlotte Yonge’s novel *The Clever Woman of the Family*, which likewise appeared in 1865, offered an even more sceptical portrayal of philanthropic interference in the lace industry. Rachel Curtis, the social activist daughter of a Devon gentry family, is appalled at the poverty and enervation of the local lace pupils, and so determines to rescue them. In tandem with the Reverend Mauleverer, she launches the Female Union for Lacemaker’s Employment, through whose offices lace apprentices were to be retrained in more remunerative work, specifically wood engraving. However, Mauleverer proves a con-man, F.U.L.E. is revealed to be an exploitative lace school in disguise, and at least one of the ‘rescued’ girls dies as a result of her treatment. Yonge, through the character of Rachel Curtis, advises against any systemic attempt to address poverty; the most that grand ladies should do is to relieve its symptoms.⁴⁰

For some years Burano’s success tempered these apprehensions about the effectiveness of philanthropic action, but they were rekindled during the Europe-wide debates on homeworking in the 1890s and the 1900s.

Lacemakers and the European debate on homeworking

The special status of handmade lace and the well-reported efforts made to preserve the industry explain the symbolic importance of lace in debates about homeworking more generally. While the topic of homeworking – at the intersection of two of the dominant ‘Questions’ of the nineteenth century, the Social Question and the Woman Question – was hardly new, it exploded in public discourse in the last decade of the nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century. As industrial workers fell increasingly under the protection of the law – through factory inspection, limits on working hours, accident insurance and other measures – the misery of homeworkers became more apparent. In the garment trades in particular, hundreds of thousands of seamstresses, milliners, glovemakers and others were excluded from the benefits of reform because they worked from home, a location into

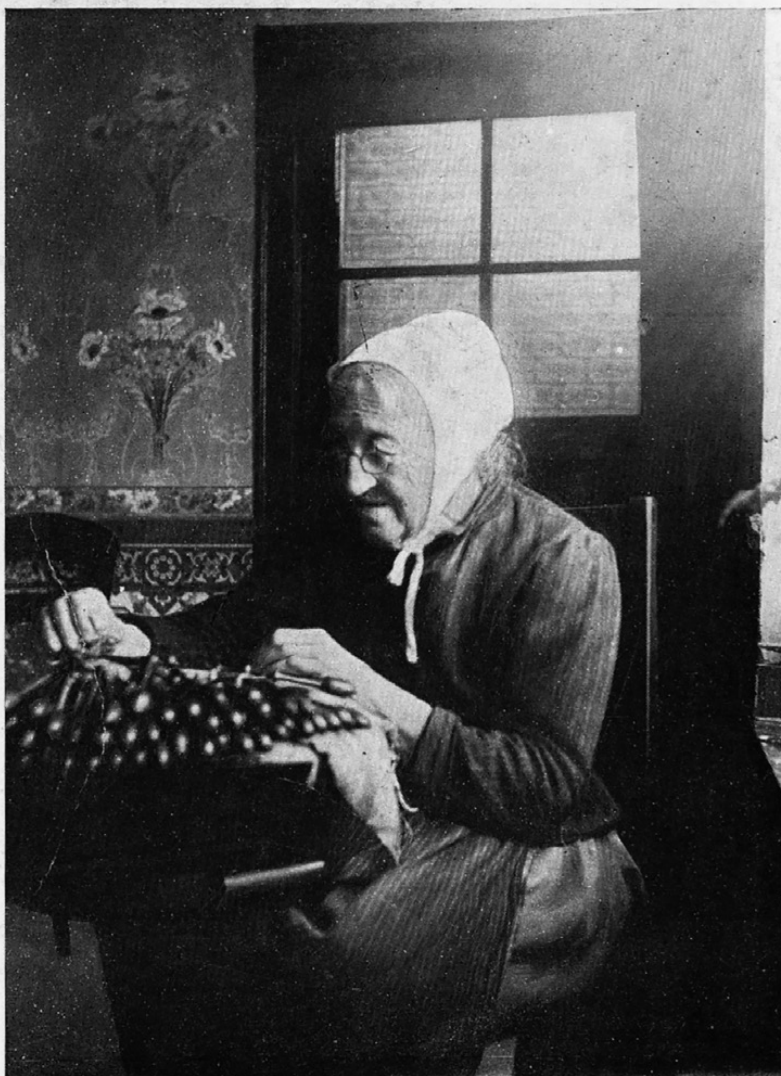
which no inspector could pry. They did not benefit from employee protection because it was not clear if they were employees. Dispersed and isolated, working at piece rates, such workers could not combine to improve their conditions: they were 'sweated', that is, forced into competition with each other, driving wages down and working hours up. One of the added stimulants in this debate was the question whether homeworking was a leftover from an older form of capitalism, which would in time give way to mechanisation, or whether industrialisation was creating new forms of homeworking that could threaten the social advances already secured.⁴¹

The 'homeworker', who was simultaneously almost always a woman worker, emerged as an international problem category in exhibitions and associated congresses, such as the *Sweated Industries* exhibition held in London in 1906, the *Heimarbeit* exhibitions held in Berlin and Frankfurt in 1906 and 1908, and in Zurich in 1909, the *Hausindustrie* exhibition in Amsterdam in 1909 and the *Travail à domicile* exhibitions held in Brussels in 1910 and in Zurich/Geneva in 1912. (Oddly, these events overlapped with others, such as the 1906 exhibition in Rome, *Le Industrie femminili italiane*, which continued to present the woman homeworker as a solution to social problems.) The Brussels Exhibition and Congress, which formed part of the larger Brussels Universal Exhibition, was the first to be conceived as 'international' in scope, and it was the launch pad for a short-lived international organisation dedicated to the problem.⁴² The first aim of the exhibition, which opened in July 1910, was to bridge the gulf of ignorance that separated the producer from the consumer, by 'teaching the public the realities of the daily life of 118,000 workers in rich and free Belgium'.⁴³ It was inspired by Camille Huysmans, a Brussels councillor and the secretary of the Second Socialist International, while the most active member of the organising committee of the exhibition was Antony Neuckens, a glovemaker and trade unionist from Brussels. Despite this socialist impetus, the Congress that followed in September drew participants from across the political spectrum. Sitting alongside Huysmans and Neuckens were social Catholics, liberal professors of economics, industrialists and doctors. However, the women philanthropists who had taken the lead in actions to preserve the lace industry, 'les dames aisées' as they were termed by one delegate, were not well represented.⁴⁴ (Belgian ladies of fashion had been slower to follow the Burano model of patronage than those in other countries: their association *Les amies de la dentelle*, under the patronage of the Queen of Belgium, had only been formed earlier in 1910: see [Figure 1.4](#).)

Lacemakers made up between a third and a half of all homeworkers in Belgium, so it is not surprising that their example loomed large both in the exhibition and the Congress. Indeed, the poster for the exhibition portrayed an aged lacemaker, based on one of Neuckens' photographs of homeworkers (see [Figure 1.5](#)). According to the accompanying information, this old



Figure 1.4 Postcard issued by *Les amies de la dentelle*, an association set up by Belgian nobility and other 'dames aisées' in 1910 to support the lace industry. The illustration is based on a photo of a Mechelen lacemaker, Johanna Habrecht. Through the window can be seen the towers of Mechelen, Antwerp and Bruges cathedrals, referencing the strong connections between the Catholic Church and the lace industry. The spider's web refers to one of many legends about the origins of lace.



DENTELLIÈRE DE CERFONTAINE
AGÉE DE 76 ANS, CONFÉCTIONNANT
UNE PIÈCE D'ENIREDEUX
DE SOIE NOIRE

Son salaire journalier pour 8 heures
de travail est de 0 fr. 25. Encore
n'est-elle pas payée en argent, mais
en étoffes (truck-système).

ZES-EN-ZEVENTIGJARIGE
KANTWERKSTER VAN CERFONTAINE
ZIJ VERVAARDIGT
EEN STUK TUSSCHENKANT
VAN ZWARTE ZIJDE

Zij wint dagelijks fr. 0.25 voor
8 uren arbeid en wordt niet in geld,
maar wel in stoffen betaald (truck-
stelsel).

N° 83

Figure 1.5 Postcard produced for the 1910 Brussels *Exposition du Travail à Domicile*. The photo was taken by Antony Neuckens and features a lacemaker from Cerfontaine, aged seventy-six, who earned 25 centimes per day (paid in loaves) for eight hours work. This photo served as the basis for the exhibition poster and the accompanying postage stamp.

woman from Cerfontaine earned the pitiful sum of twenty-five centimes a day for eight hours' work, and was not even paid in money but in bread: the truck system was illegal in Belgium but it was a recurrent feature of lace production.⁴⁵ Their living quarters were recreated as part of the exhibition, where selected lacemakers demonstrated their craft to visitors. Their produce was on sale in the exhibition shop. Delegates at the Congress were taken on guided visits to the homes of lacemakers in the impoverished villages of Hamme and Zele, the region which, since the journalist Auguste de Winne's 1902 social investigations, had become known as 'the Flanders' hell'.⁴⁶

In theory, the representation of each industry and the facts and figures that accompanied the exhibition were the work of committees representing both workers and employers; in practice, most of the information came from the existing, detailed studies completed for the Belgian *Office du Travail*. In the case of the lacemakers, the committee was dominated by its secretary, Pierre Verhaegen, who had prepared the *Office du Travail* report and authored several of the other submissions that were pre-circulated to Congress attendees.⁴⁷ It was Verhaegen who guided visitors to lacemakers' homes, and he was one of the principal proponents of the Congress's resolutions. Verhaegen's politics, inherited from his father Baron Arthur Verhaegen, were resolutely Catholic and Royalist: he was very far from sympathising with the socialists Huysmans and Neuckens, but none the less he joined them as a member of the permanent international commission on homeworking. After all, Catholics and socialists could share the conviction that capitalism was a social malaise, and that production and consumption should be made ethical.

The Congress was asked to deliberate on five questions, which can be summarised as follows:

1. What abuses were homeworkers subject to?
2. What dangers did their conditions of work pose to the consumer?
3. What legislative measures might protect and improve their lives?
4. How should they be organised?
5. Should homeworking be suppressed, in whole or in part?

The first two questions largely occupied the doctors and hygienists present. The last question was posed most strongly by the male trade unionists, especially the German representatives. They argued that homeworking was a bad thing in itself and disruptive of familial relations, but more importantly it undercut organised labour and the principle of the male breadwinner wage. However, even Neuckens, who had started from this position, ended up agreeing that suppression was impossible, and not entirely desirable.⁴⁸ Most of the other delegates were more supportive of homeworking in principle. Particularly vocal were the few representatives of the 'dames aisées': Mlle de

Marmier, director of *L'aiguille à la campagne*, which was one of the most visible of the lace revival initiatives in France, argued that 'homeworking is the most moral [form of labour] and the best of all, for woman is made to look after the house'. It ensured that young women were brought up under the supervision of their mothers, and it prevented them from leaving the countryside for the promiscuity of urban factories.⁴⁹ Although Verhaegen and other participants described this idyll in ironic terms, it was nonetheless present in their minds as an accurate description of a previous age if not of the present.

The questions posed suggest that the organisers had already given up on philanthropic interventions as a significant means to address homeworkers' miseries. Even the social Catholics, more enthusiastic about private action and the sacred intimacy of family life, recognised that in the homeworker such initiatives had reached their limit. 'The majority of such good works are hardly able to pay higher salaries than standard rates, unless they are made up by means of charity', declared Georges Mény, a priest from Épinal, and he was seconded by Verhaegen.⁵⁰ Philanthropy's role now was to prepare the way for legislation, they concluded. But while thinking in terms of state intervention, much of the delegates' language drew on earlier discourses surrounding homeworking, and lacemaking in particular. Victor Brants, the titular president of the event, lamented the decline of artisan production which had been overseen by a corporation with its own dignity, and whose members had a direct relationship with their customers. (Medieval guilds had a particular allure for the Flemish participants as they were associated with the glory days of Flemish creativity and independence in the late Middle Ages.)⁵¹ It was the irruption of middlemen into this correspondence which reduced proud craftsmen and women to the status of impoverished workers. Again and again, participants attacked these intermediaries as the 'inescapable agent of wage depression'.⁵²

The philanthropic impulse was most clearly demonstrated in the delegates' scepticism about homeworkers' ability to help themselves. They were

naturally recalcitrant. Isolated, they don't know each other, they have no consciousness of their common interests and cannot see what benefits might arise from a collective effort ... And as for the women, individualists by temperament and by education, they are even more resistant to the idea of association than the men.⁵³

In reality, lacemakers often worked communally, either in schools or gatherings on the street and in the home. They had a strong craft identity, celebrated on patronal feast days, and they enjoyed a vibrant collective life. But at the conference, the lacemaker became the archetype for this 'timid and isolated' female homeworker.

Lost in the depths of their Flemish hamlets, uneducated, brutalised by centuries of misery, fearful and without support against exploitative intermediaries, how could one begin to awake in them an understanding of the essential necessity of coming together to defend their rights, and how could one give them the energy to do so?

Whatever was agreed and achieved at this Congress would be 'for them, but without them' argued Neuckens.⁵⁴

The Congress reached a number of resolutions about the creation of craft associations, the inclusion of homeworkers within existing social legislation, and the setting up of wages boards to establish minimum tariffs (drawing on the example of Australia). In Belgium itself these led nowhere in terms of immediate legislative action, but in June 1914 West Flemish Catholic clergy did attempt to unionise lacemakers.⁵⁵ And, in a way, the wartime action of the lace committees – staffed by members of *Les amies de la dentelle* and coordinated by the Commission for Relief in Belgium – would effectively eliminate the middlemen.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, France introduced a new law in 1915, similar to the Australian model, in part under pressure to do something for women workers while their husbands were at the front.⁵⁷ But returning to the 1910 Congress, it is striking that lace was the only manufacture to receive its own resolution, with the declared intention to 'constitute a vast cooperative for the lace industry' in order to cut out the middlemen.⁵⁸

The homeworking debate in literature

Although international displays of lace feature in her fiction, I do not know whether Sarah Grand visited the Brussels Exhibition. Yet as the novelist who coined the term 'New Woman', and as a regular spokesperson on suffrage and other feminist issues, she was fully versed in the debate on homeworking. As with other British feminists of her generation, including Sylvia Pankhurst, her sympathy for the suffering of women in sweated industries went hand-in-hand with an arts and crafts enthusiasm for the handmade.⁵⁹ She tackled the future of domestic lace production in two huge novels (a third was projected but never published): *Adnam's Orchard* (1912) and *The Winged Victory* (1916).⁶⁰ Her lacemaking heroine, Ella Banks, is a subsidiary character in the first, and the lacemaking plot takes second place to market gardening, but she becomes the lead in the second. Ella is both the upholder of tradition and a self-declared 'Modern Woman', someone who can see, think and plan for herself. We first meet her in an unnamed southern English county at the turn of the century, seated at the window of her father's farmhouse, her head bent over her lace pillow, an image from the cottage idyll. Ella is the descendant of generations of lacemakers and first

learnt her skills from her grandmother. But the local lace industry has been in decline for two hundred years. Ella sets herself the task of reviving the regional tradition whose 'art was quite lost and forgotten'. For a year she sought out aged lacemakers to question and examples of old lace to study. Then for two years she worked to recreate one design which she then offers to the local aristocrat. The Duchess of Castlefield Saye (whose family name of Brabant is one of several pointers towards Belgium) was 'always on the look-out for fine specimens of lace'. The discussion between Ella and the Duchess, in which the latter first offers £10.00 and the former finally accepts £300.00, is a striking illustration of the potential gap between the price of lace and the wages earned by lacemakers. The Duchess thereafter remains suspicious of the assertive Ella, but the Duke, also a lace devotee, is more benevolent and supports her in her project of opening a lace showroom in London's West End.⁶¹

The reasons for the Duke's interest emerge in *The Winged Victory*: Ella is his natural daughter by a servant girl. But while the full impact of this heritage works itself into the latter half of the novel, the first sections are absorbed with lace. Ella's Bond Street showroom is merely the start of a much larger scheme aimed at bringing lace back into fashion and thus helping its producers: 'The interests of the poorly-paid lacemakers were her first consideration'. As the novel progresses it becomes clear that Ella intends for nothing less than a market monopoly, covering all the lacemaking regions of Europe.

She had perceived the possibility of capturing and commanding the whole trade in the most beautiful and valuable laces, the kind most coveted by women of wealth. Her project was to organise the workers into a corporation of which she herself meant to be sole head and directress. She would be middleman on a new system, the object being, not to add to her own income, but to secure to the workers ample return for their labour.⁶²

In fiction Ella Banks realised the ambition of the Brussels Congress, to establish a 'vast cooperative for the lace industry' that would permanently exclude the 'oppressive middlemen'.

However, to bring the project to fruition Ella requires the backing of fashionable society; she must mix among 'people who live in luxurious idleness at the expense of toiling multitudes to whom they in their greed barely concede enough to keep body and soul together'. She launches her showroom with an exhibition opened by royalty, and she teaches lace skills to the daughters of the aristocracy. (Grand partook of the mythology that lace-making originated as a leisure activity among ladies of the court.) But she is not just venturing into the 'enemy's country'; she is now 'living in luxury' – she has become 'Lady de Lace', the 'Duchesse de Dentelle'. In the opinion of her stepmother, by becoming a lacemaker in the first place she was already

a class traitor: 'It's jest an excuse to set in the parlour, and act the fine lady.' She overcomes the distance between producer and consumer, but at the risk of her own moral being. She resents her status as the object of aristocratic charity, a 'pauper living on alms!' And given the lack of detail about the economics of her corporation, one is forced to wonder, as the Duke's man of business puts it, whether the whole object has been to provide a 'congenial occupation for an extremely interesting young woman'. Ella feels the failure of philanthropy, but she is unable to find another solution, and the novel moves on to other themes.⁶³ I suspect that one reason why Grand was unable to complete her trilogy is that, as far as lacemakers were concerned, there would be no solution. The First World War and the change in fashions that accompanied it put an end to any substantial hope of a lace revival, whether commercial, aesthetic or philanthropic.

Conclusion: literature and humanitarian interventions in craft production

Lace has always had some claim to be a humanitarian handicraft. In as much as anything authoritative can be said about its early history, it developed in the church-run orphanages and workshops of Venice, supported by municipal funds and charitable donations. These institutions mixed the philanthropic with the carceral, commercial and educative; one of their main goals was to ensure that poor young women would have a means to earn a living to protect them from sex work. The Venetians were a model for many similar interventions both in Catholic and Protestant countries.

The motivations at work in such market interferences are better documented in the period after the French Revolution and the succeeding wars, which had done so much damage to lace production. The multiple revivals of handmade lace, even as it competed with its machine-made rival, were now accompanied with histories of the textile and social studies of its producers, as well as by an extensive literary output. There were poems, songs, plays, novels and operettas which, in their different ways, explained why lace needed protection and lacemakers required support. This chapter has mentioned only a handful of the hundreds of texts concerning lacemakers. The point is that the histories and social studies were shot through with images and ideas that circulated in imaginative literature: the cottage idyll contrasted with the suffering of emaciated, consumptive girls in the lace school; the self-sacrifice of the producers contrasted with the indulgence of the consumers. To an extent, historians and social investigators had to rely on fiction: given the absence of much documentary

evidence of lacemaking prior to the nineteenth century, fiction supplied the missing narrative.

Literary representations in turn inspired more or less practical engagements with lace and lacemakers. This was a campaigning literature, intended to have an impact on the reading public who were also the consumers of lace. When philanthropists, politicians, trade unionists and doctors planned their interventions, their thoughts were, in part, shaped by these fictions. This is as obvious in Neuckens' inability to imagine lacemakers ever combining as it is in Cora Slocomb's invocation of Burano as 'one of the holiest, most glorious, and sacred shrines to women's work'.⁶⁴ Activists were motivated by the same impulses as their narrative counterparts, and indeed they mobilised these narratives in their appeal to others to support lacemakers and lacemaking. This is particularly apparent in the circulation of myths about the divine origins of lace which, originating in a short story by the Bruges newspaper editor Caroline Popp, were regularly repeated by lace historians, including Verhaegen, before reappearing in fiction, including Grand's.⁶⁵

Crucial to this appeal was the hope that the ruptures of capitalism could be healed and harmony restored to the social order. Noble and commoner, rich and poor, could be brought together, no longer divided by economic forces but united through them. Both sides would learn from each other: lacemaking was 'so refining, so ennobling', thus the lacemaker acquired taste from her work;⁶⁶ with her head bent down over her pillow, avoiding the male gaze, she was naturally modest; and as lace needed to be kept spotless, she also learnt cleanliness. The consumer too was morally improved through their engagement with lace, taught to distinguish 'true' from 'false', and to value the lives of the producers who had laboured over such a work of art. Together they would again raise up the art of lacemaking, most clearly symbolised in the rediscovery of the 'lost stich', a powerful narrative element in the Burano and Argentan revivals, and the subject of a whole sub-genre of lace literature.⁶⁷

Elaine Freedgood in her study of lace histories has already shown how lace appreciation was presented as 'a cure for class consciousness and identification, tracing a tradition of women's work that cuts across and unites needleworkers of all social classes' and which reunited 'the otherwise separate processes of production and consumption'.⁶⁸ One of my aims in this chapter has simply been to illustrate that this was not just a British but a European phenomenon, and British lace commentators were just as inspired by what they read about Burano and Bruges as they were about Bucks. and Beds. The other aim has been to show the closeness between literary engagements with lacemaking and their real-life counterparts. Cultural representation and social action overlapped in the history of the lace revivals, which

are among the earliest examples of humanitarian craft interventions. They provided a template for later developments, such as missionary sponsorship of lace production beyond Europe.⁶⁹

The similarities between these lace initiatives and later humanitarian craft projects are striking. Lace associations were usually local, intent on rescuing a distinct regional tradition such as Burano, Tulle or Argentan lace. However, such enterprises relied on a cosmopolitan audience to sell their wares. They reached them through performances, particularly to wealthy tourists, as well as through exhibitions and literature. The repertoire of interventions applied in one region were transplanted to others, as accounts of lace successes circulated in the international press. These accounts provided few facts and figures but were filled with images and anecdotes proclaiming the benefits of women's craft work. Pictures of lacemakers, stories of their suffering and their redemption, reduced the distance between producer and consumer and helped eliminate the profit-seeking middleman. The ethics of consumption were learnt through narrative.

Absent from this chapter has been any consideration of lacemakers' own views about their relations with consumers and patrons. One of the consequences of lacemakers' collective occupational culture is that, unusually for illiterate women workers, we do have sources through which we can explore their sentiments. Much of what has been recounted here would have been entirely alien to that culture, but lacemakers did share a commitment to what Freedgood terms 'utopian consumption' – that the purpose of the rich was to make work for the poor, and that charity was the only means by which the wealthy could save their souls.⁷⁰ Hence some of the ideas presented in the literature of lace, such as the role of royal and saintly patrons, did make its way into lacemakers' folklore.

Some lace interventions survived the First World War; indeed, in some frontline regions such as Méteren and Saint-Jans-Cappel in French Flanders, lace was resurrected as a remedy for the affected populations.⁷¹ However, few lace revivals would endure, and contemporaries' doubts about the economic viability of philanthropic lace were probably justified. Given that such initiatives relied on financial support from outside the business, they could not offer a long-term alternative to capitalist forms of production. While both the literature of lace and the patrons it inspired necessarily tended towards the boosterish, they also hint at the social tensions and economic uncertainties entwined in market interventions. Readers of Meredith and Yonge would certainly have encountered the limits of philanthropy. The fate of Ella Banks' 'vast cooperative' is likewise unclear. Visions remain unrealised, dreams unfulfilled; the social rupture of capitalist production, the ache of alienation and the threat of social conflict still haunt these works.

Notes

- 1 The research for this chapter was supported by the Leverhulme Trust. The author is grateful for the feedback of the editors and the other participants at the *Humanitarian Handicrafts* conference.
- 2 Philippe Guignet, 'The Lacemakers of Valenciennes in the Eighteenth Century: An Economic and Social Study of a Group of Female Workers under the Ancien Régime', *Textile History*, 10:1 (1979), 96–113; *Bailleul en dentelles*, exhibition catalogue, 27 June–15 October 1992 (Bailleul: Musée Benoît de Puydt, 1992), p. 63; Ernest Lefébure, *Histoire de la dentelle à Bayeux de 1676 à 1900* (Bayeux: J. Tueboeuf, 1913), p. 2.
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2

Work of hands: humanitarian craft and fair trade in Britain and Ireland, 1885–1914

Janice Helland

Concern for less fortunate ‘others’ developed in late eighteenth-century Europe into what has been referred to as ‘organised compassion’ and by the latter part of the nineteenth century became evident in various endeavours.¹ In Britain and Ireland, such ‘organised compassion’ led to interest in the welfare of local craftspeople and manifested in estate-based practices such as the Industrial Society supported by Harriet, 2nd Duchess of Sutherland beginning in 1849 in the Highlands of Scotland, which showcased locally produced crafts – the ‘best produce of the looms and knitting pins, made of wool of the county, and dyed, spun and woven in the parishes’.² Profits from sales were returned to the makers. In Ireland, lace schools, such as the Bath and Shirley Lace School established in 1846 on the estate of the Marquis of Bath, developed as a ‘way to provide much needed employment for young women in rural Ireland’.³ Both activities signified responses to social and political events such as famine and agrarian agitation, and both demonstrated an awareness of the plight of the less fortunate. By the mid-1880s, the sporadic compassion responsible for the so-called revival in craft that had developed in isolated, often rural areas came under the purview of organisations that combined the production of handmade objects with education (of the workers and the public), sought to showcase the results and, in some cases, determined to develop markets. The later, more sophisticated groups also sought to guide or encourage workers to greater self-sufficiency, while some related the practice itself to potential moral improvement.

My objective here is to describe three selected nineteenth-century projects, to interrogate their goals and to suggest that these projects were humanitarian despite their usual categorisation as philanthropic.⁴ The projects differ from one another in their organisational structure, their geographical focus, their patronage and their marketing strategies. The Home Arts and Industries Association (HAIA), the largest and best known (organised in 1885), was meant, according to its founder Eglantyne Louisa Jebb (1845–1925), to ‘reconcile the pleasures of the rich with the needs of the poor’.⁵ A second less well-known and more geographically focused enterprise, the

Donegal Industrial Fund (DIF), had been established a year earlier, in 1884, by Londoner Alice Rowland Hart (1845–1931) after she and her husband toured Donegal in order to ‘ascertain the actual condition of, and the possible means of helping, the peasantry in the congested districts, the scenes of recurring famine’.⁶ The last of the three, Scottish Home Industries (SHI), grew out of the earlier Industrial Society which was revived as the Sutherland Industrial Exhibition in 1886 by Anne, 3rd Duchess of Sutherland and expanded by Millicent, 4th Duchess of Sutherland (1867–1955).⁷ In 1889, Millicent Sutherland, while continuing to promote and support Highland crafters, collaborated with a group of like-minded Scottish aristocrats and landed gentry to form the SHI.⁸ It, like the DIF, was geographically focused but unlike both the DIF and HAIA it had a high-profile aristocrat at its helm. Press coverage of all three projects was extensive in local and national newspapers, and in leading women’s magazines such as *Lady’s Pictorial*, *The Lady*, *Gentlewoman*, and *The Queen*, *The Lady’s Newspaper*: all three encouraged the making of handcrafted objects, and all three were referred to in the press as ‘philanthropic’.

However, I suggest that the term ‘philanthropic’ is a less accurate description of the nineteenth-century projects than is the term ‘humanitarian’. The label philanthropy does not appropriately describe a project that supported crafters and secured a place for their product in the commercial marketplace. Jeffrey Brison, for example, in his study of American philanthropy as it related to Canada discusses one-directional funding that flows from the benefactor or philanthropist to an organisation or an individual such as Andrew Carnegie’s monetary support for the establishment of libraries in Canada.⁹ Thus, philanthropy is more accurately deemed an aspect of giving devoid of economic exchange; it is a one-way activity that provides funding for designated ventures or initiatives while, at the same time, providing the philanthropist with an ethical repute. If differences between so-called philanthropic organisations are closely examined, they can be found to fall into three categories: first, one-directional funding or assistance (like Andrew Carnegie’s projects, such as providing money for the establishment of libraries); second, market-oriented, non-profit funding based upon an exchange of goods for money (more akin to fair trade movements); or third, educational based upon a concept of improvement or development. The humanitarian organisations I discuss here fall into the second category even though their structures and approaches differ.

Before interrogating the mandates of the historical associations, however, I also propose considering Michael Barnett’s analysis of the history of humanitarianism. He emphasises the international aspects of humanitarianism and accordingly asserts that it ‘can only be understood within its global context’.¹⁰ Following his argument, I suggest that philanthropic activities

based in Britain display some of the characteristics of the first of his 'three distinctive ages of humanitarianism', specifically 'imperial humanitarianism', which he dates from the late eighteenth century to the Second World War: faith-based, concerned with short-term relief and advocating 'non-political'.¹¹ Two of the associations I mention here focused their activities on the fringes of Great Britain (Scotland and Ireland) and were directed by women based in England. Additionally, the moral, faith-based imperatives, particularly of the Home Arts and Industries Association, represented a form of internal, class-based imperialism that permeated Victorian England. All three organisations openly described the projects as apolitical. Even Alice Hart, arguably the most political of the three, stated that she left out the 'political question' to focus on the 'economic question'.¹² Returning to Barnett's understanding of imperial humanitarianism, none of the three organisations I discuss here advocated for 'short-term relief'; all intended the results of their intervention (education, training and awareness of market trends) to continue even should the organisation itself not be sustained. The DIF and SHI, however, also represent a form of 'emergency relief' (a characteristic of Barnett's 'neo-humanitarianism' which follows on from 'imperial humanitarianism'¹³) in that the crafters they worked with were experiencing famine and extreme poverty.¹⁴

Furthermore, I have argued in the past that the DIF's mandate pushed the boundaries of philanthropy to include a historical form of what today would be called 'fair trade' or 'alternative trade' in that it was a 'development activity that utilized market mechanisms to reduce poverty'.¹⁵ Additionally, it incorporated 'Irishness' into the making and selling of craft nationally and internationally in its use, for example, of Irish linen and Irish designs such as those adapted from the ninth-century manuscript the *Book of Kells*. The SHI, particularly in the marketing of its star product, hand-woven Harris tweed, mirrored the DIF in its highlighting of the Scottish Highlands and emphasis upon 'fair trade'. Both supported the concepts (as we would refer to them now) of buy local and buy handcrafted. By the Second World War all three projects had faded in importance (HAIA), changed (SHI) or ended (DIF).

In discussing the three organisations, I suggest that they provide insight into nineteenth-century humanitarianism, although the way in which each project developed varied. The DIF represented the determination of one English woman from a mercantile family to assist Irish craftspeople after she and her husband travelled through Donegal in 1882.¹⁶ Later, Hart presented two long papers (subsequently published) to London audiences, one in 1885 and the other in 1887, in which she recounted her first experiences in Ireland and her approach to Irish history, to the Irish people and to cottage crafts.¹⁷ She encouraged embroidery worked on Irish linen using flax thread of Irish manufacture; she promoted homespun Irish tweeds and friezes

‘all pure wool, undyed or vegetable dyed’, and true to her word about an emphasis on economics, she established a market for the goods in London.¹⁸ Although Hart sought to improve the quality of handcrafted objects (necessary to attract consumers), she worked with transferable skills: the crafters, for example, knew how to weave; they didn’t know what to weave (texture or colour) to attract metropolitan consumers. Hart declared: ‘By insisting on careful carding, spinning and weaving, by supplying the peasants with wool when necessary, by giving them good samples to copy, and by teaching them how to find and use the dyes to be obtained from the common objects around them, I have succeeded in getting the peasants to produce tweeds, serges, and friezes which have a high reputation.’¹⁹ Additionally, Hart was adept at using exhibitions to showcase the crafts she promoted: in 1888 she organised the construction of a faux Irish village for London’s Irish Exhibition and another village for The World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago (see [Figure 2.1](#)).

While Hart commended the crafters she never underplayed the poverty, the isolation or the ‘removal from markets’.²⁰ According to Hart, ‘the scheme’ was established ‘on a sound self-supporting basis so that it may come to have a real life independent’ of the Fund. Thus, it was decided ‘to make the business one of profit-sharing’.²¹ ‘With this object in view’, said

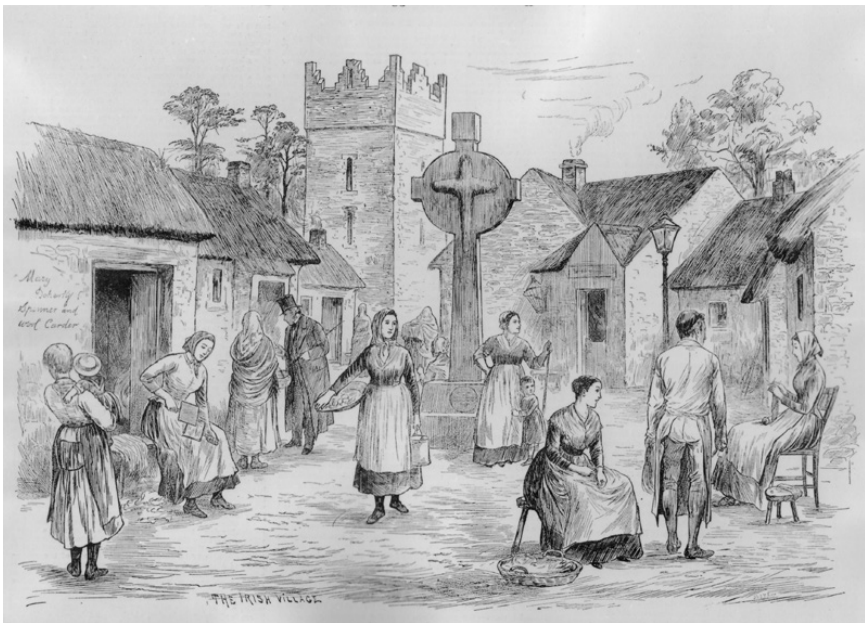


Figure 2.1 ‘The Irish Village at the Irish Exhibition, Olympia’, *Queen*, 7 July 1888

Hart in an 1885 talk she presented to the Society of Arts, ‘careful records are kept of the names of all employed and the sums paid them, and I anticipate the day when I shall have the pleasant mission to perform of going to Ireland to distribute the bonuses of profit among my Irish workers’.²² Hart thereby acknowledged her objective of encouraging an independent, self-supporting community of crafters.

Unlike the Home Arts and Industries Association and the SHI, the DIF was not responsible to a committee, which always included a number of aristocrats. Hart, who had studied medicine in Paris and London, and worked among the poor in London’s East End, managed the DIF on her own with some assistance from others during sales and undoubtedly with help from the local crafters plus, in London, a designer and embroidery instructor.²³ Hart opened a London storefront near Oxford Street (Donegal House) from which to sell Irish crafts and made strategic use of exhibitions and displays: a display organised for Dublin’s elite Shelbourne Hotel (1886), an exhibition at the Associated Artists of New York (1889), objects in the large annual Arts and Crafts Exhibition (1889), and on occasion, objects exhibited with HAIA (1888), among others.²⁴ Notwithstanding her enthusiasms and determination, the sustainability of the DIF proved difficult regardless of Hart’s astute marketing skills and her ability to increase awareness at large, international exhibition venues in Europe and the United States. In spite of the project’s limited life span (and Hart may never have intended it to be an ongoing project in its original form), an interrogation of its intent suggests it combined humanitarianism with a profit-sharing model.²⁵ Furthermore, as Seán Beattie argues, her Irish project ‘produced significant results—all the more interesting because of her background and gender—but her work is overshadowed by the fact that her initiatives became subsumed into administrative, political and social reforms’, such as those developed by the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction (DATI) organised in 1900.²⁶

The SHI, unlike the DIF, was an umbrella association that, for the purpose of exhibitions and sales, brought together a number of smaller, locally based projects or groups. Promoted by Millicent Sutherland, it had the marketing advantage of having a well-known aristocrat as figurehead, although Sutherland, as well as lending her ‘brand’ to the products, was also very hands on.²⁷ The organisation’s first London exhibition, which was advertised as ‘the Sutherland sale’ even though it represented cottage industries from all of Scotland, was hosted by Hannah, Countess Rosebery in London and opened by Princess Louise, Marchioness of Lorne. Articles sent by crofters and cottagers, according to *The Times*, included homespun cloth from the Isles of Lewis and Harris, linens and embroideries from Ayrshire, wood carvings, Shetland shawls and ‘a number of violins from the village

of Gifford, in East Lothian, where this manufacture has been hereditary for several generations'.²⁸

Millicent Sutherland's promotion of Scottish tweed paralleled Alice Hart's support for the production of Irish-made crafts, although Sutherland, while she stayed at the forefront of the more eclectic SHI, remained predominantly focused on one product: Harris tweed.²⁹ Probably because of her status, she was able to translate this into fashion via one of London's leading shops, D.H. Evans, which enhanced the market value of the product (see [Figure 2.2](#)).³⁰

Gentlewoman, for example, in its 1897 coverage of the annual exhibition and sale wrote that Harris tweeds were 'the leading fabric for smart gowns'; they could be worn by women 'on the moors, by the sea, or on cycling'. The article went on to write that lengths of the fabric were purchased by 'nearly all the members of the aristocracy present' including the Prince of Wales, Princess Louise, the Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Aberdeen among others.³¹ Furthermore, the association was guaranteed detailed reporting in the *Inverness Courier*, the largest and most widely circulated newspaper in the Highlands.³²



[Figure 2.2](#) 'Autumn modes in Sutherland Tweeds at Messrs. D.H. Evans & Co., Oxford Street, W.', *Gentlewoman*, 21 August 1897

Millicent Sutherland's promotion of tweed attracted particular attention, as did her abilities as a public speaker. At the opening of the 1892 exhibition of Scottish craft she wore a heather wool dress fashioned from yarn dyed with crotal (a lichen growing in the Highlands) then spun and woven by local crafters.³³ In her speech for the event she addressed the poverty of the workers, the production of the goods, and the middlemen who profited from purchasing goods cheaply and selling them dearly.³⁴ Prior to the organisation's intervention, the weavers operated within a barter system whereby middlemen would trade 'necessaries' (*sic.*) for tweed: workers bartered 'their craftsmanship before it was executed for such necessities in even the poorest households as bacon, meal, tea, and sugar to grasping middle-men who overestimated the value of their own commodities' while, at the same time, they underestimated 'the worth of the everlastingly wearing tweeds and homespuns they secured in exchange'.³⁵ A paramount goal of the SHI was to eliminate middlemen by obtaining goods directly from the crafters and selling them under the auspices of the not-for-profit organisation and thus, like the DIF, returning funds to the makers. In another speech presented to the Edinburgh Women Workers' Union, Sutherland asserted that her colleagues in the SHI 'armed themselves with the methods of trade'; the association 'was not ashamed of being a trading concern, knowing that ... they worked for a poverty-stricken people'.³⁶

To achieve success both the SHI and the DIF encouraged the crafters to develop new designs and refine weaving techniques in order to produce a finer cloth more attractive to sophisticated urban consumers. Millicent Sutherland herself 'visited the chief centres of the industry, explained what the fashionable world wanted in colours, textures, and fabrics, promised help as old wheels and looms needed repairs, and set the undertaking upon as sound commercial basis'.³⁷ Alice Hart, as mentioned earlier, also visited crafters and 'educated' them about attracting buyers for their goods. This concern for marketing plus the encouragement of product adaptation in order to entice consumers is a strategy that continues to define humanitarian craft projects; it exists today in contemporary projects which seek to attract '[n]ewly emerging national and international markets'.³⁸ Maxine Berg, for example, in her analysis of Indian craft, writes that local craft-people 'seized opportunities to adapt designs and techniques ... to meet the tastes of Western markets'.³⁹

The HAIA formed, like the DIF, because of the energy and commitment of one woman concerned for the well-being of those less fortunate but expanded to include a committee and, like SHI, the patronage of aristocrats. Unlike the DIF and SHI, Eglantyne Jebb's concern was for education; the market was an occasional by-product. She originally established an association to foster 'cottage arts in and around her own village'

(Ellesmere, Shropshire near the Welsh border) to encourage 'thrift and industry, taste and talent among those she knew'.⁴⁰ These early efforts, beginning in 1880, focused upon teaching wood carving to boys and young men, generally ranging in age from ten to 'upwards of twenty years'.⁴¹ In an 1883 article, she described her early project: students paid 'a penny a week' if they had left school and a half penny if still attending; tools were lent 'at a rate of three for a penny per week' and became the property of the student 'once the payments had covered the cost'.⁴² Amateurs taught the classes, and small exhibitions were held to display the finished work.⁴³ Although the market was not her priority, which remained focused on the development of skilful design and making, she acknowledged that 'the work of advanced pupils sells at a good price'.⁴⁴ It was from these modest beginnings that Jebb's ambitions moved much beyond her own neighbourhood.

Jebb's status as minor gentry gave her access to her neighbours, Earl and Countess Brownlow, and their aristocratic circle.⁴⁵ This connection laid the foundation for the expansion of Jebb's small estate-based cottage crafts to become the much larger Home Arts and Industries Association with its own web of connections that encompassed much of Britain and Ireland, its emphasis predominantly on craft making, beneficial leisure and the display of objects in exhibitions. Art critic Mabel Cox summed up HAIA's approach in a 1900 article: 'to teach the minor arts to the working classes' and thus to spread 'a knowledge of artistic handiwork among the people'. 'Its object', continued Cox, 'is educational and not commercial, and it encourages its pupils to work chiefly for their own or friends' houses, and for local buildings and monuments'.⁴⁶ An article written earlier, however, acknowledged the possibility of this education providing the potential for paid work in industry: HAIA had 'three main aspects – the recreative in combination with the aesthetic, the educational in combination with the technical, and the industrial in combination with the social'.⁴⁷

This differed from the trajectories of the DFI and SHI. Both began and remained focused upon product and community – on communities of craft makers and the movement of their products from rural isolation to metropolitan markets with a percentage of profits obtained from sales returned to remote regions. Millicent Sutherland's promotion of tweed concentrated on one area of Scotland, the Highlands, and sought to transport the product from a remote area to the metropole. So too were profits distributed among the workers, but Sutherland did attract criticism because of the reputation of the Sutherlands as the land holders of the region.⁴⁸ That aside and undoubtedly because of the committee structure, the SHI outlived the Fund with its one-person coordinator. Although it encountered difficulties during the First World War, it persisted, concerned in 1916, for example, that by

closing their Edinburgh storefront, they ‘would deprive the workers of the Highlands one of the chief means of disposing of their goods’ during a time when the war made selling their tweed difficult.⁴⁹ By this time Millicent Sutherland was not actively involved but had shifted her focus to the war. She nursed at a hospital in France and worked with the Red Cross with a frontline ambulance.⁵⁰

The HAIA placed more emphasis upon morality, structured use of leisure time and education than did the DIF or SHI. As Eglantyne Jebb suggested in an 1885 article, ‘mischief grows in the soil of idleness’ but, she continued, ‘if pains were taken to make every child love industry’, to appreciate design and the making of objects, ‘human life and ability might be saved’.⁵¹ Furthermore, Jebb was convinced that the manual work of making craft objects might even remove the necessity of ‘our vast and expensive machinery of prisons and reformatories’.⁵² Jebb embraced a Rousseauian emphasis upon the potential of educating children (Hart and Sutherland focused upon adults) while apparently not accepting a lack of structure. She reflected upon ‘training them from their earliest years to make intelligent use of their hands and eyes’, which in turn would lead to ‘a new generation, happier, thriftier, and more capable than their fathers—a generation which shall have hope and not despair for their heritage’.⁵³

HAIA’s council, in addition to Earl and Countess Brownlow, included Beatrix, Countess of Pembroke, British architect Gilbert R. Redgrave, and English historian and author Walter Besant, noted for his writing about poverty in London’s East End.⁵⁴ The minutes of the first meeting held in London stated: ‘The revival of hand-work and of village industries was most necessary to the prosperity of the country ... the time was ripe for the movement which the Association hoped to inaugurate.’⁵⁵ HAIA’s goal was to spread the ‘knowledge and practice of good handicraft ... with the intent that people should learn the twofold delight of making and enjoying beautiful things’.⁵⁶

Unsurprisingly, their first exhibition was held in the London residence of Earl and Countess Brownlow, possibly attended only by those with invitations. The Princess of Wales visited and purchased a small carved table made by William Temple, ‘crippled and a great invalid’, who had been taught to carve and ‘derives not only amusement but profit from his work’.⁵⁷ The following year, at the suggestion of Countess Brownlow, the exhibition moved to a completely different venue located in London’s East End.⁵⁸ It opened with a speech by the countess and included exhibits from Scotland and Ireland as well as England. The exhibits from the metropolitan classes were, according to *The Queen*, *The Lady’s Newspaper*, ‘perfect revelation as to the existence of artistic talent amongst lads whose occupations are not of mechanical nature’ and the ‘Hon. Misses de Grey’ were highlighted for the contributions of their classes who were boys ‘mostly of the roughest class

and have only been taught three months'.⁵⁹ During the 1887 exhibition, a 'corner cupboard, by a lad aged seventeen' attracted much attention and sold 'immediately the exhibition opened', attesting to the possibility of the students selling their work.⁶⁰ In keeping with the humanitarian aspect of the association, the recently launched *Lady's Pictorial* commended the teachers for the 'advancing technical training' of the students and for teaching them 'useful and pleasant modes of earning a living'.⁶¹ To guarantee the quality of this 'technical training', the association established studios in London to assist potential teachers (usually middle-class women) so they could be 'sent forth to the villages to teach a people that has been allowed to forget the use of its fingers' (see [Figure 2.3](#)).⁶²

Although a moral imperative is in evidence, HAIA also represents the nineteenth-century 'revolution in compassion' or what Hannah Arendt called a 'passion for compassion';⁶³ this was particularly evident among a number of 'ladies of the higher classes' in Britain.⁶⁴ According to an 1886 description of HAIA in *The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper*, 'many ladies' beyond 'amusing themselves ... desire to turn their knowledge to some practical use'. One way to do this, suggested *Queen*, was to bring 'new interests into the lives of their poorer brethren', specifically to encourage practical developments of craft skills among the young and thus also provide 'recreations for winter evenings'.⁶⁵

Rapid growth in outreach was evident by 1887 when, according to a long report in *Queen*, HAIA had established 196 classes with over 2,000 students. Considering that it had formed only two years earlier, this was an impressive achievement, geographically and locally, evidenced by the designation of two women ('Mrs Coffey and Miss Bourke') as 'honorary secretaries of the Association for Ireland',⁶⁶ in recognition of the 'two dozen schools', which were, according to *The Saturday Review*, 'scattered all over the island' by 1887.⁶⁷ Scotland, too, offered classes by this time; contributions from classes in Ardrrossan, Stirling, Corstophine and Braemar appeared in the second exhibition of 'artistic work' held at St. Andrew's Parish Hall, Bethnal Green.⁶⁸ By 1890 exhibitions, too, were organised in venues outside London (see [Figure 2.4](#)).

Beginning in 1888, a large annual exhibition took place in the spring in London's Royal Albert Hall. These were more complex than the mandate of the association would indicate: they included objects from so-called developed industries, as well as 'a certain amount of foreign work' which, according to the Council, 'would increase the interest of the Exhibition'.⁶⁹ The DIF included displays in the early exhibitions, as did the Langdale Linen Industry and Della Robbia Potteries.⁷⁰ In 1906, in the twenty-second exhibition held at the Royal Albert Hall, the Disabled Soldiers and Sailors Society contributed 'useful articles of carpentry', the Potteries Cripples' Guild (under



Figure 2.3 'Illustrations of the Home Arts and Industries Association at 1 Langham Chambers, London', *Queen*, 13 November 1886



Figure 2.4 'The Exhibition of Home Arts and Industries at Birmingham',
Queen, 5 July 1890

the patronage of Millicent Sutherland) displayed ‘some of the most artistic metal-work in the exhibition’, and Emily Hobhouse’s Art Training School and Weaving School, South Africa, sent textiles for display.⁷¹ By 1912, ‘for the first time’, ‘isolated exhibitors’, those not attached to any class, could exhibit crafted objects.⁷²

Conclusion

This discussion of three organisations in Britain and Ireland demonstrates a long history of a relationship between humanitarianism and the making of handcrafted objects. Over time, organisations such as these developed methods of encouraging craft production for personal development and/or for supporting communities of craft makers in attempts to secure markets. To return to Hart for a moment, she stated clearly that one objective was to encourage an industry or industries that would go forward on their own.⁷³ Additionally, and although often referred to as a craft ‘revival’, Hart did not avoid a relationship with industry: ‘We employ, as far as possible, the workers we train, and we also work in connection with Belfast and other manufacturing firms for whom we train hands, they supplying them with the work.’⁷⁴ The Fund’s lifespan was approximately twenty years and results of its intervention in Donegal are difficult to trace, although an Irish scholar has recently suggested that projects such as Hart’s laid a foundation for later craft-based communities and production, particularly because the Fund’s interest was in enhancing and promoting already existing skills, and encouraging makers to consider markets.⁷⁵ Hart’s goals were similar to those of the SHI and both retained concerns for craft makers to produce objects that would attract buyers while, at the same time, promoting local culture. Without attempting to draw too many analogies between the DIF and SHI, working within the context of Victorian Britain, and present-day organisations facing the challenges of a rapidly expanding global economy, I suggest that there are some similarities, specifically given their emphasis on the market economy. Hart specifically saw craft production as ‘embedded in the economic, social and cultural environment’ and her concern, like Sutherland’s, was for people struggling to survive on subsistence activities.⁷⁶ In this, both projects also demonstrated, an ‘ethics of care’, which stressed, as Maria Småberg suggests in her research on Swedish humanitarianism and Armenian refugees, ‘the importance of meeting local needs in close relationships with sensitivity to the context and culture’.⁷⁷

Sutherland and Hart both stressed the importance of the market, adapting production to attract consumers, and used exhibitions as advertising forums; Sutherland added fashion as an incentive to purchase. Like Hart,

Sutherland turned her attentions to a remote rural area, the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, encouraged production, particularly of tweed, that would attract urban consumers, and returned profits to crafters. Unlike Hart, the product was intimately related to Sutherland's image as a prominent socialite evident in a full-page sketch of the Duchess published in the *Gentlewoman* (1898) in which she was depicted examining a length of cloth woven by a Sutherland crofter.⁷⁸ The class difference between the women was established by a smaller sketch inserted above the head of each – Sutherland under Dunrobin Castle (the Sutherland's Highland home) and the crofter under a small thatched cottage – thus retaining a quality of paternalism while simultaneously encouraging craftmaking and reinforcing aspects of Barnett's 'imperialist humanitarianism'.

HAIA, on the other hand, did not focus extensively on the market but upon enhancing leisure time, on providing artisanal training and encouragement to the poor or disadvantaged to make, use and possibly sell handcrafted objects. Unlike the DIF and SHI, it sought and obtained influence far beyond its origins in Ellesmere or in London: affiliated branches developed all over Britain, some in Ireland, even as far removed as Trinidad.⁷⁹ As early as 1888, HAIA announced: 'The work is steadily advancing, new classes are continually being formed, and some are starting up in America and the colonies.' For example, in 1885 there were forty classes affiliated with HAIA; by 1888 there were three hundred classes with over four thousand participants.⁸⁰

These three different organisations shared one important characteristic: an understanding of and willingness to explore the effectiveness of exhibition, display and advertising. This moved them beyond bazaars and fancy fairs and expanded 'humanitarian handicrafts' to promote makers and attract consumers.⁸¹ Thus, the DIF, SHI and the Home Arts and Industries Association, along with the numerous projects in nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland that brought humanitarianism and handicraft together, might be investigated through a lens that considers the nineteenth-century projects more like later organisations that promoted craft for the benefit of makers (Ten Thousand Villages, for example, founded in 1946, 'averted traditional middlemen, ensuring higher prices for artisans themselves').⁸² The DIF and SHI both worked with makers who had specific skills (for example, spinning and weaving), encouraged enhancement of those skills in order to attract consumers, and sought markets via exhibitions and storefronts. Millicent Sutherland, for example, insisted that greater care was to be taken with the dying of wool, weaving was to be improved (to this end the committee offered competent weavers new looms) and the woven cloth was to be marketed through a non-profit organisation.⁸³ HAIA promoted education and taught skills that enabled workers to expand their knowledge and potentially work towards making practical use of those skills. Although not as

market focused as the DIF and SHI, the association held annual exhibitions that enabled crafters to exhibit their products and potentially sell them. These ventures were not without criticism.⁸⁴ For instance, an anonymous critic in an 1885 issue of *Queen* wrote: ‘Nothing could be more depressing than to read the record of the industries set up and fostered by English capital and philanthropy’ and, insisted the author, ‘as long as these energetic ladies will push the go-cart themselves the cotters will probably consent to go in it’.⁸⁵ On the other hand, an art critic reviewing the 1895 HAIA exhibition wrote that ‘to look upon the movement it [HAIA] represents as merely a philanthropic scheme’ is too simplistic as well as ‘short-sighted and foolish’.⁸⁶ This insight could be applied to all three projects discussed here. Despite differences in structure and composition, and accepting that aspects of the organisations can be critiqued, all three operated within the concept of ‘organised compassion’ and displayed a humanitarian concern for those with whom they worked and whose products they valued.

Notes

- 1 Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 50.
- 2 ‘Show of Home Manufactures’, *Inverness Courier* (4 October 1849), p. 3.
- 3 Nellie ó Cléirigh, *Carrickmacross Lace: Irish Embroidered Net Lace* (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe, 1990), pp. 10–11.
- 4 Frank Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980) remains one of the most frequently cited works on the topic. See also Sarah Richardson, ‘Women, Philanthropy, and Imperialism in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain’, in Helen Gilbert and Chris Tiffin (eds), *Burden or Benefit? Imperial Benevolence and its Legacies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 90–102.
- 5 Eglantyne Jebb, ‘The Home Arts and Industries Association’, *Magazine of Art*, VIII (1885), p. 294.
- 6 Alice Hart, ‘The Cottage Industries of Ireland, with an Account of the Work of the Donegal Industrial Fund’. A paper read before the Society of Arts (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1887). British Library 8277 D 15, p. 4.
- 7 ‘Industrial Exhibition at Golspie’, *Inverness Courier* (31 August 1886), p. 7. The Sutherland Industrial Exhibition expanded in 1888 under the auspices of Millicent Sutherland and a ‘committee of ladies’ to become the Highland Home Industries. ‘The Sutherland Exhibition’, *Inverness Courier* (18 September 1888), p. 5.
- 8 ‘Scottish Home Industries Association’, *Queen* (19 October 1889), p. 532, and ‘Jottings from the Provinces: Edinburgh’, *Queen* (23 November 1889), p. 703.
- 9 Jeffrey Brison, *Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Canada: American Philanthropy and the Arts and Letters in Canada* (Montréal, Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006).

- 10 Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, p. 7.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Hart, 'Cottage Industries of Ireland', p. 2.
- 13 Neo-humanitarianism extended from the Second World War until the end of the Cold War. Barnett's third category, 'liberal humanitarianism', follows the Cold War through to the present day. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, p. 7.
- 14 While not as frequently discussed as the mid-century Irish famine, potato famine also devastated the Highlands beginning in 1846. See, for example, James Hunter, *The Making of the Crofting Community* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1997). It was in the aftermath of the initial disaster that Harriet Sutherland established the Industrial Society.
- 15 Mary A. Littrell and Marsha A. Dickson, *Artisans and Fair Trade: Crafting Development* (Sterling, Vermont: Kumarian Press, 2010), p. 8.
- 16 Hart was the daughter of Alexander Rowland, a London merchant, distributor of perfumes and soaps and regular advertiser in journals such as *Queen*, *Lady's Pictorial* and *Lady*, all of which would report extensively upon the DIF.
- 17 Alice Hart, 'Cottage Industries: And What They Can Do for Ireland', a report given at the Club House, Bedford Park (30 May 1885). British Library 8275 C 24; 'The Cottage Industries of Ireland, with an Account of the Work of the Donegal Industrial Fund'. A paper read before the Society of Arts (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1887). British Library 8277 D 15.
- 18 Hart, 'Cottage Industries of Ireland', p. 1. Friezes are coarse plain weave woolen fabrics.
- 19 Hart, 'Cottage Industries', pp. 13–14.
- 20 Hart, 'Cottage Industries of Ireland', p. 9.
- 21 Hart, 'Cottage Industries', p. 15. Profit sharing is not without criticism. See, for example, Christophe Estay, C. Lakshman and Jacques-Olivier Pasme, 'Profit-sharing in the Nineteenth Century: History of a Controversial Remuneration System,' *Social Responsibility Journal*, 7:1 (2011), 25–41. Although this is an analysis of profit sharing among industrial workers and not among cottage crafters, some characteristics, such as paternalism, are evident in both situations.
- 22 Hart, 'Cottage Industries', p. 15.
- 23 Aimée Carpenter (b. 1859) and Una Ashworth Taylor (1857–1922). Hart made one brief mention of a small committee but did not name its members. Mary Jeune, 'Irish Industrial Art', *Woman's World*, II (1889), p. 161.
- 24 *Irish Textile Journal* (15 April 1886), p. 38; *Magazine of Art* (December 1889), p. xi; 'The Home Arts and Industries Association Annual Exhibition', *Queen* (23 June 1888), p. 804; Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, Catalogues for the exhibitions.
- 25 Hart's husband died in 1898. It seems that Alice Hart's commitment to the DIF waned after his death. However, in 1915, during the First World War, her humanitarian work extended to providing a food shelter in war-ravaged Poland 'with a capacity for 500 children'. The 'Polish Deputation from Great Britain' was headed by acclaimed Russian stage actor Lydia Yavorska (Princess Bariatinsky) and Hart. 'Food Shelter in Warsaw', *The Scotsman* (19 April

- 1915), p. 8. Hart also wrote about and gave talks on the hazards associated with smoke in the atmosphere and its effect on health as it 'deprives town-dwellers' of clean air. See, for example, *Hull Daily Mail* (19 October 1922), p. 6; *Hull Daily Mail* (3 November 1922), p. 8.
- 26 Seán Beattie, 'Female Cultural Philanthropy: Alice Hart and the Donegal Industrial Fund, 1883–1900', in Victoria Crossman and Peter Gay (eds), *Landlords, Philanthropy and the Relief of Poverty, 1838–1948* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), p. 174.
- 27 For a discussion of Scottish Home Industries and the Irish Industrial Association, along with a more extensive discussion of the Donegal Industrial Fund, see Janice Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries 1880–1914: Marketing Craft, Making Fashion* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007).
- 28 'Scottish Home Industries', *The Times*, 2 July 1889, p. 10.
- 29 Like Alice Hart, Millicent Sutherland's interests were diverse, ranging from the promotion of Highland tweed to the establishment of her Potteries' Cripples' Guild on the Sutherland estate in Trentham, support for the National Lifeboat Institution, Veterinary Relief and the International Congress of Women.
- 30 Janice Helland, 'Highland Home Industries and the Fashion for Tweed', *Journal of the Scottish Society for Art History*, 9 (2004), 27–34.
- 31 *Gentlewoman* (31 July 1897), p. 144.
- 32 The *Inverness Courier* published long, detailed coverage of the annual exhibitions, including names of the makers, held near or on the grounds of the Sutherland's Highland home, Dunrobin Castle.
- 33 'Highland Home Industries and Art Exhibition', *Inverness Courier* (23 September 1892), p. 5.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 M. F. Billington, 'The Scottish Home Industries Association', *Queen* (24 July 1897), p. 170. See also, Millicent Sutherland, 'The Scottish Home Industries Stall at the Earl's Court Exhibition', *Queen* (25 September 1897), p. 594.
- 36 Millicent Sutherland as quoted in *The Scotsman* (22 March 1899), p. 11.
- 37 Billington, 'The Scottish Home Industries Association', p. 170; See also, Millicent Sutherland's report on the industry published in *Scottish Home Industries Association* (London and Dingwall: Ross-shire Publishing, 1895), pp. 110–111.
- 38 Maxine Berg, 'Skill, Craft and Histories of Industrialisation in Europe and Asia', *Transactions of the RHS*, 24 (2014), 145.
- 39 *Ibid.* Crafters do not always want to address such concerns. See, for example, Susan Falls and Jessica Smith, 'Branding Authenticity: Cambodian Ikat in Transnational Artisan Partnerships (TAPs)', *Journal of Design History*, 24: 3 (2011), 255–271.
- 40 'The Home Industries Agency', *Queen* (14 July 1888), p. 37. Jebb's more well-known daughter, also Eglantyne Jebb (1876–1928), expanded her scope much beyond her mother's to establish the global humanitarian project Save the Children at the end of the Second World War. See, for example, Linda Mahood, *Feminism and Voluntary Action: Eglantyne Jebb and Save the Children, 1876–1928* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 1.

- 41 E. L. Jebb, 'Home-Industry for Irish Children', *Good Words* (December 1883), p. 474.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 *Ibid.*, p. 475.
- 45 Irish-born Eglantyne Jebb, daughter of a barrister, married her distant cousin, Arthur Trevor Jebb, a Shropshire barrister and land owner in April 1871. She became familiar with and interested in cottage industries while still living in Killiney, Ireland prior to her marriage. Francesca M. Wilson, *Rebel Daughter of a Country House* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1976), p. 30.
- 46 Mabel Cox, 'The Home Arts and Industries Association', *Artist* (January 1900), p. 145.
- 47 'The Home Arts and Industries Association', *Queen* (12 September 1885), p. 277.
- 48 In 1880 the Duke of Sutherland was one of wealthiest peers in the realm, controlling over a million acres of land, with an annual income of over £140,000. Gilbert T. Bell, *A Prospect of Sutherland* (Edinburgh: Birlinn Ltd, 1995), p. 48. For further discussion of the criticisms surrounding the Sutherlands as landholders, see Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries*, pp. 148–153.
- 49 'Highland Home Industries', *The Scotsman* (28 January 1916), p. 4.
- 50 See, for example, 'Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland's Hospital at Dunkirk', *The Scotsman* (24 July 1915), p. 11; 'Women and the War', *Gentlewoman* (22 August 2014), p. 12. See also a short obituary, 'Millicent, Duchess of Sutherland', *Illustrated London News* (27 August 1955), p. 22.
- 51 E. L. Jebb, 'Recreative Learning and Voluntary Teaching', *Contemporary Review*, 48 (October 1885), 527.
- 52 *Ibid.*
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 472.
- 54 Jebb acknowledged Besant's commitment to 'the great voluntary movement of the present day' and cited him at length in her 1885 article. Jebb, 'Recreative Learning', p. 526.
- 55 Home Arts and Industries Association. Minutes of the Meetings of the Council. Minutes of the First Meeting. 20 November 1884.
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 'Home Arts and Industries Association', *Queen* (11 July 1885), p. 36.
- 58 Minutes of the Council of the Home Arts and Industries Association, 17 December 1885.
- 59 'Home Arts and Industries Association', *Queen* (26 June 1886), p. 703. Mabel de Grey (1855–1942) and her sister Odeyne (1861–1947) both participated in the activities of HAIA. They were sisters of Baron Walsingham. For an analysis of the early exhibitions, see Janice Helland, "'Good Work and Clever Design": Early Exhibitions of the Home Arts and Industries Association', *Journal of Modern Craft*, 5:3 (2012), 275–294.
- 60 'Home Arts and Industries Exhibition', *Queen* (2 April 1887), p. 415.

- 61 *Lady's Pictorial*, 3 July 1886, p. 590. Teachers were voluntary and undertook initial training of their own at Langham Chambers, London. After training they taught students in their own homes, 'or in rooms provided for the purpose'. Brownlow, 'The Home Arts and Industries Association', *The Times* (21 November 1890), p. 3.
- 62 'Home Arts and Industries Association', *Lady*, 9 July 1885, p. 607.
- 63 Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, p. 49 and Arendt, as quoted in Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, p. 50. Arendt, wrote Barnett, 'observed that by the early nineteenth-century, rapidly modernizing Europe, began experiencing a "passion for compassion"'.
- 64 'Home Arts and Industries', *Queen* (13 November 1886), p. 548.
- 65 *Ibid.*
- 66 Minutes of the Council of the Home Arts and Industries Association, 11 January 1887.
- 67 'Home Arts and Industries', *The Saturday Review* (18 June 1887), p. 877. By 1898, eleven Irish classes exhibited objects. 'Home Arts and Industries Association', *London Daily News* (19 May 1895), p. 5.
- 68 'Home Arts and Industries', *Queen* (26 June 1886), p. 703.
- 69 Home Arts and Industries Association. Minutes of the Council. 24 March 1885.
- 70 'The Home Arts and Industries Association Annual Exhibition', *Queen* (23 June 1888), p. 804; 'The Home Arts and Industries Association Exhibition (Second Notice)', *Queen* (30 June 1888), p. 839. The 1888 exhibition included work by 'Mexican Indians'. See also, 'Home Arts and Industries Exhibition', *Queen* (25 May 1901), p. 857. Although the DIF contributed to at least one HAIA exhibition; it was never a regular contributor. SHI did not contribute exhibits to HAIA.
- 71 *Morning Post* (17 May 1906), p. 8; 'Home Arts and Industries Exhibition', *Queen* (26 May 1906), p. 903. The contribution from South Africa had been made in the Art Training School at Langlaagte and Philippolis Weaving School.
- 72 For example, Amy Moore, 'postman's daughter (white embroidery)', Arthur Denman, 'a disabled carman (inlay and cabinet work)', George Shergold, 'an old shepherd (toys)'. 'Home Arts and Industries. Forthcoming Exhibition in London', *The Times* (3 May 1912), p. 4.
- 73 See, for example, Alice Hart, as quoted in Mary Jeune, 'Irish Industrial Art', *Woman's World*, II (1889), p. 161.
- 74 Alice Hart, 'Art and Technical Training of the Donegal Industrial Fund', in *Transactions of the National Association for the Advancement of Art and its Application to Industry, Edinburgh, 1889* (London, 1890), p. 437.
- 75 Seán Beattie, 'Cottage Industries: Arts and Crafts in Donegal 1880–1920', *Donegal Annual*, 60 (2008), pp. 59–81.
- 76 Kimberly M. Grimes and B. Lynne Milgram, *Artisans and Cooperatives: Developing Alternative Trade for the Global Economy* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2000), p. 4.

- 77 Maria Småberg, 'Material Help and Self Help: Materiality and Cosmopolitan Care in the Swedish Humanitarian Work Among Armenian Refugees in Thessaloniki, 1923–1947', in Andreas Schmoller (ed.), *Middle Eastern Christians and Europe: Historical Legacies and Present Challenges*. Orientalia–Patristica–Oecumenica 13. (Wien: Lit, 2018), p. 23.
- 78 'The Duchess of Sutherland among the Cottagers of the Western Highlands', *Gentlewoman* (27 August 1898), p. 281.
- 79 'Trinidad Home Industries', *The Times* (25 October 1901), p. 4.
- 80 S. H., 'Art and Industry Classes', *Queen* (29 September 1888), p. 374.
- 81 The move also blurred the boundaries between what is traditionally referred to as philanthropy and what is considered humanitarian. Rebecca Gill and Cornelius Muller explore this 'blurring' in 'The Limits of Agency: Emily Hobhouse's International Activism and the Politics of Suffering', *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, 19:1 (2018), 16–35.
- 82 Sarah Lyon and Mark Moberg (eds), *Fair Trade and Social Justice: Global Ethnographies* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), p. 5.
- 83 *Scottish Home Industries Association*, p. 112.
- 84 The advantages and the critiques of such projects continue to be discussed. See, for example, Lyon and Moberg, *Fair Trade and Social Justice*; Helen Gilbert and Chris Tiffin (eds), *Burden or Benefit? Imperial Benevolence and its Legacies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).
- 85 'At the Inventories', *Queen* (20 June 1885), p. 655. Alice Hart was singled out in the article although the critic obviously felt strongly about all such ventures.
- 86 'The Home Art and Industries Association, at the Albert Hall', *The Studio* (August 1895), p. 167.

Thinking Anglo-American industrial relief through Armenian needlework in the late 1890s: humanitarian marketing ethics, agency and identity

Stéphanie Prévost

Humanitarian textile objects as orphaned archives: the case of ‘a small piece of Armenian embroidery’

According to the most recent estimates, the three waves of the 1894–1896 Hamidian massacres, which were mostly carried out by Kurdish irregular soldiers, often with some complicity of local Ottoman Turkish authorities and probably with Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s avowal, caused approximately 200,000–300,000 Armenian deaths.¹ They left many reliant on some form of relief for survival including ‘industrial relief’, that is, employment in industries that were identified as ‘native’ (such as embroidery) by local relief actors, American missionaries and itinerant British relief agents, and that were revived by them as a way to help those in need. The Hamidian massacres had long been overshadowed by the 1915 Armenian Genocide, before a historiographical shift in the 2010s called for further addressing their specificities and the social upheavals they created or enhanced.² This chapter situates itself in this new historiographical moment: it seeks to critically address a neglected field, that of Anglo-American industrial relief as a form of aid to Ottoman Armenians immediately following the massacres.³ In so doing, it builds on the thriving conversation between history and humanitarianism which has been developing, especially since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and which investigates stages, varieties and ambivalences of humanitarianism(s) rather than sharp transitions, as well as exploring a variety of humanitarian media (photographs, objects, etc.).⁴ To narrate this relatively unknown story of aid and more largely explore how textile can operate as a site of humanitarian encounter, this contribution revolves around an unusual, extremely delicate piece of humanitarian handicrafts. It was produced in the immediate aftermath of the Hamidian massacres in one of the cottage industries run by the American Board of Commissioners for

Foreign Missions (ABCFM), missionaries in the Ottoman Empire, and was sent to Britain as an example of what could be produced by survivors and sold to help themselves.

This ‘small piece of Armenian embroidery’ (Figure 3.1) – this is how the archive catalogue describes it – was found inadvertently during the perusal of the Friends Armenian Mission records held at the London Library of the Society of Friends.⁵ It is housed, folded in two, in the envelope (Figure 3.2) that once took it to a certain Miss J. M. Baker in Lancashire in the late 1890s (from the remainder of the stamp date). Once past the surprise of seeing the unique artefact physically, conceptually and organisationally connected to the archival collection it belongs to, the needlework instantly stands out, despite – or also perhaps because of – its small size (in total 13.5 × 13.5 cm).

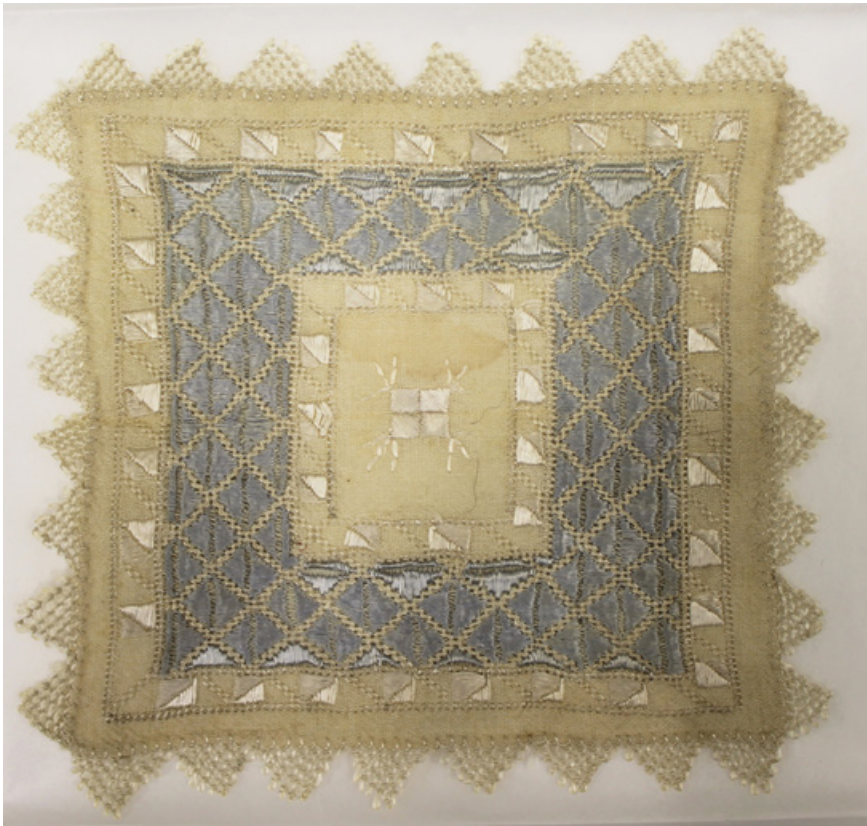


Figure 3.1 ‘A small piece of Armenian embroidery’, Friends Armenian Mission Papers, Library of Friends

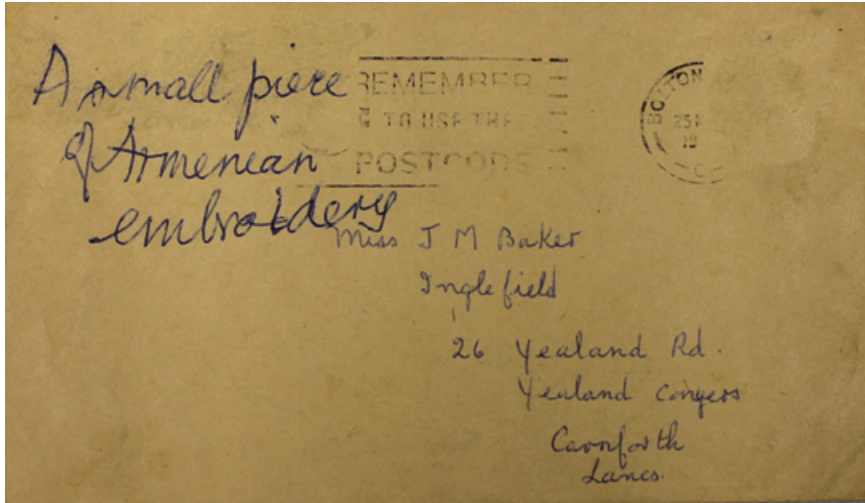


Figure 3.2 Envelope, Friends Armenian Mission Papers, Library of the Society of Friends

While post-1915 handicrafts pieces produced by Armenian survivors as some form of industrial relief have occasionally survived in institutional collections, humanitarian textile objects dating back to the immediate aftermath of the Hamidian massacres are much rarer.⁶ This chapter values this needlework sample as the perfect token from which to appraise the ambivalences of Anglo-American industrial relief and its marketing strategies in Britain, for at least two reasons. First, embroidery, together with rug weaving, is a craft central to the Armenian identity: it traditionally adorned clothing, table material and was essential in bridal trousseaus. It has been practised for centuries; it has been preserved with the help of local Armenian communities, diasporic members and foreign relief despite mass violence and it now participates in the Armenian collective memory. Second, the 1894–1898 mass relief movement for Ottoman Armenians in Britain had long been overlooked, essentially because Armenian relief organisations in Britain had apparently left no archives.⁷ The needlework under study therefore forms an essential starting point from which to write this history. It is thus both of interest in itself as well as its value as a symbol of Armenian industrial relief production in the context of Anglo-American aid.

Apart from its belonging to – but looking very different from – a small range of known humanitarian embroidery artefacts of that period and aside from its near perfect condition, the piece bewilders as an archival object. Its very existence amid a body of textual archives reminds us of French

philosopher Paul Ricoeur's pronouncement that 'the document sleeping in the archives is not just silent, it is an orphan' – an orphan that requires a 'vigilant epistemology' so that archives as traces of a past become as much answer and question.⁸ A minute observation of both the piece and its container yields some factual information, such as their nature as humanitarian handicrafts (because of their location in the Friends Armenian Relief Mission records). But they raise many more questions than the surrounding archives can answer: the Friends Armenian Relief Mission records contain no element documenting the embroidery and the envelope contains nothing else but the preservation wrapping sheet. For these reasons, the piece should be construed epistemologically as a material text that needs decoding. The envelope also needs attention as a signifier. Not only does it materialise the portability of the piece, but it also gives visibility to intermediaries between producers of humanitarian handicrafts and recipients (for instance, buyers). In so doing, the envelope asks us to rethink the humanitarian relationship between producers and buyers as not necessarily direct. Here, the envelope symbolically opens a window onto a complex layering of intermediary humanitarian agents and sites of humanitarian marketing/transit.

Asking what the small piece of Armenian embroidery can tell us about the triangular relationship between (1) relief agents, (2) recipients of relief/cottage industry workers and (3) buyers of humanitarian handicrafts, this chapter regards the piece as a site of multi-layered and multivalent connectedness from which to reflect on ambivalent British humanitarian marketing ethics, the British imagination of Ottoman Armenian survivors, and the impact on Armenian agency and identity. Positing that the piece embodies the transformational (more than purely transactional) force of charity characteristic of industrial relief, this chapter specifically contends that it points to vexed processes of transculturation, which remain traditionally associated with post-1915 foreign aid to Ottoman Armenians, but which were induced by the British relief actors' humanitarian handicrafts' marketing choices and discourses already in the late 1890s. First, the piece will be set in the context of industrial relief and will be viewed as a site of transnational female connectedness and empowerment. Second, the piece will be analysed with regard to the embroidery market in view, as one reflecting broader processes of hybridisation, which in this case was mainly driven by the need to find a balance between meeting market demands and applying fair retail ethics. This will induce discussions of authenticity and identity. Finally, the piece will be read alongside advertising discourses to highlight the embattled connectedness and maternal imperialism behind industrial relief to Ottoman Armenians at the time and to raise the question of embroideresses' agency.

Armenian humanitarian needlework: a site of female connectedness and empowerment

The Hamidian massacres occurred in between the autumn of 1894 and the winter of 1896–1897, in the six provinces (*vilayets*) of ‘Ottoman Armenia’ (namely Van, Erzurum, Bitlis, Harput, Sivas and Diyarbekir) and in ‘Asiatic Turkey’ (especially the vilayets of Trabzon and Aleppo), as well as in Constantinople. Aside from extremely high Armenian casualties, the displacements and mass destruction of certain villages and towns often left survivors without means or work. Those affected most harshly were widows, orphans and waifs, who frequently became dependent on community or foreign relief to make do. With Ottoman authorities long denying the existence of disruption, Ottoman relief was scarce during that period.⁹ Foreign relief thus became essential but required the approval of Sultan Abdul Hamid II because foreign interference in domestic affairs was barred under the 1856 Paris and 1878 Berlin Treaties. By late May 1895, he authorised the British ambassador at Constantinople, Sir Philip Currie, to revive the International Committee at Constantinople (ICC), which was repurposed to distribute foreign aid to Armenian victims. Donations started flocking in, especially from the United States, where \$300,000 to \$837,000 was collected, but also in Britain, where anywhere between £150,000 and £250,000 was raised between May 1895 and late 1898, when the ICC officially stopped distributing funds.¹⁰ These are huge amounts in today’s relative value.¹¹

Soon after, the major fundraising structure in Britain and quasi-state agency, the Armenian Relief Fund (ARF), was opened in June 1895 to raise relief money in Britain and throughout her empire; other collecting structures developed the idea of investing such money in industries that would provide employment to destitute women first and then also to men. The idea was to ‘aid without pauperising’, to give a chance to survivors who had lost their employment to aid themselves through the reconstruction of local trades and industries thanks to foreign relief money and voluntary associations. This was quite a bold move. Indeed, although industrial relief was more or less commonly accepted in both Britain and the United States as a way to deal with poverty in a domestic or humanitarian context, its translation into the post-Hamidian massacres Ottoman Empire was controversial on several grounds. It had to meet with conditions determined by the Sultan; the idea of relief being transformative over the long term was long frowned upon by the main fundraising structures in both Britain (the ARF) and the United States (the National Armenian Relief Committee, NARC). When industrial relief was first proposed by the American medical missionary at Van, Dr Grace Kimball, in July 1895, the ARF/NARC failed her and she had to find support elsewhere.

Kimball launched the Women's Armenian Relief Fund (WARF, the collecting structure for the Van Industrial Bureau) with her associate in London, Miss Madeleine Cole. This allowed them to mobilise British and American Evangelical circles beyond the ARF and the NARC. Banking on the success of its rug weaving workshop, the WARF invited donations (especially of thread and fabric) and money was used to buy raw materials, buy equipment, and (re)build industrial schools and shops. It was thought that in this way, relief money would last longer should relief fatigue flare up and needs still persist. The WARF was a successful pioneer in industrial relief, raising over £35,000 by July 1896 (£4.8 million in today's wealth) mainly in Britain, and also collecting coarse cotton, woollen fabrics and thread for transformation.¹²

Thanks to targeted campaigning in certain women's periodicals (for instance, *Queen*, *the Lady's Newspaper*), the Liberal (often Armenophile) press, and religious/missionary organs, the WARF built up enthusiastic relays in Britain and local WARF branches sprouted up in Glasgow, Norfolk, Bath, Bristol and Manchester to name but a few. The Van Industrial Bureau's partnership with the British Friends Armenian Mission also proved decisive. Present in Constantinople through a medical mission since 1881, British Quakers developed their own fundraising structure, the Friends Armenian Relief Committee (FARC), in late February 1896. The FARC commissioned biblical scholar James Rendel Harris and his wife, Helen B. Harris, as their agents to distribute Quaker funds and it was through them that Van Industrial Bureau news and calls for donations were regularly issued in Britain.¹³

The envelope containing the small piece of embroidery gives materiality to another similar industrial relief enterprise *in loco* but involving the same Evangelical circles in Britain. As the Van Industrial Bureau took off, interest in Britain grew in 'native industries', including handicrafts such as needle-lace, embroidery and rug weaving. This was a boon for Mrs Shephard, an American missionary based in Ayntab (now Gaziantep) in the Aleppo vilayet. In launching the Ayntab Cottage Industries in late 1895, Shephard sought to spur on one of the most distinguished regional productions of Armenian embroidery. This required ensuring overseas support. In the United States, she could rely on her sister. Conversely, Helen B. Harris's visit to her at Ayntab in late 1896 proved invaluable for diffusion in Britain. It was probably through her in one way or another that the piece, which bears distinctive features of Ayntab embroidery (notably the drawn-thread work, the double-sided motifs and the geometrical arrangements), eventually made it to Miss J. M. Baker, a Free Church of Scotland missionary running an industrial school in India, who was visiting at Carnforth, north Lancashire. The Boston stamp on the

envelope foregrounds the Manchester area as a hub of Nonconformist Armenian relief, to which Helen B. Harris was connected, and materialises the importance of personal connections in worldwide rhizome-like relief networks of 'the Protestant International'.

Practical Christianity in the shape of textile industrial relief was primarily a female business. In targeting women, the WARF gave them the opportunity to aid Ottoman Armenians in their own names, and thus exert their own agency in this humanitarian campaign. This formed parallel activism to a diplomatic settlement of the Armenian question through the European Concert, which was barred to them on the ground of their sex. 'Dozens of poor women, whose ordinary home work was reeling cotton for the looms of the men, came to our hospital, begging for work. The demand for their cotton weaves was paralyzed for the time, so what could they do?', Mrs Shephard explained after opening the Ayntab Cottage Industries.¹⁴ She was approached as *Khanum*, a lady of rank, to provide work – a practical solution against the backdrop of male-dominated diplomatic exchanges.

Building on Ayntab women's *savoir-faire*, Shephard started an embroidery industry, alongside weaving, with whatever material could be gathered from the community or through donations.¹⁵ This squared with a conception of relief that should not be demoralising but rather should help towards restoring self-dignity. By extension, it was to help rebuild the social fabric of the Ottoman Armenian community. As the main mode of female artistic expression and one that every girl was to master to prepare her bride's trousseau, embroidery by Ottoman Armenian women was deemed to fit these prospects perfectly.¹⁶ Such an enterprise could not but find positive echoes in late nineteenth-century women's British circles at a time when needlework was often reinvented as a site of female self-expression, emancipation and agency.¹⁷ Though out of the two hundred Ayntab Cottage Industries employees, a few were men, what was mostly at stake was a gendered process of rehabilitation, in which donors, relief workers, victims and workers all exerted agency. Reference to men's work in such industries is thus absent from humanitarian narratives.

Armenian embroidery even became a token of transnational women's campaigning for further rights by front-staging sisterly bonds and advocating female agency through emancipating self-employment. In June 1898 London, the presentation of Armenian embroidery at a joint meeting of two strongholds of female power for the furtherance of all women's rights – the recently established Grosvenor Crescent Club (1897) and its parent structure, the Women's Institute (1897) – clearly exemplified this.¹⁸ Armenian humanitarian needlework thus came to embody women's desire for a fairer governance which required women's social, economic and especially political representation, including in international decision-making arenas.

Negotiating the embroidery market: humanitarian trading and retail ethics, or the ambivalences of setting fashion

Sustained dreams of female empowerment and transformative relief through humanitarian handicrafts nonetheless depended on marketing successes. This was not so straightforward. At the third annual national conference of the British societies working for the relief of Armenian distress, held at Cardiff in September 1898, one of its organisers, Percy William Bunting, even exclaimed: ‘a great deal of the work sent from Armenia for sale in this country was of great beauty, but many of the articles were not quite what was wanted here’.¹⁹ Such a pronouncement by the Liberal and Armenophile editor of *The Contemporary Review*, whose sister Sara Sheldon Amos had just started an embroidery industry in Cyprus after opening a silk industry there for Armenian refugees (late 1896), necessarily begs the question of whether there was a market for Armenian embroidery in Britain at all. A coextensive question stems from the piece now held by the Library of the Society of Friends: was the latter intended as a sample of Armenian women’s production for the British market and could it meet demand there?

Until the Hamidian massacres, Armenia largely remained a distant land which met with little interest outside Orientalist, missionary or political circles in Britain. And yet, that Armenian embroidery was known in Britain at the time was not in doubt. This was at least the case among those who cultivated an interest in what had become known as ‘art embroidery’, following the establishment of the 1872 Royal School of Needlework and the Arts and Crafts movement that recognised needlework and embroidery as art.²⁰

It is in that context that the still famous London Liberty & Co. store opened in 1875 as a prime locus for both retail and exhibition of elegant Oriental products (especially from Japan and China). It became a hub for arts and crafts artists and clientele. Embroidery formed one of Liberty & Co.’s early departments (especially antique embroidery). It was boosted in 1877 when the store became the sole agency of a philanthropic enterprise, aimed at selling modern Turkish embroidery on behalf of the Turkish Compassionate Fund, which sought to relieve the destitution occasioned by the then ongoing Russo-Turkish war.²¹ Such fundraising proved controversial in a Britain that was violently torn apart between Conservative Turcophiles and Gladstonian Russophiles. Yet, the English-run Fund’s embroidery workshop launched by two outstanding female art patrons, Lady Charlotte Schreiber and ‘queen of the poor’ Angela Burdett-Coutts, proved rather sustainable (despite the Fund’s winding up in 1880).²² So did the Liberty partnership. It is most likely the latter that spurred an early interest in Armenian embroidery in 1870s Britain: the Turkish Compassionate Fund then and later produced pieces that were distinctly Armenian.²³

By the mid-1880s, Armenian embroidery had outreached Liberty & Co. It made its entry in *The Young Ladies' Journal Complete Guide to the Work-Table* alongside several other 'ethnic designs' that middle-class households regarded as fashionable.²⁴

With this in mind, could such a piece as that found in the Library of the Society of Friends archives sell at Liberty & Co., or elsewhere in Britain? The piece is particularly elaborate, with a central fine linen square (11.5 × 11.5 cm), probably home hand-woven *bez* (a sort of local coarse cotton), which is embroidered using a fusion of counted drawn work and satin stitches, in both white and pearly grey shiny threads. The linen square subdivides into embedded spaces, which themselves are the theatre of varied, geometrical embroidered patterns. The centrepiece displays a centre square made up of four embroidered squares, adorned with four inward-pointing arrows. The linen piece is also edged all round with triangular needle-lace loops, recalling the Massis pattern – Massis being the name Armenians give to Mount Ararat, which is not only a national symbol but also the alleged resting place of Noah's Ark for many (*Genesis* 8:4). The piece is double-sided and looks almost perfectly alike on reverse, an Ayntab work trait.²⁵ Descriptions of Turkish Compassionate Fund embroideries, as well as of Armenian stitches in *The Young Ladies' Journal Complete Guide to the Work-Table*, would have rendered the layout familiar to any aficionada... not necessarily as Armenian but rather as Turkish or Oriental.

Less conventional might have been the format, although small square tumbler doilies of a similar size sometimes adorned fashionable dinner tables. Less mundane than it seems, the piece is a chalice cover.²⁶ Given the controversy around the use of chalice covers within the Anglican Church (except for ritualist High Church Anglicans, who accepted their use) and the fact they were disused among dissenting churches, it is very unlikely that the piece served as a prototype aimed at an expanding British ecclesiastical embroidery market.²⁷ Besides, commissioned church embroidery was to be 'art embroidery' in the sense of the 1882 *Dictionary of Needlework* definition, that is, 'descriptions of needlework that spring from the application of knowledge of design and colouring, with skill in fitting and executing'.²⁸ In the face of re-evaluation of coloured embroidery in Britain, white-work, that is white-embroidery-on-white-material, was at the risk of falling out of fashion.²⁹ Not all Armenian embroidery was affected, as each area had its own patterns, designs, colours and identity. Traditional Ayntab embroidery (mostly white-work) was particularly vulnerable, in contrast to the other forms of local production, especially Urfa, Marash or Constantinople embroidery, which all resorted to colour – and, for the latter, golden threads.³⁰ The British ecclesiastical embroidery market seemed as closed off to Ayntab humanitarian embroidery as could be.

The piece found in the Library of the Society of Friends' collection thus seems at odds with British market demands in more ways than one – hence Percy Bunting's pronouncement. Another early supporter of the Van Industrial Bureau, *Queen* magazine, deployed special energy to teach its readers appreciation of all Armenian embroidery in an article entitled 'embroideries with a history'. Yet again, preference was given to coloured and golden embroideries, with Ayntab embroidery being presented in but a few lines. *Queen* valued it for its fineness which compared favourably to the 'wondrous stitchery of the antique punto tirato or point coupé'.³¹ By ranking Ayntab embroidery alongside other antique needlework, *Queen*, 'the ladies' newspaper', appealed to discerning buyers among its usual readership, which went towards strengthening a developing connoisseurs' small niche-market for exceptional pieces, but little more. This placed Liberty & Co. in a commanding position – one that worried Helen B. Harris – when it started selling humanitarian Armenian embroidery in late 1896, as it had done with the Turkish Compassionate Fund.

Following her visit to Mrs Shephard's Ayntab Cottage Industries in November 1896, Helen B. Harris breached the ethics of humanitarian handicrafts retail with the Friends Executive Committee in London, pleading for fair trade and female financial empowerment through fair retribution. It was public knowledge that in an 1884 exhibition catalogue, Liberty & Co. had advertised the 'numbered samplers of beautiful [modern Turkish embroidery] designs' customers could order from. Meant as unique embroidered trimmings and decorative work, they were created on demand in Constantinople. Liberty & Co. boasted that 'as no duplicate stock [was] kept all designs [were] special, and [could not] become vulgarised', which made them sought-after art pieces sold according to the prices of the market.³² Liberty had already warned in 1881 that prices were on the rise. Design historian Linda Cluckie highlights Liberty's profiteering strategy in the 1884 exhibition, which he used 'as a vehicle to promote benevolence, whilst profiting from selling the more popular Japanese embroideries'.³³ Liberty & Co. operated as much as a collector's space as a store, with its owner making the most of a smart display. Helen B. Harris, a Radical Quaker minister who had gone out to Armenia just after relinquishing the Quaker ministry in England because it barred female singing, clearly doubted the sincerity of Liberty's benevolence in offering to sell Armenian humanitarian embroidery and wrote so to the Friends' Executive Committee: 'I want very much that some English friends of the Armenians should open a dépôt for its sale [embroidery] so that a mere business Firm [Liberty and Co.] should not absorb all the profit from this fruit of industry, every penny of which one could wish the women to have.'³⁴

To Helen, the risks of Liberty & Co. imposing their own terms (with reference to profit margins and design) on Armenian industries offset prospects

of a reliable, resilient thriving retail agency with national and international outreach – Liberty & Co. then had branches in London, Birmingham and Paris. The collaboration with Liberty thus seems to have been an ephemeral one – lasting not more than a few months. Indeed, when the new umbrella structure federating British and certain international Armenophiles, the International Association of the Friends of Armenia, was formed in December 1896, it took over as a business and retail agency for Armenian embroidery and other products from missionary Ottoman industrial centres. Launched with the aims of offering ‘continuous and systematic relief as shall make all who can self-supporting and provide for the thousands of helpless orphans’, the Friends of Armenia (its new name from 1897, FA) was bent on redistributing as much collected money as possible to those employed in orphanages and industries. Benefits were also spread across production centres to aid as many survivors as possible.³⁵

Armenian or Oriental? Mediated authenticity and the orientalising of commodities

Taking over from Liberty & Co. was a daunting challenge for the FA, who had to quickly position themselves in the embroidery markets if they wanted to achieve long-term goals. Historian Michelle Tusan has convincingly argued that Ann Mary Burgess, Quaker missionary at the Constantinople Friends’ House and organiser of the Constantinople embroidery industry, had rapidly managed to turn herself into a successful business woman and that by the early 1900s, she supported over seven hundred women workers and had a turnover of between £8,000 and £10,000 a year.³⁶ In no way though was Burgess’ success immediate. More than the FA’s early support, her success owes to her adaptability and understanding of market demands, as Edward A. Annett’s biography (1938) makes clear: ‘Here Miss Burgess discovered a talent which had had small scope hitherto. Her artistic sense made it possible for her to devise lines of work which found a ready sale. Embroidery of a fine quality was taught to the women, the patterns being taken from old Turkish, Persian and Armenian needlework.’³⁷ After an early attempt at producing various qualities of Armenian dolls’ beds (*salandjaks*) to target different markets and include all scheme participants, whatever their qualifications in needlework, Burgess eventually switched to high-end embroidery which seemed to offer more stable, long-term marketing prospects.³⁸ More generally, by mid-1898, as the International Committee at Constantinople (ICC) was to wind up, out of a dozen production sites run by American missionaries and jointly funded by the FA and its American counterpart (the NARC, now renamed the National Armenia and India

Relief Association), only two (Van and Marsovan) were virtually self-sustained – the others largely depended on foreign channels for disposal.³⁹

Quite naturally, the FA had opened a depot on their London premises early in 1897 for that purpose. They collaborated with German and American missionaries *in loco*, as well as with other local British relief organisations for Armenians to ensure the best distribution of handicrafts (with depots in Scotland and Ireland). The FA aimed at reaching more (diversified) buyers and issued leaflets about Urfa embroidery, for instance. They nonetheless found out that they could not altogether bypass department stores if the sale of work by destitute women was to be aided efficiently. Indeed, as Australian historian and curator Maria Quirk has shown, department stores gave visibility to art embroidery, but even professional women had limited access to these male-run sale venues.⁴⁰ The main alternative, commercial and charity bazaars, best known as ‘ladies’ sales’ – a model on which the FA depot was elaborated – was often dismissed as amateurish, with *The Manchester Guardian* even labelling bazaar handiwork as ugly, silly and trivial.⁴¹ This market division impacted relief embroidery marketing strategies.⁴² The FA chose to keep in touch with both worlds. The provincial branches organised bazaar-like annual touring exhibitions and seem to have selected the finest pieces for sale at department stores (as Christmas or wedding gifts), where references to their origins as humanitarian handicrafts were rarely made. By contrast, the FA London depot was ready to exhibit products of a lower quality, even pieces produced outside of the industries brought in by women who hoped to make a little money on and off when needed – pending the approval of the London executive committee. Production by the neediest was thus only foregrounded in the less commercially driven contexts (such as bazaars and the FA depot).

The relative lack of quality ‘sifting’ on the part of the FA at their London depot was to be outweighed by a display that offered some fiction of authenticity. In an attempt to mimic the Oriental bazaars which fascinated so many in Britain, the FA depot brought together ‘a good collection of Armenian embroideries’ in the midst of ‘many things really uncommon and effective’, ranging from other ‘embroideries on silk and satin’ (possibly Turkish or Persian), ‘quaint specimens of brass and copper work, camel bells and other trifles, as well as the more expensive wares – rugs and carpets to wit’, as well as Turkish delight.⁴³ In a way, the depot offered (female) shoppers an affordable alternative to the recreated Orient of their neighbour Liberty & Co.⁴⁴ It, however, resorted to a similar ‘orientalizing of commodities’, which aimed to recreate an Oriental atmosphere rather than highlight specific local traditions of Armenian embroidery.⁴⁵

The FA depot embodied the attempt at finding a balance between popular imaginations of the East and Armenia, market trends and a firm conviction

in retail ethics, which resulted in Armenian Embroidery Cottage Industries production being very much market-driven. To satisfy both potential customers' taste for vibrant colours and their imagination of Oriental textiles as richly coloured, the FA sent Miss Marshall of Glasgow out to Urfa some time in 1899 to 'improv[e] the Industries' there by introducing new colours for the native *bez* and by proposing various combinations of colours for stitches – which proved popular, to their delight.⁴⁶ Adaptations had to be subtle enough to maintain credibility in provenance, as the piece at the Library of the Society of Friends firmly suggests. Satin stitches were borrowed from Urfa embroidery, though grey would have been an unusual colour for the latter. Besides, the Hardanger arrangement (Norwegian), which is often readily associated with Ayntab embroidery nowadays and is still practised in Syria and Armenia, was popular in Britain and the United States at the time.⁴⁷ To American missionaries and British volunteers who went to help, it must have seemed an acceptable introduction authenticity-wise, all the more so as it had another asset, that it was considered easy to work. New combinations of Armenian stitches were thus brought to traditional textile artefacts (especially handkerchiefs) to spur on new fashion, and items were specifically produced for the British and American markets (such as collars, cuffs, jabots using Ayntab drawn-thread work, embroidery and lace).⁴⁸

Marketing Armenian humanitarian embroidery then, whether high or lower-end, eventually involved cultivating a sense of exotic curiosity in customers, which, either at the high-street stores like Liberty & Co. or at the bazaar-like FA depot, offered women 'possibilities for the deployment of desires within imperial capitalism'.⁴⁹ But what about the Armenian needleworkers' agency?

Threads of maternal imperialism and discord?

FA steering committee members had originally thought that the FA would run for five years, a period by which it was hoped that all Armenian industries would be self-supportive. Despite diversification and changes brought to output, the FA reported lowering sales by 1899, which the closures of the ICC and of the main fundraising British structure, the ARF (both in late 1898), had only worsened. While the sales decline was blamed on the local Ottoman markets, FA members could not overlook that even sympathetic press titles in Britain still begged for further 'improvements' to Armenian embroidery so that it would be (better) suited to English taste.⁵⁰ Beside mediated authenticity, the FA had even launched a collaboration with girls' needlework schools in Britain, hoping that schools or embroidery agencies

would help to cultivate long-term interest and would form ideal outlets to reach a more diversified clientele – this was in vain, however.⁵¹ To defy relief fatigue, the FA thus adapted their strategies again.

For money to continue flowing in, the FA decided to emphasise and embed a pattern of maternalism traditional to Victorian upper and middle-class philanthropy in their revamped organ, *The Friend of Armenia*. The FA thus continuously struggled with the paradox of making some Armenian women self-supportive while presenting them as primarily needy and possibly also inferior. The ambivalent discourse was now cloaked in the mantle of benevolent British humanitarian imperialism, which exudes from *The Friend of Armenia* photos, such as the one presented here. The low-angle long-shot group portrait of ‘Miss Burgess’s Workers’ (Figure 3.3) – with the towering missionary employer and her stooped, labouring ‘flock’ seated on the floor in front of what looks trophy-embroidery – sharply contrasts with Miss Burgess’s private photos and much more amiable, egalitarian framing of employees in the different industries (Figure 3.4).

And yet, this constructed hierarchical relation perhaps best translates in what the FA’s discourse omits. Indeed, while they pursued their activities well beyond 1902 (until 1951), their bulletins nearly silenced the long-term collaboration with the other existing England-based Armenian-run charity, the Thoumaians’ Armenian Orphan Fund, which also raised money in England to support Armenian orphans employed in missionaries’ Armenian handicrafts industries, at least until the Genocide.⁵² Overlooking such close collaboration allowed the FA to foreground their British upper-middle-class patrons – most of whom were well-known figures in other charitable/humanitarian causes (in particular, the National Vigilance Association for the suppression of the traffic in women and children) – to the detriment of Armenian agents (who remain anonymous). Portraying Armenians in need of aid served their fundraising strategy, potentially activating a sense of moral British superiority in donors.

Retrieving the voice of Armenian survivors employed in such cottage industries is extremely difficult. Direct testimonies tend to be lacking due to the repeated episodes of violence and displacement. It means that the history of Armenian industrial relief tends to be written from the donors’ and humanitarian brokers’ viewpoint, which often results in overlooking the recipients’ agency. Nazan Maksudyan has wonderfully demonstrated how imperial humanitarianism was rampant in Anglo-American/German but also Ottoman post-Hamidian-massacres orphanages, where evangelising could use proxies (including industrial schools) to convert Armenian children, not necessarily so much to a new religion (as there existed small Armenian Evangelical communities), but to a new culture.⁵³ Many FA members and close associates made no secret of their grander ambitions: nothing



MISS BURGESS' WOMEN AT WORK.—CONSTANTINOPLE.

loss has been felt by the helpless and suffering ones whom she ever befriended in their hour of need. Hers was a loving and large-hearted activity for others, without distinction of race or creed.

She first went to Constantinople as a missionary to the Jews in that city. After her marriage to Mr. Niven, she continued her interest in the Mission, but wherever need arose, there her hand was stretched out to aid. During a cholera epidemic she rendered such great help to the plague-stricken Moslems, that she was blessed from the pulpit of a neighbouring mosque.

Then came the black days of the Armenian Massacre in Constantinople, and the voice which had blessed, now cursed the hands of mercy, which were being reached out to save the dying Armenians. Regardless of all personal danger, Mrs. Niven visited the ruined villages near her home on the Golden Horn, giving immediate help to the most desperate cases, from funds and clothing supplied by the Duke of Westminster's Committee, and by friends in other lands whose hearts had been stirred by her graphic accounts of the sad scenes she had witnessed. Feeling that more than temporary help was needed for the Armenian widows left destitute, with children to support, Mrs. Niven organized a large and successful industrial work, and the embroideries executed under her superintendence were characterized by her good taste and beauty of design. She further took an interest in the sad lot of each individual, and I remember when accompanying her to the homes of the people, she was everywhere received as an angel of mercy and blessing, the poor trembling women kissing her hands in their heartfelt gratitude.

This good work did not remain unnoticed, and the Patriarch of the Armenian Church wrote Mrs. Niven a personal letter, expressing his appreciation of her

noble efforts, and his belief that she was thereby raising the moral as well as the social condition of the women who came under her influence.

Another beneficent object that lay near Mrs. Niven's heart was the "Société des Amies de la Jeune Fille," of which she was the organizer and active president in Constantinople, and which has done untold good in helping young girls, who have been placed in positions of danger in the Oriental capital. Mrs. Niven was singularly gifted, speaking English, French, German, and Turkish with equal fluency. She also wrote in a charming and graphic style, and by her letters interested numerous friends in the cause of the suffering Armenians. In all her work she was zealous and enthusiastic, with a soul overflowing with love to God and to man. Her truest memorial is written in the hearts of the widows and orphans, whom she visited and saved in the days of their affliction.

ANNIE C. MARSHALL.



HARPOOT REGION.

The following interesting report was omitted from our last number for want of space.

DIARBÉKIR,

May, 1900.

"MY DEAR FRIENDS,

"I am now making my annual visit to Diarbekir to inspect the orphan work here.

"They all go to school, and the older boys half a day to school and half to their different trades, and I think are much happier this year than last, for they were all then longing to go to school. They commenced going

Figure 3.3 'Miss Burgess's Workers', *The Friend of Armenia* (new series), no. 3 (September 1900), London, p. 5



Figure 3.4 Ann Mary Burgess, 'Women Looking out from the Loom to be Photographed', Ann Mary Burgess Papers, British Library of the Society of Friends

less than awakening 'the old creative and industrial power of the people ... at the educating kiss of peace' to foster British informal imperialism and reconcile Ottoman society.⁵⁴ Such prospects relied on a British imagination of Armenians as forebearers of civilisation, whose civilising capacity would be revived by Anglo-American influence, notably through industrial relief. But did that necessarily mean nullifying Armenians' agency?

Missionary mediatic discourses go for binaries of those who save and those who need to be saved, and certainly tend to erase Armenians' agency. And yet, for some decades already, Armenian embroidery work in the Ottoman Empire showed some versatility and adaptability, so that Armenian female needleworkers with some prior experience would have been used to mixing new elements into traditional patterns and motifs. Cottage industries thus often produced hybridised artefacts which bore the creativity of needleworkers, as one of the very early bulletins of the FA acknowledged.⁵⁵ Accepting further versatility should thus also be discussed in terms of a survival strategy that nonetheless allowed for the long-term preservation of a traditional craft and that, in so doing, helped to perpetuate a strong sense of identity and belonging. With such considerations in mind, one should look

anew at the piece under study primarily as a site of encounter and translation. Of course, needleworkers integrated imposed adaptations (Norwegian Hardanger white-work in place of Ayntab and grey shades, as both were popular in Britain). But simultaneously, they played with such constraints to find new ways of expressing traditional identity. For instance, here, the needleworker still stitched her Armenianness in the centrepiece through the abstract rendering of the Armenian cross (*Khachkar*), which made it both very universal and very identifiable. The piece thus brings together the complex dynamics of philanthropy at play in Anglo-Armenian humanitarian embroidery for and by Armenians. It perfectly exemplifies the three-pronged social bond French sociologist Marcel Mauss identified in gift-giving, one which involved aid-giving (in the form of money or else), then its acceptance (industrial relief employment against pay) and its reciprocation (textile artefacts, for instance), a necessary, empowering move to ‘demonstrate one’s own freedom, liberality, honour, status and wealth’.⁵⁶

However, how far the versatility strategy should be pushed required careful consideration for fear of jeopardising the sustainability of the whole industry. This was crudely revealed by terse, if not racialised, denunciations of Armenians by Irish needleworkers in the 1910s, when the latter feared undue competition. Indeed, an Irishman working in an Ayntab relief industry had switched to producing cheap ‘pseudo-Irish lace’ to be floated on the world market (except in Britain), as it sold better than low-end Armenian needlework and because it bypassed competition from production centres of high-end ‘Oriental’ humanitarian embroideries (in Bulgaria and in the Ottoman Empire mainly).⁵⁷ This ultimate episode fully reveals the complex equipoise behind the unity between philanthropy and business, but also tensions between various relief industries (here with the Irish industry) within the Greater British world.

Conclusion: from a particle to an affective history of humanitarian handicrafts?

This contribution attempted to reconstruct and critically address Anglo-American industrial relief for Ottoman Armenians in the immediate context of the 1894–1896 Hamidian massacres by moving beyond the all-female-empowerment narrative and the dichotomous coloniser/colonised debate. This could be done by a minute decoding of an orphaned humanitarian textile archive, the small piece of Armenian embroidery found in the Library of the Society of Friends collection. The drawn technique and the overlap of threads can act as a metaphor for the multivalent, sometimes ambivalent connectedness at stake in Anglo-American embroidery industrial relief for

Armenians. Indeed, the piece simultaneously reveals how industrial relief propped up humanitarian self-help, transnational female agency through work, humanitarian retail ethics, mediated authenticity, maternal imperialism, as well as Armenian agency in stretching the sphere of British influence and British dreams of global peace-building. Humanitarian Armenian embroidery was all that at the same time and the Ayntab piece ties all these threads together for us to see.

Beyond the complex connectivity materialised by the piece, what this contribution did was to place intermediaries in the limelight by addressing the ambivalences of humanitarian marketing discourse. Those at the origins of industrial relief for Armenians in Britain tapped into a repertory of sentiments (such as compassion) and discourses, whose humanitarian imperialism was meted out according to their context (public vs. private) and who deftly played on the Orientalist imagination of Ottoman Armenia(ns) in Britain at the time. The contribution has insisted on the fluidity of these positionings and of the social processes behind industrial relief, which the piece of Armenian embroidery discussed here comes to symbolise. Furthermore, the study of the piece disclosed attempts at rationalising humanitarianism in industrial relief, as when the FA strove to unite business and philanthropy ethically and sustainably by trying to find a balance that would be acceptable both to customers and the Armenian community. Such rationalisation had imperialistic underpinnings, including when British brokers of industrial relief were ready to make space for Ottoman Armenian needleworkers as co-agents and co-developers of British influence and values in the longer term, thereby facilitating the fostering of Anglo-American industrial relief in subsequent episodes of violence and need (1904, 1909, post-1915) and longer-term transformations of Armenian embroidery.

While some of these ethical concerns still irrigate discussions of humanitarianism today, the ultimate significance of the small piece of Armenian embroidery lies perhaps elsewhere – that as a piece of humanitarian handicrafts belonging to a community that has undergone and survived extreme violence, it is itself a survivor that archiving has preserved, albeit as an orphan. Paraphrasing the title of a 2017 exhibition (*Masnikapatum*) by Armenian artist Narek Van Ashughatoryan, who also curated the 2019 ‘Rescued Armenian Embroidery’ exhibition at the National Gallery of Armenia, this piece thus forms but one particle from which to approach a vaster, affective entangled pre-genocide history of Armenian humanitarian handicrafts and Armenian memory, one that still largely remains to be written. It forms but one particle in the rich and complex history of humanitarian textile.

Notes

- 1 A preliminary version of this chapter originated in a joint paper ('An Attempt at Restoring the Fabric of Ottoman Armenian Society Through Humanitarian Handicrafts') with Joan Laycock at the *Humanitarian Handicrafts* conference held in Huddersfield on 28 June 2019. I am grateful for her insights, and to organisers and participants for comments and questions. I am also indebted to the Library of the Society of Friends in London and the British Library for allowing reproductions and for their help (Bill Emery from the British Library, in particular). The Library of the Society of Friends in Swarthmore generously digitised material about Burgess for me. Finally, Dickram Koumjian, Boris Adjemian, Mélanie Keledjian, Siroon Keledjian, Vahé Tachjian, Adrineh Zinali and Anaid Donabédian are to be thanked for contributing to a better understanding of the piece under study here.
Selim Deringil, "'The Armenian Question Is Finally Closed': Mass Conversions of Armenians in Anatolia during the Hamidian Massacres of 1895–1897", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 51:2 (2009), 344–371.
- 2 Boris. Adjemian & Mikaël. Nichanian (eds), *Etudes Arméniennes Contemporaines*, 10 (2018), 'The Massacres of the Hamidian Period (I): Global Narratives and Local Approaches' special issue.
- 3 Michelle Tusan, 'The Business of Relief Work: A Victorian Quaker in Constantinople and her Circle', *Victorian Studies*, 51:4 (2009), 633–662.
- 4 Matthew Hilton, Emily Baughan, Eleanor Davey, Bronwen Everill, Kevin O'Sullivan and Tehila Sasson, 'History and Humanitarianism: A Conversation', *Past & Present*, 241:1 (2018), 1–38.
- 5 Friends Armenian Mission Papers, Library of the Society of Friends, London, TEMP MSS 997/2/10. © Britain Yearly Meeting.
- 6 Institutional collections throughout the world preserve richly embroidered church-related pieces (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) and more rarely lay pieces. Repeated episodes of mass violence and dislocation have impacted preservation, as the 2019 *Rescued Armenian Embroidery* exhibition at the National Gallery of Armenia recalled. Some early twentieth-century humanitarian doilies are preserved by the Armenian Museum of America (Watertown). As memory carriers, many more pieces – those that have been rescued – probably remain as family heirlooms. See Dickran Kouymjian, 'Textiles arméniens: une riche palette', in Dominique Sérénia-Allier, Raymond Kévorkian, David Vinson and Dickran Kouymjian (eds), *Trames d'Arménie: tapis et broderies sur les chemins de l'exil, 1900–1940* (Arles: Musée Arlaten, 2007), p. 33; 'Բարի՛ նկար... Փրկելալ Չեռագործք Հայոց', *The huytjn*, 8 November 2019, <https://thearmenians.am/hy/blog/bari-ekaqrkeal-dzeragorcq-hayoc-narek-van-ashughatoyan>; 'Textiles', *Armenian Museum of America* [website], www.armenianmuseum.org/textiles (accessed 28 March 2024).
- 7 Stéphanie Prévost, 'Humanitarian Accountability: Anglo-American Relief during the Hamidian Massacres (1894–1898)', in Jo Laycock & Francesca Piana

- (eds), *Aid to Armenia: Humanitarianism and Intervention from the 1890s to the present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), pp. 17–33.
- 8 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2005), p. 169.
 - 9 Jelle Verheij, ‘Diyarbekir and the Armenian Crisis of 1895’, in Joost Jongerden and Jelle Verheij (eds), *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbekir, 1870–1915* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), p. 108.
 - 10 Amounts are very difficult to ascertain. Indeed, alongside the main relief funds (NARC/ARF), many others existed but did not necessarily keep detailed records. Ottoman authorities also tried to collect information and provide statistics, which may be inflated. For American relief, see: Merle Curti, *American Philanthropy Abroad* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 125 and *The Independent* (23 July 1896). For British sources: see Stéphanie Prévost, ‘Humanitarian Accountability’, p. 19.
 - 11 The relative value of \$300,000–\$837,000 from 1895 converts to a range of \$11,000,000–\$31,000,000 in today’s wealth, while £150,000–£250,000 from 1895 converts to £20,000,000–£34,000,000 today.
 - 12 ‘Bits of Feminine Gossip’, *Omaha Daily Bee*, 25 July 1896, p. 11.
 - 13 ‘Armenian Relief’, 25 March 1896, FARC Papers, Library of the Society of Friends, London, MS Box T2/1.
 - 14 F. A. Shepard, ‘Industrial and Relief Work in Turkey’, *Life and Light for Women*, 41:7 (July 1911), 305.
 - 15 Alice Shepard Riggs, *Shepard of Aintab* (New York: Interchurch Press, 1920), p. 34.
 - 16 *Armenian Embroidery: Echoes from the Past* (Beirut: Armenian Relief Cross of Lebanon, 1999), p. xlvii.
 - 17 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), pp. 6–7.
 - 18 ‘Our Employment Bureau’, *Hearth & Home*, 16 June 1898, p. 217.
 - 19 ‘Armenian Conference at Cardiff: The Encouragement of Village Industries’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 26 September 1898, p. 10.
 - 20 Elizabeth Stanehow-Hidemark, ‘Textile Design & Furnishings, c. 1780–1914’, in David T. Jenkins (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 876.
 - 21 See the ornamental 1877 ‘Turkish Compassionate Fund’ poster, Records of Liberty and Co. Ltd of Regent Street, Westminster City Archives, London, Acc. 2847/3.
 - 22 Jordanna Bailkin, *The Culture of Property: The Crisis of Liberalism in Modern Britain* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2004), p. 129.
 - 23 S. A. Brock Putnam, ‘Embroideries of the Turkish Compassionate Fund’, *The Decorator and Furnisher* 25:6 (1895), 221–222.
 - 24 *The Young Ladies’ Journal Complete Guide to the Work-Table* (London: Harrison, 1884), p. 111.
 - 25 Alice Odian Kasparian, *Armenian Needlelace Embroidery: A Preservation of Some of History’s Oldest Needlework* (Maclean: EPM Publication, 1983), pp. 42 and 80–81.

- 26 I am very grateful to Dikram Koumjian and Berdj Achdjian for highlighting the function of the piece.
- 27 Colette M. Crossman, 'Art as Lived Religion: Edward Burne-Jones as Painter, Priest, pilgrim, and Monk' (PhD thesis, University of Maryland, 2007), p. 157; Maria Quirk, 'Stitching Professionalism: Female-Run Embroidery Agencies and the Provision of Artistic Work for Women, 1870–1900', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 21:2 (2016), 184–204.
- 28 Sarah F. Caulfeild and Blanche C. Seward, *Dictionary of Needlework* (London: L. Upcott Gill, 1882), pp. 15–16, in Quirk, 'Stitching Professionalism', p. 194.
- 29 Cariclee Zacaroff, 'The Turkish Compassionate Fund', in Mary K. O. Eagle (ed.), *The Congress of Women: Held in the Woman's Building, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, U. S. A., 1893* (Chicago, IL: Monarch Book Company, 1894), pp. 618–622.
- 30 *Armenian Embroidery (Echoes)*, pp. xx–xxiii.
- 31 'Embroideries with a History', *The Queen*, 16 September 1899, p. 468.
- 32 'Modern Turkish Embroidery work', *Catalogue of a valuable collection of ancient & modern Eastern Art and other embroideries on View at East India House, On Saturday November 15, 1884* (London: Liberty & Co., 1884), p. 13.
- 33 Linda Cluckie, 'Embroidery, Business Enterprise and Philanthropic Ventures in Nineteenth-Century Britain' (PhD thesis, Sheffield Hallam University, 2006), p. 200.
- 34 'Armenian Relief Circular Letter #7', 24 April 1896, FARC Papers, MS Box T2/1.
- 35 Edward A. Annett, *Fifty Years Among the Armenians: A Brief Record of the Work of Ann Mary Burgess* (London: Stanley L. Hunt, 1938), p. 25.
- 36 Tusan, 'The Business of Relief Work', p. 643.
- 37 Annett, *Fifty Years Among the Armenians*, p. 26.
- 38 Jane Hay, 'Help to the Armenians', *The Free Church of Scotland Monthly*, 1 March 1897, p. 70.
- 39 *The Friends of Armenia, Report from June 1897 to June 1898*, London, p. 5 (British Library Collections).
- 40 Quirk, 'Stitching Professionalism', p. 187.
- 41 Quoted in Quirk, 'Stitching Professionalism', p. 191.
- 42 Cf. Janice Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries: Marketing Craft, Making Fashion* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), especially pp. 10–16; and her contribution to this volume.
- 43 'A Woman's Chit-Chat', *The Cheltenham Looker-On*, 18 December 1897, p. 1203.
- 44 John Sweetman, *The Oriental Obsession Islamic Inspiration in British and American Art and Architecture 1500–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 188.
- 45 Krista Lysack, 'Goblin Markets: Victorian Women Shoppers at Liberty's Oriental Bazaar', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 27:2 (2005), 160.
- 46 *Friends of Armenia*, November 1899 report, p. 11.
- 47 See the English version of Thérèse de Dillmont's guidebook, *D.M.C. Hardanger Embroideries* (Mulhouse: Dollfus-Mieg & Cie, c. 1900). Of note, German

missionaries adopted different strategies at Van to tamper as little with traditional patterns as possible, as well as to favourably position the Van humanitarian embroidery in the market.

- 48 Susan Lind-Sinanian, 'Armenia', in Jill Condra (ed.), *Encyclopedia of National Dress: Traditional Clothing around the World* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2013), pp. 36–38.
- 49 Lysack, 'Goblin Markets', p. 160.
- 50 'Armenian Sale of Work', *Manchester Evening News*, 24 October 1899, p. 5.
- 51 'From Belfast', *Hearth & Home*, 20 July 1898, p. 460.
- 52 *The Friends of Armenia, Report from June 1897 to June 1898*, p. 5; Thoumaian Family Papers, Essex Archives, Chelmsford, DU/1777/5 file.
- 53 Nazan Maksudyan, '"Being Saved to Serve": Armenian Orphans of 1894–96 and Interested Relief in Missionary Orphanages', *Turcica*, 42 (2010), 59–60.
- 54 William M. Ramsay, 'What to Do in the East', *The Contemporary Review*, 72 (August 1897), p. 235.
- 55 *The Friends of Armenia, Report from June 1897 to June 1898*, London, p. 5.
- 56 Jonathan O'Brien, *Supplier Relationship Management: Unlocking the Hidden Value in Your Supply Base* (New York: Kogan Page, 2014), p. 287.
- 57 'Pseudo-Irish Lace', *The Irish Independent*, 31 July 1913, p. 4.

Emily Hobhouse and the Koppies Lace School, 1908–1926

Helen Dampier and Rebecca Gill

Introduction

The Anglo-Boer War Museum (ABWM) in Bloemfontein, South Africa, opened in 1931 on the site of the 1913 memorial to the Boer women and children who died in the concentration camps of the 1899–1902 South African War.¹ It tells the history of the war as an ennobling defeat and moral victory for the Boer people and to this day sustains an Afrikaner identity of a benighted but chosen people, many years after the end of political apartheid. Alongside military dioramas and life-sized models of Boers on commando, one display case features a rather unexpected ‘object of war’: a needlework lace collar of intertwined leaf patterns mounted on a background of bronze-coloured satin.² It is given the attribution of ‘Koppies Lace’ though its exact provenance is uncertain. Behind the scenes in the museum, in a store preserving sculptures and other artefacts of Afrikaner heritage not now on public display, further items of lace have been preserved. Here a miniature set of drawers contains samples of lace (see [Figure 4.3](#) for an example) that Hobhouse, a British pacifist and suffragist and Afrikaner heroine, had sent from Europe to her friends and collaborators in the Boer Home Industries (BHI).³ Sent from Russia, Belgium and Italy, and embellished with gold and iridescent thread, these are so whispery and fine that they create the impression of a translucent mist. The exquisite precision of their design and execution was intended for inspiration and instruction for the young women who had been appointed to the BHI lace school which Hobhouse and her associates had founded in the aftermath of the South African War. In a small village 220 km from Bloemfontein, another display case, this time in an old people’s home on the site of the former lace school at Koppies, displays a further set of lace produced by the women of the school. Coarser in appearance and of a simpler design, these attest to the disparity between Hobhouse’s aesthetic ambitions and the items of lace which came to be known as ‘Koppies Lace’, as shown in the example in [Figure 4.2](#).



Figure 4.1 Lace collar attributed to Hobhouse's Koppies Lace scheme

Very little is written about Hobhouse's lace school or the wider BHI scheme of which it was part. The lace on display in the museum is accompanied by a perfunctory exhibition label; of the hands that made this lace there is barely a mention; of the patrons in Britain, Europe and South Africa who sponsored its production there is no word. In this chapter, we focus on the lace as object as well as symbol, concentrating on its making and its use and value as it passed between the women of Boer families, female consumers in an international charity market, and buyers, collectors and curators in South Africa at a time of emerging Afrikaner nationalism. This focus on materiality and practice allows us to examine the making of international welfare schemes and nationalist politics in post-war South Africa, in terms not of 'applied ethics' but of the multivalent forces that move people to act, the relationship between objects and identity, and what happens as a result; what Raymond Geuss would call meaningful acts grounded in lived experience.⁴ In an analogy which feels apt for this volume, Geuss contends that

politics is more like the exercise of craft or art, than like traditional conceptions of what happens when a theory is applied. It requires the deployment of skills and forms of judgement that cannot easily be imparted in simple speech, that cannot be reliably codified or routinised, and that do not come automatically with the mastery of certain theories. A skill is an ability to act in a flexible way that is responsive to features of the given environment with the result that action or inaction is enhanced or facilitated, or the environment is transformed in ways that are positively valued.⁵

Considered in these terms, the making and use of lace in a period of 'reconstruction' and political uncertainty, to follow Frank Trentmann, appear as 'integral parts of relationships and subjectivities rather than as instruments of meaning appropriated by a prior subject'.⁶ This rescues Koppies lace from the condescension of 'mere' textiles that Liisa Malkki describes as the fate of humanitarian handicraft, revealing the ubiquity of women's politicking in South Africa at this time, gendered material cultures and the value of women's labour in projects of welfare eugenics.⁷ That the lace was laboriously handcrafted generated particular value when we consider how objects can be seen to absorb the qualities of the people who created and consume them, and makers and owners can in turn be affected by the qualities of the object.⁸ For Hobhouse, moved by deliberate ethical and aesthetic choices, the lace made at Koppies was disappointingly coarse, and the girls were never seen to have acquired the refinement that she had aspired to in her inception of the scheme. The prospect of making lace was, literally and figuratively, the prospect of making whiteness, at a time when, as Timothy Keegan suggests, '[p]auperism and moral malaise in large sectors of the white population gave rise to the threat of racial subversion and the breaching of racial boundaries, as well as having baneful effects on racial hierarchy, respect and dominance'.⁹ Whiteness then was arguably in peril after 1902 – rural Boers were being outperformed economically by their black tenants – and by the Union of South Africa in 1910, rising urbanisation and further white insecurity meant that the racial order remained precarious.¹⁰

While the dominant historiography of Afrikaner nationalism has tended to focus on formal political organisations and the rise of the National Party and its eventual success in 1948, work on women's place in nationalism has focused on women's factory employment and philanthropic organisations.¹¹ The role of women's networks of sociability in cultural nationalist projects has been neglected. Yet among the supporters of the BHI were women whose work bridged the public and private and who could draw upon their domestic and familial resources to underpin a lifetime of politicking. This included Mrs Steyn's political salon on the stoep of her farm Onzerust and Hobhouse's extensive correspondence with women sympathisers engaged in

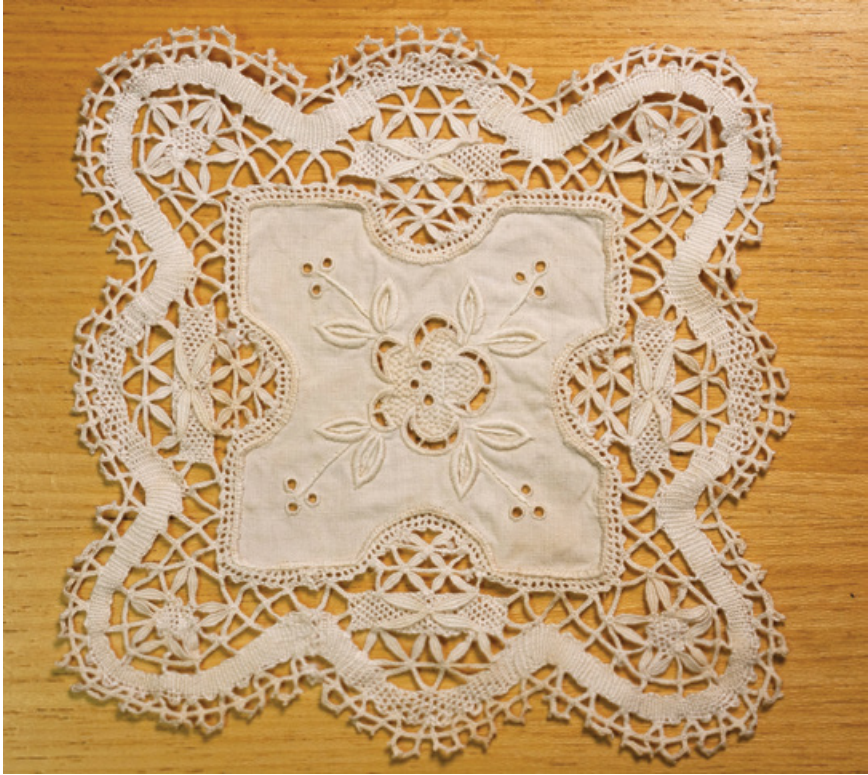


Figure 4.2 An example of ‘Koppies lace’

circulating campaigning letters and lobbying work. When the BHI became obsolete as the ‘poor white question’ was addressed through state-backed interventions in the economy, these networks then became important conduits of Afrikaner heritage and cultural identity.

A focus on these women’s networks and practices also reorientates an understanding of humanitarianism from being purely philanthropic towards an appreciation of its racial and gendered modes of cultural and economic production, as well as collaboration and negotiation between local and international actors. Suddenly the Koppies lace appears less parochial and more central to the recounting of the intertwined racial history of international welfare, cultural nationalism and new forms of women’s political agency. This is a history of tangible material connections and of fluctuating use and exchange values which reminds us not to lose sight of the actualisation and potency of all participants – and objects – in these encounters.

‘Wag-‘n-bietjie’: lace as a way of life and ersatz tradition

The lace collar now in the ABWM (see [Figure 4.1](#)) seems to have been designed by Hobhouse for the lace school at Koppies. It incorporated a pattern called ‘wag-‘n-bietjie’ (‘wait a bit’), a reference to both the thorn tree of this name and to a Boer adage equivalent to ‘take your time’. Subsequent descriptions of the collar generally attribute the design to Hobhouse and suggest that the collar itself was made at the Koppies lace school.¹² However, Hobhouse’s letters to Johanna Roodt (later Osborne), a young Boer woman who ran the Koppies lace school, suggest that the story of the collar and its provenance is not quite so straightforward. In a 1910 letter to Roodt, Hobhouse commented: ‘I am sending now the collar ‘wacht ‘n bietjie’ which Donna Carolina has just finished – you recollect I designed it at Venice... & I think Lucia could have it worked & still improve upon it – because the berries are not good – they should be more raised, I think with Punto Riccio...’.¹³ Lucia here refers to Lucia Starace, an Italian lacemaker who assisted Roodt with the establishment of the Koppies school; Donna Carolina was Lucia’s mother and ran an Italian lace and embroidery school. Though Hobhouse refers to berries on the collar, these are not visible in the War Museum collar.

Much later, in 1922, Hobhouse wrote again to Roodt, commenting, ‘Oddly enough in a forgotten boxed [sic] I unearthed this collar half done which I began in Venice. I think it might be finished & sold cheap. Anyhow the design could be copied. I send as I found it with the bunch of padding thread.’¹⁴ It is not now possible to know with any certainty whether the collar on display in the War Museum was made by Hobhouse, Lucia Starace, Donna Carolina, Johanna Roodt or another of the women working in the Koppies lace school – or indeed, whether it was the product of collaboration between these women or was intended as a design prototype for the school’s lace pupils to copy.

In 1904 Hobhouse carried out ‘A Study of Cottage Industries’, as she described it in her unpublished memoir, which was written in the early 1920s as an extended letter to her friend and collaborator Mrs R. I. Steyn.¹⁵ Reflecting on the origins of the BHI scheme, she commented:

I had leisure to study the question of suitable house or cottage Industries for the girls on your farms. I had seen so many sitting in their ruined homes where every means of occupation had been destroyed. I knew they had skill with the needle & I had detected here & there a latent sense of art. They appeared to cling to home and family life and time was theirs in abundance. This tranquil existence combined with brilliant skies all helped to suggest lace-making and particularly needle-point as a most suitable occupation.¹⁶

Hobhouse undertook a tour of European lacemaking institutions, including home industries, schools and cooperatives in Ireland, Venice and Bologna and collected samples. However, on her return to London, she met with Alice Stopford Green, the Irish nationalist historian, who persuaded her that lace was a ‘luxury’ product that would be unaffordable for most South Africans and suggested a spinning and weaving project instead. Hobhouse ‘yielded’ to Green’s arguments that linked the production of textiles and the development of national cultures, ‘the women of every nation in the Old World had spun & had woven – they had been through the educative processes entailed in producing all the textile necessities of their peoples’.¹⁷

Thus in 1905 Hobhouse put aside her plans for a lace school and established the BHI’s first spinning and weaving school in the village of Philippolis in South Africa. The scheme was supported by donors and sponsors in Britain, and the Women and Children’s Distress Relief Fund, from the days of the South African War, was reconstituted as the Boer Home Industries Committee. The plan for a school to produce lace on the de Wet farm at Koppies in the Orange Free State was revived in late 1908, with a young Johanna Roodt recruited by Hobhouse to oversee the project. Together they spent a year learning lace production in Venice, Bologna and elsewhere in Italy. Roodt was later joined at Koppies by Lucia Starace of the Italian



Figure 4.3 Sample of European-made lace collected by Hobhouse and intended as inspiration for lacemaking at the Koppies school

lacemaking de Vito de Marco family. Lucia's mother, Donna Carolina, ran an Italian lace and embroidery school and had tutored both Hobhouse and Roodt. Invoices in Hobhouse's papers include one from the Italian craft cooperative in Bologna, Aemilia Ars.¹⁸

Hobhouse mobilised the support of a wide social network in Britain, Europe and South Africa from both her suffrage circles and from among those with whom she had worked to protest the South African War. These included Quakers, and in particular the Clark family of shoe manufacturers who lived close to her aunt and uncle in Somerset. Margaret Clark Gillett accompanied Hobhouse to South Africa to help oversee the BHI, and Alice Clark was treasurer of the BHI in England. Hobhouse could draw on links of kin and kith which spanned women's domestic and public life and provided bonds of great strength and durability. For the Boer women of South Africa she wished to recruit to the BHI, Hobhouse hoped to encourage a similar sense of citizenship in which the political order would be transformed through the representation and organisation of women's special moral powers of nurture and empathy. For Hobhouse, these important qualities required both acknowledgement and cultivation in the domestic realm if women's contribution to family and to nation was to be fully realised.

'Wait a bit' was also Hobhouse's advice to Roodt on the moral qualities of the lace she wished to impart. '[Lacemaking] is refining & educative', Hobhouse recorded in her draft memoir,

for it demands patience, extreme cleanliness, absolute thoroughness, delicacy of workmanship, and an appreciation of outline & design. Complete command of the needle is a matter of course. A girl gains in moral qualities as well as skill – and she could produce in hours that are otherwise often only idle, a work of art which though not a livelihood will bring pocket money.¹⁹

Here was the education in virtue and vision of a domestic industry that would complement women's responsibilities in the home. In a pamphlet to potential supporters to launch the scheme, she spelt out the moral didacticism of the project:

Poverty still prevails; but the actual foodlessness of last year is lessened by a harvest fairly good in parts. It seems that moment to substitute constructive for remedial relief, while not entirely abandoning the latter.

During last year's work in South Africa Miss Hobhouse was deeply impressed by the time, energy, and ability wasted, owing to the solitary character of the women's lives. Meals are so simple that cooking is reduced to a minimum. Every woman is her own dressmaker and, except perhaps for the "nachtmaal" coat, her husband's tailor. Housework is finished early in the day, and visitors are rare. Domestic service as a profession, as is usual where a coloured race exists, is not the national custom.

Women and girls are anxious to fill their leisure hours, and seize rapidly upon any idea. They are remarkably skilful, and show special aptitude for needle-work in any form. When Miss Hobhouse examined the conditions on the spot, the making of fine lace (needlepoint and finest pillow lace) seemed to her the employment best fitted for the case. A study of the lace industry in Europe confirmed her opinion. Such work is equally suitable for the refined and unrefined; it is an art as well as an industry, and in a land where art is yet unborn would afford an outlet for the Boer's natural aptitude for design.

Making has always been an auxiliary in a woman's life; it can easily take turn with home duties, and is thus not merely a training in art and design, an education in method and accuracy, but a helpful addition to the family purse. Enquiries show that there is always a market for lace of *very fine* design and workmanship, and no inferior kind is contemplated.

Miss Hobhouse hopes to develop an Association on Co-operative lines, each worker becoming a sharer in the profits over and above the actual price received for her work.

...

It appears to the Committee to be the duty to inform those who have already shown sympathy with the Boers of the above scheme thus giving them the opportunity of helping to build up the lives and develop the skill of Boer women.

...

Those who know the Boers best cordially co-operate. Mr. and Mrs. Steyn, who have been consulted, feel its need and believe in its success, Dutch Ministers and their wives have welcomed the idea, and the Colonial Secretary of the Transvaal has signified his approval.

...

Miss Hobhouse would be grateful for any sample, however small, of *really* good lace, as these are necessary in founding the industry.²⁰

This combination of moral uplift and fillip to the domestic economy was at the centre of Hobhouse's ambitions for her lace school in South Africa and her direct intervention into contemporary feminist debates on the relationship of work to motherhood taking place in Britain in the Fabian's Women's Group and among Labour women.²¹ Hobhouse sought to reclaim a pre-industrial model of women's occupation found in the workshop in which women would combine the work of motherhood, considered women's especial moral responsibility, and contribute to the domestic economy through craft and cottage industry. This placed Hobhouse into a tradition of social and political critique which spanned Josephine Butler's notion of the home as a realm of social agency and William Morris' equation of the

workshop with the dignity and self-sufficiency of artisanal ways of life. She cited Morris as a particular inspiration for the BHI. It was also a position in keeping with her work for the Women's Industrial Council (WIC), for whom she had conducted an inquiry into conditions for women employed as refuse sorters or 'dust women' in 1900. Hobhouse, noting their 'habit of working' even when they had husbands in work, asked why they continued: '[t]here's more life in the yard', one said; another commented, 'I like to be out in the air'.²² This suggests the routine, occupation and socialising such work provided. Hobhouse concluded that they found such work invigorating. Though they may have been keen to sing the virtues of their work for fear of their employment being restricted by new legislation, this does also hint at some of the intangible, emotional and social benefits of women's work not often captured in the debates over married women's work in this period. Hobhouse recommends improved pay and conditions, particularly greater inspection of the dust yards in which these women worked. She also decried the fact of their working outside the home if they had children, seeing this as a poor moral choice on their part: 'It is a habit which re-acts cruelly upon the little children; one woman stated that all her children had been put out to keep, and all had died. Any others said they paid 3s. or 3s. 6d. for their babies, but refused to own they needed a mother's care.'²³

In 1908 the WIC launched an investigation into married women's employment in Britain.²⁴ The questions of married woman's work, as well as protective legislation for working women in general, were the source of debate both in the WIC and more widely in the women's movement. For instance, South African feminist Olive Schreiner was a critic of the social reproduction of gendered labour relations, in particular the association between women's work and the home, and argued that women needed professional opportunities and the protection of trade unions if they were to contribute most fully to society. Schreiner was also concerned about the idleness of middle-class women whom she termed 'parasites' for their forced dependence on husbands and fathers.²⁵ Hobhouse expressed concern about the idleness of Boer women and girls who were 'eating their parents' heads off', as she put it, but were reluctant to take up work deemed racially beneath them, such as domestic service.²⁶ Alice Clark, Treasurer of the BHI, cited Schreiner's book *Woman and Labour* as the direct inspiration for her own study of women and work which she commenced in 1912 and published in 1919 as *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, though she resolved the relationship between motherhood and work differently. For Clark, a pre-industrial economy in which the home was the font of women's reproductive and productive labour provided ideal inspiration. Work inside the home provided the grounds for women's moral leadership, independence, kinship support and community cohesion (within class lines),

a world not far removed from Quakerly business and familial ties within which Clark and many of her kin lived and worked, though Clark herself lived a notably mobile professional life outside the home. Like Hobhouse, Clark was a 'democratic suffragist', committed to full adult suffrage and alliances with the Labour movement.²⁷ She drew strength from Quaker traditions of passive resistance in supporting acts of civil disobedience in the suffrage movement. For these women, who bitterly decried the gendered effects of militarism and war in the domestic realm, protection and care for women and children grounded their moral opposition to war and campaign for women's representation. This conception of the need to protect women's maternal roles, and of women's moral leadership, posited a notion of independent womanhood bounded in relations of kin and kind, where women were able to reproduce their own independence through family inheritance and the transmission of skill.

Lace and the making of 'whiteness'

In the former premises of the lace school, now a home for elderly people, there is a display of Koppies lace and a memorial to the lace school. The lace is noticeably simpler, made of cotton with an appearance similar to Irish crochet lace, never achieving the delicacy of the Burano lace Hobhouse had sent as samples. For Hobhouse, this was disappointing evidence that Starace, Roodt and the pupils did not yet possess the necessary qualities of sustained and careful application. She commented in a 1916 letter to Roodt, 'I feel very sorry that Burano lace is abandoned for there were some girls who were doing it very beautifully. I believe they left or married. ... Fate seems to have decided upon the other style and of course that is cheaper being more quickly done and coarser.'²⁸ Hobhouse's letters to Roodt document a lack of aptitude, a waning enthusiasm, dissatisfaction, sense of isolation on the remote farm and pull of duties to family members. 'How are you getting on? It is an anxious time for you all & for you in particular this commencement of the work & outlining of the scheme', wrote Hobhouse in 1909:

I say for you in particular because you know – Johanna – I am depending mainly on you to carry this enterprize to a successful issue. You passed through a sore & stormy time – but that is training – being ground in a mill so to say – and & you came out the other side quite different and some day you will be glad I was stern & you will recognize that to do special work needs special training. And now I look to you for the result – & it will take

Time (Rome was not built in a day)

Patience – mistakes will be made ...

Prudence – look before you leap

Pluck – Never be discouraged

Economy – “Take care of the pence etc.”²⁹

These values – and frustrations – were shared by Hobhouse’s key collaborator in South Africa, Mrs Steyn, who acted as a cultural and political broker between Hobhouse and her British and European supporters, the Boer Republican elite and the growing nationalist organisations. Steyn herself had an instrumental role in the creation of the lace school at the de Wet farm at Koppies. In her letter of April 1922, Mrs Steyn records the receipt of a lace scarf sent by Hobhouse and could record with pride the connoisseurship of her fellow women of the OVV in their estimation of the value of the lace and their appreciation of the gift, which was eventually raffled to raise money for the OVV. Mrs Steyn, Chair of the OVV, the leading women’s Afrikaner organisation of the day, assured Hobhouse that the head of the committee was ‘one who knows how to value real lace’.³⁰ Mrs Steyn’s comments were perhaps intended to assuage Hobhouse’s expressed in a letter which accompanied the lace when she posted it: ‘I hope whoever wins it will never cut it. That, to a true lover of lace, is a black crime.’³¹ With this act of reverence towards the lace, Steyn could engage in a ritual of communal homage to a shared heritage of European cultural traditions and aesthetics and activate the bonds of friendship and alliance between her circle of Boer women and Hobhouse and the supporters of the BHI in Europe.

There was no tradition of lace production in South Africa. This was less of a revival than the creation, it was hoped, of a new way of life. The hands of Boer girls, sitting in Boer workshops and parlours, would, it was envisioned, create a direct link with old European cultural traditions, simultaneously crafting objects and subjects which shared the necessary qualities of refinement and distinction. For Hobhouse, lacemaking was ‘painting with the needle’ and not only a source of occupation and income, improving and educative, but also a symbol of Western civilisation.³² As she commented in her draft memoir, ‘the story of lace & its various developments is bound up with the history of Western Europe of the last four centuries’.³³ In an early letter to Roodt of 1909, Hobhouse emphasised that ‘it is no good learning lace as an adjunct to other things – it must be treated professionally not dabbled with – & when girls are doing it for 5 or 6 hours a day that is considerable work & not much else can be expected’.³⁴ Hobhouse indeed cautioned Roodt against accepting a marriage proposal, on the grounds she needed to devote herself wholly to the lace scheme. When Roodt did eventually marry in 1920, Hobhouse commented: ‘Now you can plainly see – without going further afield than Koppies, [sic] why women’s work is of less market value than men’s. They always spoil a professional career by marriage.’³⁵ In a later

letter, Hobhouse imagined lacemaking to be the bourgeois pastime of an old elite, but failed to consider that for many Boer girls the reality was of rural farm life, with little time for leisure or hobbies or artistic endeavour:

Another principle is – not to inculcate or expect that girls can earn a whole livelihood from hand industries – but only pocket money when an article is finished. It is to give occupation in the home, consonant with the usual duties of home or farm life – refining, educative & artistic in nature – but not intended to furnish a livelihood.³⁶

Hobhouse's hope that the women would learn to make Burano lace, in the style of her delicate samples, were quashed. Responding to Roodt and Lucia Starace's apparent concerns about the recruitment of suitable girls to train, Hobhouse remarked in 1910:

A good General, tell Lucia [she] will by instinct & by study learn how to marshal these forces & out of them form an efficient army of workers – giving to each what they can best do.

Tell her from me that to drop Burano would be a vast mistake, though it may have to be kept in abeyance till the right workers are found, and then a class formed specially of that & made to stick to it.³⁷

For Roodt and her fellow manager of the lace school, Starace, the dedication and strictures of this kind of work proved restrictive and frustrating. Letters from Hobhouse, evidently written in response to their requests to leave the school, put pressure on them to continue:

So cheer up and do your duty daily and I think all will come right in the end. It is wonderful how helpful duties are, something to cling to when there is nothing else and one leads on to another and so there is a path through the darkness.³⁸

Eventually Roodt left the school on 'sick leave', and Starace returned to Italy with 'homesickness' (18 July 1911). The thread bore witness to significant emotional distress and the misalignment of aspiration with emotional conflict and physical resistance. In the lace school at Koppies, we encounter young women grappling with training in needlecraft and the restrictions of the workshop. Here within the semi-feudal strictures of the lace school they faced the new hardships of isolation, found the making lace and acquiring of technique frustrating rather than refining, and battled conflicting demands and duties, giving rise to resentment and withdrawal rather than avowals of the dignity of labour. Hobhouse dismissed the complaints and appeals of her students as moral failure.

As the extracts from Hobhouse's letters to Roodt show, there was a conflict inherent in the BHI scheme between the desire to cloister the girls for their moral uplift and earn them 'pin money' and the wish for their

economic self-sufficiency through training and trade. Neither was a wish that appears to have been shared by the young women to whom Hobhouse appealed to join the scheme. The ‘right kind of girls’, those from the Steyn’s circles of rural matriarchs, had to earn a livelihood through the rural economy and could not take the time to learn lace. This period before the First World War was a protean and uncertain moment in post-war reconstruction characterised by divisions and contestations among Afrikaners on the social and geographical axes of rural and urban, old provincial town networks and urban sprawl, and the class status that was perpetuated by the strength of personal networks rooted in the old Republics and dominated by Mrs Steyn and her circle. Within these old rural and provincial networks, the reverence and display of the lace were still important and meaningful ways of expressing gratitude towards Hobhouse, despite the problems of recruitment to the schools. Thus, the handling, circulation and veneration of the European samples of lace was, as Trentmann conceived, ‘mutually constitutive’ of subject and object: a fabrication of whiteness and ‘civilised’ mores at the intersection of liberal humanitarian notions of the deserving poor and Afrikaner anxieties about poor whiteness which heralded the beginnings of welfare eugenics in South Africa.³⁹

Hobhouse’s practical interventions into debates about women and labour, grounded in her enquiries into women’s work in Britain, were responded to by Olive Schreiner, who objected to the BHI as part of her wider theorisation of women’s economic, social and racial equality in South Africa. As Schreiner noted in a letter to her friend Alice Greene, a supporter of Hobhouse’s Home Industries scheme:

Don’t think I’m so narrow that because I don’t see the way to women’s economic salvation lies in the direction of hand work, that I can’t sympathize with one who finds joy & beauty in doing it. I think weaving must be most delightful – far better than most other kinds of fancy work in the beauty of the things one is able to produce.⁴⁰

It was not work with the needle per se that Schreiner decried but the economic model of domestic work in which the value of their labour was not adequately recompensed and women remained dependent upon men, which was certainly not dignified in Schreiner’s view.⁴¹ Instead, in *Woman and Labour* she proposed education and equal professional opportunities:

It is because so wide and gracious to us are the possibilities of the future; so impossible is a return to the past, so deadly is a passive acquiescence to the present, that to-day we are found everywhere raising our strange new cry – “Labour and the training that fits us for labour!”⁴²

Schreiner’s intellectual heritage stretches back to the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, for whom subservience to men and inferior education

warped women's capacities for reason and the exercise of conscience, which in turn hindered their ability to give moral instruction to their children. In 1920s South Africa, however, the kind of conservative moral reform and 'uplift' advocated by Mrs Steyn and the OVV – and the socialist and feminist visions of women and labour propounded by Schreiner – were eclipsed by the effects of industrialisation, urbanisation and nationalist economic policies. Iris Berger traces key shifts in early twentieth-century South Africa, noting that by the time of the First World War, factory employment opportunities expanded for women, and '[w]hite women's employment climbed from 4,586 in 1915–16 to 8,848 in 1925–26'.⁴³ Berger notes that these women were concentrated in the Transvaal, and many, though not all, were employed in the garment worker industry. By the 1930s, the Great Depression exacerbated the persistent plight of 'poor whites', but impoverished white families were sending their daughters to earn their livelihoods in factories in urban areas, not to rural rescue schemes such as Hobhouse's lace school. Louise Vincent's work on Afrikaner women in the garment worker industry during the 1930s picks up this story, examining tensions between the class politics of trade unionism, which attempted to promote non-racial class solidarity, and Afrikaner nationalism, in vying for the allegiance of these women. The nationalist ideology was triumphant in re/claiming these women for the *volk*, and Vincent stresses the agentic role played by working-class Afrikaner women themselves in reshaping the concept of the *volksmoeder* ('mother of the nation') to include white working women.⁴⁴

This is a cultural project centred on women's domestic labour that fails in the first instance for Johanna Roodt and her fellow trainees in the school, as it fails to consider women's crucial role in the rural economy where they could not be spared for training in needlework. In the second instance, it became increasingly obsolete at a time when women's ideal role was that of the *volksmoeder*, embodied either as wife and mother (with black women as domestic servants), or as employee in the growing manufacturing sector. Where the 'home industries' did flourish – cakes for rural stores and fetes or other examples of domestic arts – these were more usually made not by the Afrikaner woman but by her black servant.⁴⁵ Moreover, once the nationalists had 'solved' the economic and labour questions by restricting black employment rights and segregating industries and professions, the moral quandaries which Hobhouse and Steyn concerned themselves with were as obsolete as the old spinning wheels and looms sent by well-wishers from Europe which featured in the photographs of the Boer Home Industries scheme.

Yet the lace associated with Hobhouse's scheme still had a political function as an ersatz tradition. The Boer women who ran the schemes such as Roodt, and the Boer women who acted as patrons such as Mrs Steyn, increasingly understood the lace as bearing witness both to the relationship

between the Afrikaner people and ‘Saint Emily’, now divested of her own political voice and accorded the status of primary witness of Boer war-time suffering, and a tangible link with European civilisation.⁴⁶ In a letter from 1921 Sara, sister-in-law of Roodt, and a leading light in the Second Language Movement,⁴⁷ wrote to Hobhouse to request that she write a brief history of the lace scheme,

The pulse of life is very strong in our nation today and the afrikaner [sic] is gradually coming to the fore and beginning to realize that to attain means to maintain all kinds of movements and organisations are brought into existence which all go to show that the Afrikaner is beginning to find himself and to assert himself. We have not only the different “Taal” movements but latterly we have formed a “Voortrekkersbond” which is to supplement the boy scouts and Girl guides movements as well as a “Historicse [Historiese?] Bond”, which has an aim the investigation of historical facts on a scientific basis. Our field of research is at first only the period 1899 – 1902.

I shall be glad if you could write to me a short history of the home Industries especially The Lace School or if you could send us just a short account of your interviews with different authorities and such correspondence in connection with these.⁴⁸

Initially absorbed into the government’s education department as a token of respect to Hobhouse and Steyn, though never a going concern, the lace school was closed in the late 1930s. At this point, Roodt arranged for Hobhouse’s lace collection to be transferred to the War Museum for conservation and display as aides to lacemaking students. Though Roodt made it clear that the lace collection was, with the exception of the wag ‘n bietjie lace collar, made up of European lace samples, in accepting the accession, the curators at the War Museum commented that its value lay in ‘see[ing] [Hobhouse’s] gift in the light and in the atmosphere of that part of our history which so immediately and intimately revolved around her life’.⁴⁹ It was now a heritage item, its display and exhibition a relic of Hobhouse’s ministry during the days of Boer suffering in the era of the South African War and used to validate the distinctiveness of ‘old’ Afrikaner culture and the narrative of a ‘people apart’.⁵⁰ Mrs Steyn and her networks were now also increasingly ossified, even as Mrs Steyn herself was respected for her place in the story of the Afrikaner people. Within the material cultures of Afrikaner nationalism of the 1930s and 40s, it is instructive that the lace was acquired by the War Museum in Bloemfontein in 1940 only a couple of years after the Great Trek enactments of 1938 and the production of new public art best symbolised in the tapestries depicting the Great Trek commissioned for the Voortrekker Monument.⁵¹ Here, figurative textile art became part of the vernacular nationalism involved in re-enactment and public ritual

which recounted Afrikaner history through symbols and narrative. The lace, opaque, rarefied and abstract, was a useful illustration of Boer traditions and civilised mores, but the story of its provenance, and the story of white uplift of which it was part was no longer relevant, nor was it a welcome reminder of an earlier period of Afrikaner disunity and poor white-ism.

Conclusion

The many hands involved in sewing, selling and curating Koppies lace created tangible networks and moral communities not often documented in the historiographies of humanitarianism, women's labour or Afrikaner nationalism. The handmade textile operated as a form of material resistance to war and British imperialism and created tactile bonds of sympathy and ethical concern between European and Boer women. By the 1920s, at which point Hobhouse was working with the new Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and publishing testimonies of Boer women in the South African War, she could reflect upon the affective and emotional responses her experiences in South Africa had on the formulation of her feminist pacifism:

Too long have historians eulogised war and warriors while passing over in some general phrase or two all that has happened to non-combatants during and because of war.

[The] word 'love' will surely appeal to South African women in its universal embrace and in that belief I dedicate this book to them – to women from whom I personally never heard a word of hatred though I moved among them during their most bitter, woeful days of war-suffering. ... Everything points to the great mission that lies open to women in preparing the mind and conscience of the world for permanent peace.⁵²

These experiences informed the new generation of permanent feminist pacifist organisations such as the WILPF, and the methods of new international humanitarian agencies such as The Save the Children Fund that emerged after the First World War. Artisanal crafts were valued for preserving folk traditions and saving girls and young women at risk of 'social degradation', for instance in Hungary and among Armenian refugees.⁵³ As in South Africa, this was also a form of rescue work targeted at the 'deserving poor', especially young middle-class women and girls, operating once more as a form of welfare eugenics. Koppies lace involved a romantic vision of women's role in domestic industry and the maternalist thinking which was threaded through the suffrage movement in the early twentieth century. The workshop and the needle were one of the most important sites and technologies

of modern humanitarian aid, and the making of the lace reveals the centrality of nostalgia and the uses of a historical imagination in these schemes.

In advocating new roles for women in the nation and internationally, Hobhouse and her South African networks took not their own busy, demanding lives as inspiration but rather the life of the seventeenth-century lacemaker. It is in the practical manifestation of making lace that the intersections of gender, class and race were embedded into Afrikaner women's responses to the poor white question. Any suggestion that women's work could be a source of emancipation, emotional fulfilment, personal choice or artistic expression, or that it might meet the needs for sociability claimed by the 'dust women', were ignored in favour of a much more functional and moralistic prescription of women's social purpose and contribution in the making of the gendered and racial order in both international welfare and women's labour in the new political economy of South Africa.

The articulation of the domestic lives and problems and the difficulty of balancing such work with family responsibility for the young Boer women in training at the school were not listened to. Similarly, in eulogising the improving qualities of the domestic arts and crafts, Hobhouse and her supporters paid scant heed to who was doing the brunt of the domestic labour being undertaken in the schools. It is evident from Hobhouse's letters that black servants undertook the domestic work at Koppies lace school and the other BHI schools.⁵⁴ They accepted without comment that such schemes would rest upon the labour of black women in maintaining the day-to-day routines of providing meals and emptying slop buckets, and indeed the desire to 'reconstruct' traditional social and racial hierarchies was ingrained. The hands of the Boer women were readily imagined in the cloth and in tactile networks of feeling with their South African and British supporters who had been inducted into the stories of the BHI through its publicity material, but the hands of the black women who provided the domestic labour which made lacemaking possible at Koppies were imperceptible. Here we see the co-production of a racial politics of rescue and uplift for an 'imperilled nation' by both liberal humanitarians and local social elites which would be replicated time and again in the twentieth century.

Notes

- 1 The research for this chapter was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/M011119/1).
- 2 The phrase is taken from the title of Leora Auslander and Tara Zahra's edited collection *Objects of War: The Material Conflict of War and Displacement* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

- 3 Hobhouse (1860–1926) is best known for her relief work in the concentration camps of the 1899–1902 South African War. In 1903 Hobhouse carried out a tour of the ‘ruined areas’ and, concerned by the devastated post-war Boer rural economy, she founded the Boer Home Industries scheme in 1905, setting up spinning and weaving schools for Boer women. Hobhouse hoped the scheme would replace essential household goods lost in the war and weave together the fabric of a new South Africa founded on self-reliance, co-operation and autonomy. See Rebecca Gill, *Calculating Compassion: Humanity and Relief in War, 1899–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), [Chapter 6](#).
- 4 Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 1.
- 5 Geuss, *Philosophy*, p. 9.
- 6 Frank Trentmann, ‘Materiality in the Future of History: Things, Practices, and Politics’, *Journal of British Studies*, 48:2 (2009), 25.
- 7 Liisa H. Malkki, *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press 2015), [Chapter 5](#).
- 8 Trentmann, ‘Materiality’, p. 26.
- 9 Timothy Keegan, ‘Gender, Degeneration and Sexual Danger: Imagining Race and Class in South Africa, ca.1912’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27:3 (2001), 460.
- 10 See Colin Bundy’s seminal study *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1988) on the effects of the war on black peasant farming as part of his wider analysis of this group; Bundy examines the war as a key factor contributing to a temporary improvement in the fortunes of black small-scale farmers, and the role of the 1913 Land Act in arresting this.
- 11 On the historiography of women and Afrikaner nationalism see Charl Blignaut, ‘Untold History with a Historiography: A Review of Scholarship on Afrikaner Women in South African History’, *South African Historical Journal*, 65:4 (2013), 596–617.
- 12 Janis Savage ascribes the collar’s design to Hobhouse in ‘Emily Hobhouse and the First Lace School in South Africa’, *Bulletin of the International Organisation of Lace* (reproduced at emilyhobhouse.weebly.com); Elsabe Brits also attributes the design to Hobhouse, noting that the ‘wag-‘n-bietjie’ pattern would ‘later become an institution’; see Elsabe Brits, *Emily Hobhouse: Beloved Traitor* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2016), p. 127. A photograph of the collar appears in the Anglo-Boer War Museum’s recently published book *The Anglo-Boer War in 100 Objects*, where it is captioned ‘A lace collar with a buffalo thorn (*Wag-‘n-bietjebos*) motif, made at the lacemaking school in Koppies’ (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Books, 2018), p. 244.
- 13 Free State Archives Repository (hereafter FSAR), Bloemfontein, South Africa, A53 Joanna Osborne Collection, Hobhouse to Johanna Roodt (Osborne), 6 June 1910.
- 14 FSAR, A53 Joanna Osborne Collection, Hobhouse to Johanna Roodt, 16 December 1922.

- 15 Rachel Isabella ‘Tibbie’ Steyn (1865–1955), wife of the former President of the Orange Free State, M. T. (Marthinus Theunis) Steyn, and after their meeting in the South African War, Hobhouse’s lifelong correspondent. After her husband’s death in 1916, Mrs Steyn remained an influential political figure and cultural broker, and was involved in several key Afrikaner women’s organisations, including as Chair of the *Oranje Vroue Vereeniging* (OVV; Orange Women’s Society). The OVV was based in the Orange Free State and focused on social welfare and uplift in local Afrikaner communities. See Elbie Truter, *Tibbie Rachel Isabella Steyn, 1865–1955: Haar Lewe was haar Boodskap* (Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau, 1997).
- 16 Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS Hobhouse 26, folder 2.
- 17 Bodleian Library, MS Hobhouse 26, folder 2.
- 18 Bodleian Library, MS Hobhouse 8, folder 1.
- 19 Bodleian Library, MS Hobhouse 26, folder 2.
- 20 Bodleian Library, MS Hobhouse 7, folder 2, E. Hobhouse, ‘Suggested Scheme of Home Industries for the Boers’ (emphasis in original).
- 21 See Miranda Chaytor and Jane Lewis’ introduction to their republication of Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).
- 22 Emily Hobhouse, ‘Dust Women’, *The Economic Journal*, 10:39 (September 1900), 418.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 See Clementia Black’s *Married Women’s Work* (London: G. Bell, 1915).
- 25 Olive Schreiner, *Women and Labour* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1911).
- 26 Bodleian Library, MS Hobhouse 25, folder 11.
- 27 Hobhouse was briefly chair of the People’s Suffrage Federation which brought together radical liberals and the women’s labour movement. On its place within democratic suffragism, see Sandra Stanley Holton, *Feminism and Democracy: Women’s Suffrage and Reform Politics in Britain, 1900–1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- 28 FSAR, A53 Johanna Osborne Collection, Hobhouse to Johanna Roodt, 12 July 1916.
- 29 FSAR, A53 Johanna Osborne Collection, Hobhouse to Johanna Roodt, 8 October 1909. The stray quote mark here has been retained from the original.
- 30 Mrs Steyn to Hobhouse, Onze Rust, 10 April 1922, PV181, Archive for Contemporary Affairs (ACA), Bloemfontein, South Africa. Mrs Blignaut was Treasurer of the ‘Hoof Bestuur’ of the OVV and Mrs Steyn’s sister-in-law.
- 31 FSAR, A156 Steyn Collection, Hobhouse to Mrs Steyn, 15 November 1921.
- 32 Bodleian Library, MS Hobhouse 26, folder 2.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 FSAR, A53 Johanna Osborne Collection, Hobhouse to Johanna Roodt, 12 November 1909.
- 35 FSAR, A53 Johanna Osborne Collection, Hobhouse to Johanna Roodt, 3 February 1920.

- 36 FSAR, A53 Johanna Osborne Collection, Hobhouse to Johanna Osborne, 16 November 1925.
- 37 FSAR, A53 Johanna Osborne Collection, Hobhouse to Johanna Roodt, 6 June 1910.
- 38 FSAR, A53 Johanna Osborne Collection, Hobhouse to Johanna Roodt, 6 July 1910.
- 39 In South Africa, the government-appointed Carnegie Commission of 1932 estimated that one-sixth of the white population was 'very poor' and a further 30 per cent were categorised as 'poor'. The Commission's report was inflected with the language of welfare eugenics. On the Carnegie Commission see Jeremy Seekings, 'The Carnegie Commission and the Backlash against Welfare-State Building, 1931–37', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 34:3 (2008), 515–537; Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, 'South Africa's Poor Whites and Whiteness Studies: Afrikaner Ethnicity, Scientific Racism, and White Misery', *New Political Science*, 29:4 (2007), 479–500; Tiffany Willoughby-Herard, *Waste of a White Skin: The Carnegie Corporation and the Racial Logic of White Vulnerability* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015). For parallels with the welfare eugenics of Hobhouse's relief work in Leipzig following the First World War, see Tatjana Eichert and Rebecca Gill, 'Children and the "Hunger Politics" of 1919–20: Food Aid to German Children and the Founding of the International Save the Children Movement', in Elisabeth Piller and Neville Wylie (eds), *Humanitarianism and the Greater War, 1914–1924* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023), pp. 210–229.
- 40 University of Cape Town, Manuscripts and Archives, Olive Schreiner to Alice Greene, 15 October 1910 (Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription).
- 41 This is thus a slightly different reading of Schreiner's objections to the one made by Rozsika Parker in her influential book *The Subversive Stitch: The Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1983).
- 42 Schreiner, *Woman and Labour*, p. 282.
- 43 Iris Berger, *Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry 1900–1980* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 30.
- 44 See Louise Vincent, 'Bread and Honour: White Working Class Women and Afrikaner Nationalism in the 1930s', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 26:1 (2000), 61–78. Vincent shows how working-class Afrikaner women successfully adapted the ideology of the *volksmoeder* to their particular circumstances, demonstrating that: 'The growth of Afrikaner nationalism then, cannot simply be conceived in terms of the machinations of middle class cultural entrepreneurs who managed to seduce a compliant audience. The garment workers played an active role in achieving recognition for working class women as legitimate members of the volk.' (p. 76).
- 45 As reported in Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and Madams* (London: Women's Press, 1980).

- 46 In a 1921 letter to Hobhouse, Johanna Roodt (now Osborne) commented: 'My little daughter will know all about St. Emily when she is old enough.' Bodleian Library, MS Hobhouse 8, folder 1.
- 47 The Second Language Movement emerged during the 1910s and sought to promote the use and growth of Afrikaans, and to formalise its hybridic character into a standardised and respectable language for the *volk*. See Isabel Hofmeyr, 'Building a Nation from Words: Afrikaans Language, Literature and Ethnic Identity, 1902–1924', in Shula Marks and Stanley Trapido (eds), *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (London and New York: Longman, 1987), pp. 95–123.
- 48 Bodleian Library, MS Hobhouse 8, folder 1, Sara Osborne to Hobhouse, 1 April 1921.
- 49 Anglo-Boer War Museum, Johanna Osborne Uncatalogued Lace Collection Accession Documents, from Secretary (unnamed) of the Anglo-Boer War Museum to Johanna Osborne, 14 August 1941 (translated from the original Afrikaans by the authors).
- 50 For instance, in 1940, the local press reported that an exhibition of the lace and Hobhouse's paintings was put on display at the War Museum in Bloemfontein. (*Huisgenoot*, 24 May 1940; Bodleian Library, MS Hobhouse 8, folder 2).
- 51 See Liese Van der Watt, 'The comradeship ideal and the *Volksmoeder* ideal: Uncovering gender in the Voortrekker Tapestry', *South African Historical Journal*, 39 (1998), 91–105.
- 52 Bodleian Library, MS Hobhouse 15, folder 1, Emily Hobhouse, draft manuscript Preface to the translation and republication of *The Brunt of the War and Where it Fell* (first published in English in 1902; published in Afrikaans by the Nationale Pers as *Die Smarte van die Oorlog* in 1923), p. 8 and p. 12. Hobhouse's Preface to the Afrikaans translation of *The Brunt* reflected on the South African War through her more recent experiences of the First World War. The Afrikaans translation was undertaken by Dr N. J. Van der Merwe, a prominent Afrikaner nationalist, chairman of the *Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurverenigings* (FAK; Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Associations) and Mrs Steyn's son-in-law. On love as an emotional practice in feminist-pacifist politics of this era see Ingrid Sharp, 'Love as Moral Imperative and Gendered Anti-war Strategy in the International Women's Movement 1914 – 1919', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 31:4 (2020), 630–647. See also the discussion of Alice Clark in Sandra Stanley Holton, 'Feminism, History and Movements of the Soul: Christian Science in the Life of Alice Clark (1874 – 1934)', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 13:2 (1998), 286.
- 53 These included Save the Children's Hungarian Handicrafts 'work schools', where girls were taught to make lace in Budapest in the early 1920s; see Emily Baughan, *Saving the Children: Humanitarianism, Internationalism, and Empire* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2021), p. 68. Hobhouse and Alice Clark were also involved in the sale of Austrian-made lace in this period on

behalf of the Friends' Emergency and War Relief Committee, Bodleian Library, MS Hobhouse 15, folder 1.

- 54 In circular letters sent to her supporters in Britain and usually addressed to Lady Charlotte Toler, Hobhouse made frequent references to black servants whose work was central to the running of the BHI, writing for example about 'our black Maria', and also 'My Jeremiah' (19 August 1906), or 'Black Moses', a servant who 'is brought into shape, and trained to wait table & be a house boy' (19 March 1905). FSAR, Smuts/Clark Collection, Hobhouse to Toler.

Beyond gratitude: Belgian women, humanitarian organisations and lace-aid programmes in the First World War

Wendy Wiertz

Introduction

Lacemaking is an important part of Belgium's cultural capital. During the First World War this renowned industry was in danger of disappearing forever: demand for the luxury handmade fabric plummeted, while the supply of materials was interrupted. Thousands of lacemakers faced unemployment. In response, humanitarian organisations developed lace-aid programmes with a twofold goal: saving an imperilled European tradition and ensuring the wartime employment of Belgian lacemakers, often women who supported themselves and their families. The largest and most well-known programme was the one working under the auspices of the American relief organisation Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB). It provided the lacemakers in German-occupied Belgium with the materials to produce lace destined for sale in the United States and the Allied Countries. Its outcome was highly successful, bringing unprecedented publicity to the industry and to American philanthropy, and employing around fifty thousand women in German-occupied Belgium.¹

The lace produced under these schemes became known as 'war lace'. The most recognisable pieces refer directly to the conflict. They contain battle-field scenes, names of people and places, inscriptions, years, portraits and national arms of the allied forces, of the nine Belgian provinces or of the Belgian martyr cities. During the war, Belgian lacemakers also produced many pieces that did not refer directly to the conflict. Originally, these were not labelled as 'war lace', but this changed over time, although they continue to receive a minor place in curatorial practices and historiography. However, these pieces, depicting a diverse iconography including flowers, animals, bucolic scenes, cherubs, fairy tales and mythological creatures, are much more difficult to attribute. This is certainly the case when there are no photos, illustrations or design drawings of the laces, or when there is no



Figure 5.1 Unknown, Motif with Belgian lion and the text 'Belgium 1914', 1914–1916. Needle lace, 5.5 × 7 cm.

label referring to their origins. When such evidence is lacking, it is almost impossible to determine if a particular piece was made during the war. An example of a war lace with direct references to the conflict is a motive of a Belgian lion holding a shield with the inscription 'Belgium 1914' (Figure 5.1). An example of a war lace without these direct references is a peacock design border sample, which is only revealed to be a war lace owing to a photograph in a contemporary album and a publication (Figure 5.2).²

Histories of Belgian war lace to date are limited to an art-historical approach with a focus on the symbolism of high-quality laces and their elite designers, and are generally framed within a nationally bound labour history.³ In addition, most of these histories are uncritically based on the writings of Charlotte Kellogg (1874–1960), an American writer and a member of the CRB.⁴ During the First World War, Kellogg travelled to Belgium, where she documented the experiences of Belgian women living under the occupying regime. Her encounters resulted in the book *Women of Belgium: Turning Tragedy to Triumph*, in which she dedicated a chapter to the destitute Belgian lacemakers and the lace-aid programme developed



Figure 5.2 Unknown, Peacock design border sample, 1914–1918. Bobbin lace (Point de Paris), 15.2 × 86.4 cm.

by the *Comité de la Dentelle* (also called the Brussels Lace Committee) and supported by the CRB.⁵ Shortly after the armistice, she travelled back to Belgium, where she visited many places renowned for lacemaking, met with lacemakers, lace teachers and benefactors, and witnessed the results of the relief programme. She published her experiences in *Bobbins of Belgium: A Book of Belgian Lace, Lace-Workers, Lace-Schools and Lace-Villages*.⁶ At first glance, both of her books seem to give an authentic picture of Belgian women and their war experiences, but Kellogg wrote from an American perspective and for a US audience, resulting in a eulogy of the CRB and of American benevolence with expectations of Belgian gratitude. A tangible way to meet these expectations was the war laces expressing gratitude to the United States. One example is a bobbin lace depicting an American eagle and coat of arms, surrounded by flowers and the translated French inscription: ‘Tribute to America, grateful Belgium, 1914–1915’⁷ (Figure 5.3).

Yet this one-sided perspective neglects the sometimes ambivalent experiences of the lacemakers, diminishes the efforts of Belgian organisations and fails to fully acknowledge the relationships between the lacemakers and those involved in relief organisations. Therefore, this chapter searches for the reactions of the lacemakers to the lace-aid programme, and reconstructs



Figure 5.3 Unknown, *Hommage à l'Amerique: Belgique reconnaissante*, 1914–1915, c. 1915–1919. Bobbin lace, 25 × 18 cm.

the relationships between Belgian organisations, the lacemakers and the staff of the CRB. In doing so, it inscribes itself in the current push to capture the experience of aid recipients.

Following the call of historian Peter Gatrell, whose insights into refugees and displaced persons equally applies to displaced Belgians and those in occupied Belgium receiving international aid in situ, this chapter aims to relocate them ‘to the centre of historical enquiry by recovering and analysing their voices’.⁸ This permits a re-evaluation of humanitarian beneficiaries as participants with agency rather than simply as persons receiving aid. The approach pays off, as recent research of both historical and contemporary humanitarian programmes has uncovered occurrences of ingratitude, resistance, protest, empowerment and emancipation.⁹ Here, the newly uncovered papers of the *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières* in the National Archives of Belgium (NAB) have been used to reconstruct the organisation of the programme on a local, national and transnational level, permitting all of those involved in the lace organisations and the level of their activities to be accounted for. Using these papers allows us to nuance the traditionally celebratory historiography of the CRB, often promoted by the Hoover’s

archives which were constructed to preserve the legacy of the humanitarian organisation and its founder Herbert C. Hoover (1874–1964). The approach in this chapter inscribes itself in the recent work on the CRB, which is more attuned to its transnational nature and power relations as well as a critical reading of the organisation's publicity.¹⁰ Yet, this chapter differs from most recent works by choosing to study a handicraft programme instead of food aid. In particular, the *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières* papers were consulted to address the aims of the programme itself at a national level, revealing the humanitarian organisations' contribution to the politics of the social and gendered order. In addition, they allow for the experiences of the lacemakers to be captured, including the women's own gendered identities, their agency and reactions towards the lace-aid programme.¹¹ This involves reading archives against the grain, as humanitarian archives are constructed by institutions that seldomly record the experiences of aid beneficiaries.¹² In addition, lacemakers remain, in the words of British historian David Hopkin, 'missing persons', as they have left very few written accounts of their own.¹³ The papers consulted for this chapter do not differ in this aspect as they include few sources by the lacemakers themselves. However, their words and actions have been documented by local collaborations of the lace-aid programme and were commented on by the aid agencies involved. Analysing the dominant reading of these texts and engaging in alternative readings helps to capture the experiences of the lacemakers and to reconstruct their relationships with the different help organisations.

Using these archival traces, the conditions causing the Belgian lacemakers to need assistance are elucidated, and the organisation of the lace-aid programme and the ties between local, national and international actors are reconstructed. This will enable an understanding of the lace-aid programme's ability to employ around fifty thousand lacemakers and to capture their reactions to the scheme, while revealing the organisations' social and gendered politics. The study of the continuous challenges faced by the organisations and the involved lacemakers provides a point of insight into their relationships. This culminates in a history of war lace and the CRB that goes beyond narratives of benevolence and gratitude to instead offer a cultural history of the intersections of humanitarian initiatives, craft identities and social relations in efforts to preserve national heritage and labour practices.

In need of assistance

Lace was manufactured in Flanders from the sixteenth century onwards, making the region an internationally renowned centre for the production of this luxury textile. After the independence of Belgium in 1830, the craft

and its maker became part of the young nation's identity. But the invention of machine-made lace in the early nineteenth century threatened the hand-made lace industry and its workers. In just a few decades after its invention, machine-made lace looked just as attractive and was considerably cheaper because it could be produced much faster. To compete, the already low wages of handmade lacemakers were cut. Subsequently, many women left their bobbins in search of higher wages. In just half a century, the number of lacemakers diminished from 150,000 in 1850 to 50,000 in 1900, and probably to just around 25,000 in 1914.¹⁴ Many went to work in the newly built factories. This was, for example, the case in the East Flanders town of Geraardsbergen, where the lace industry declined after cigar and match factories opened. The women who continued to make lace in Geraardsbergen, and elsewhere in Belgium, had to produce more for the same meagre wages, which was detrimental to the quality of their pieces and to their living and working conditions.¹⁵

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Belgian lace industry and its workers were in a miserable state. Other European countries and countries beyond Europe with a tradition in handmade lace experienced the same situation. Measures targeting the production and consumption of lace were subsequently taken to restore the local lace industry to its former glory.¹⁶ In Belgium too, studies, statistics and novels began to appear, indicating the causes of the decline of the lace industry and proposing solutions for its revival, as described in David Hopkin's chapter.¹⁷ Local and regional committees sprang up willing to implement these remedies. But before any of the measures could be implemented, the war broke out.

On 4 August 1914, Belgium was violently invaded by German troops. In mid-October 1914, the advance of the German army was halted and trench warfare began in the west of the country and would last for four years. During all of this time, most of Belgium, apart from a small strip of land behind the Yser River, was occupied by the German invaders. The territory was divided into three parts: the *Operationsgebiet*, which circumscribed the actual front zone; the *Etappengebiet*, which encompassed most of East Flanders, the western part of Hainaut and the southernmost part of Luxembourg; and the *Occupationsgebiet*, which covered the remaining part of the conquered Belgian territory. In all three parts, a repressive occupation regime was installed. Freedom of speech and movement were severely curtailed. Expressions of anti-German or pro-Belgian sentiment were strictly forbidden, while travelling became difficult, expensive and time-consuming. The 7.5 million Belgians who had not fled abroad were subject to the laws of the occupying forces, were obliged to pay high war taxes and suffered from pillages and requisitions.¹⁸ In response to the German occupation of Belgium, the British installed a blockade cutting the country off from

international markets. This was disastrous. Before the war, the country had been an important economic power in Europe, relying heavily on the international trade of materials and finished products. The occupation and the blockade had an impact on the population, which suffered hunger and unemployment.¹⁹ The lace industry was also hit, as the import of thread and the export of finished laces was halted. For the lacemakers, unemployment threatened and they were in dire need of assistance.

Local, national and international support

Immediately after the outbreak of the war, assistance was provided to the lacemakers. Pre-war associations followed up the situation, while new local initiatives were taken to support these craftswomen. In Brussels, the *Union patriotique des femmes belges*, created a few days after the German invasion by the Belgian feminists Jane Brigode (1870–1952) and Louise Van den Plas (1877–1962), provided employment for women as seamstresses, toymakers and lacemakers.²⁰ In Bruges, the ‘*Kant-comiteit*’ (Lace committee) was created to provide employment to the lacemakers. The committee collaborated with lace merchants, who were given first refusal on the products. They worked independently until May 1915, when they became part of an international lace-aid programme. Photographs dated September 1916 show how young volunteers from the nobility and bourgeoisie registered unemployed lacemakers at the ‘*Kant-comiteit*’ in the Sint-Trudo almshouse on the Garenmarkt. The lacemakers were then given patterns and a precisely measured quantity of thread, with which they set to work. The finished pieces were brought back to the almshouse to be measured and checked for quality (Figure 5.4). Depending on the amount of lace made, the technique and the quality, the price of the submitted pieces were determined and the women were paid at the counter. These working practices coexisted with middlemen who gave out work to and collected it from lacemakers.

Lacemakers also sought opportunities to continue their craft in the best possible situation. In Poperinge, a West Flanders town close to the front-line, several women decided to change middlemen to earn a fairer remuneration. They did this after learning that their usual middlemen reduced their wages by half but sold the finished pieces at much higher prices.²¹ Traditionally, middlemen were the first intermediary between lacemakers and the lace shop. They put out commissions, provided thread and designs to the lacemakers and paid them, before selling lace on to a manufacturer or wholesaler. The latter passed the lace on to a lace shop.²² It is not known how often the strategy of changing middlemen was employed by lacemakers, but it does show that they were not as powerless as previously thought.



Figure 5.4 Alfons Watteyne, *The measuring and the checking of the lace*, September 1916. Glass plate.

However, during the war, lacemakers and most local initiatives would experience at some point a shortage of thread and clients. Lace expert Martine Bruggeman stated that the lack of clients was an even bigger problem than the depletion of the thread reserves.²³ But she ignored the fact that lace was easily sold to the fighting troops of both sides who sent the fabrics home as souvenirs and gifts.²⁴ Lacemakers became in the first place unemployed because their raw materials – the supplies of linen and cotton thread – were depleting. They did manage to find linen thread in the country during the whole war, although against ever rising prices. Those working with cotton were more disadvantaged, as this material had to be imported from English spinneries, which was impossible due to the British blockade.²⁵

In early 1915, the philanthropic committee *Comité de la Dentelle* was founded. Several of its members had been part of the pre-war group *Les Amies de la Dentelle* [The Female Friends of Lace].²⁶ This earlier membership was reflected in their aim and approach. Like *Les Amies de la Dentelle*, the members aimed to revive the Belgian handmade lace industry and to improve the miserable fate of the lacemakers. They concentrated particularly on increasing the technical quality of the lace and on raising the aesthetics of the designs. These goals were to be obtained respectively by

improving the training in lace schools and by commissioning new designs, preferably drawn by artists. The members of the committee did not focus on the commercial aspects of the enterprise, such as demanding a higher and fairer price from the consumer, organising trade unions, or negotiating with the dealers and factories. This demonstrates a paternalistic approach and a nostalgic vision of an imagined past. They imagined that the production of handmade lace had been economically viable, permitting working-class women to work from their homes while looking after their children. In addition, the American market was seen as the industry's salvation. The pre-war interest of American tourists buying lace in Belgium had developed the idea of exporting Belgian lace to the United States.²⁷

The *Comité de la Dentelle* was to become the most renowned philanthropic committee aiding the Belgian lacemakers. This was largely due to their association with the national aid organisation *Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation* (CNSA) and the American relief organisation CRB, under whose auspices they worked.²⁸ Both the CNSA and the CRB had been founded in autumn 1914 to set up a food programme in German-occupied Belgium to relieve hunger and to avoid starvation as the food supply and distribution had almost immediately become a problem after the invasion.²⁹ The CNSA, supported by the Belgian government in exile, united local efforts and coordinated the food aid in Belgium. The CRB brought food in from abroad, a purpose for which the relief organisation was especially created by the engineer, businessman and later 31st US President Herbert C. Hoover (1874–1964) who became the CRB chairman.³⁰ For more than fifty months, both organisations would collaborate to feed the civilian population in occupied Belgium. They were the optimal partners for the lace-aid programme the *Comité de la Dentelle* wished to set up. The CRB would bring in the thread and take out the lace for sale in the United States and the Allied Countries, while the CNSA would distribute the thread to all lacemaking regions and provide a monthly grant to pay the lacemakers' wages.

The *Comité de la Dentelle* was not the only group supporting lacemakers that asked for assistance from the CNSA. The first had been established earlier as the *Union patriotique des femmes belges*. They would continue to support women producing semi-manufactured or imitation lace, while the newly founded *Comité de la Dentelle* would take over the fate of those producing handmade or real lace. In addition, the CNSA established the *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières*, an all-male organisation supervising the efficient use of resources and the allocation of tasks among predominantly female associations and coordinating the communication with the CRB, with the lacemaking regions and with the *Comité de la Dentelle* and the *Union patriotique des femmes belges*.³¹ The latter two became technical

committees, predominantly tasked with the provision of (new) designs to the lacemakers, assessment of the produced lace and preparing it for export.

An immediate success

The lace-aid programme was put into action in early 1915 and proved to be an immediate success. Within a few months, nearly fifty thousand women enlisted – the majority making real lace. They were particularly drawn to the programme due to the promised weekly salary of 3 francs to support themselves and their families, and the ability of lacemaking to keep up their morale. The former was stressed predominantly by the high number of participants, while the latter was regularly mentioned in letters by local supporters, as in the following example:

How many poor women have told us how much they would like to go back to work which would distract them from their sad thoughts and worries: how long and dreary are the hours spent doing nothing when one sees one's children lacking bread and shivering from the cold in front of the hearth which no flame lights up and when one thinks of the husband, of the son who is over there fighting for the honour of the Fatherland and about whom one has known nothing for months!³²

Lacemaking served as a distraction from 'sad thoughts and worries', a quality believed to be shared by all crafts and originally promoted by nineteenth-century reformers and crafts preservationists – most notably by associates of the Arts and Crafts movement – and continues to be emphasised by craft enthusiasts today.³³ Yet this quality was also used as an emotive entreaty to continue supporting the work, as it categorised the women as hardworking and caring, qualifying them as 'deserving poor' and thus worthy of humanitarian assistance.

The programme's success far exceeded the aid organisations' expectations and budget to support around twenty thousand women.³⁴ The male president of the *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières* suspected that many were still apprentices, were not in need or had been working in the industrial and agricultural sectors before the war.³⁵ He forgot that lacemaking had been an important additional income for farming families since the agricultural crises in the 1840s; that many industries had closed since the start of the war, causing women to resume their former craft to survive; and that the rising living costs due to the ongoing war resulted in increasing numbers of women and families in need.³⁶ Nevertheless, he urged a reduction in the number of registered women.³⁷ The women needed to fulfil the criteria of the lace-aid programme as explained by its aim: to entrust any woman who

had been working as a professional lacemaker before the war, who was over sixteen years of age, who was without employment and in need, with the task of making lace, so to grant her a weekly salary of 3 francs.³⁸ In addition, only one member per household was admitted; family members could not benefit from any other replacement income; and in rural areas the possession of two cows – later one cow – excluded the applicant from further support.³⁹ An undated and badly spelt application letter by a widow explicitly mentioned that she had been a lacemaker before the war, was in need and did not possess a cow.⁴⁰ It is unknown if she was admitted, but the number of women participating in the lace-aid programme never went below around forty-three thousand and quickly rose again to its previous level. As the war progressed, more women needed and obtained assistance.⁴¹

The lace-aid programme was set up as an unemployment scheme for lacemakers, with the obligation to work for support, or in the words of the *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières*: ‘the instructions relating to the Unemployment Fund formally stipulate that lacemakers cannot be included on the lists of the unemployed’.⁴² Marguerite Coppens, former curator of the lace collection at the Art & History Museum in Brussels, commented that ‘aid needed to reach the greatest number of the unemployed yet it would be unthinkable to grant aid without work performed in return’.⁴³ She noted that the ‘allocation given to refugees [including Belgian refugees] by the French government without expectation of work in return was a novel and strongly criticised policy’.⁴⁴ The obligation to work for aid shows how the support for Belgian lacemakers largely drew on earlier philanthropic ideas and practices. The deserving poor, whose behaviour was strictly controlled, were imagined as working hard to improve their living conditions while maintaining the highest moral standards. The control of the skilful lacemakers is reminiscent of craft theorist Glenn Adamson who wrote about the makers of the 2010 Jabulani football by Adidas: ‘like the modern craftspeople for two centuries, the makers find themselves working at the intersection of two fields of manipulation: they masterfully shape their materials but are themselves controlled within a larger system of mastery’.⁴⁵

Additionally, the lace-aid programme was an effective way to control female bodies and to reproduce the social and gendered order. Since their origins, lacemaking and handicrafts in general have been used to ‘keep women purposefully occupied in order to avoid any possible moral “trouble”’.⁴⁶ During wartime the need to control moral standards was even higher. The fear existed that ‘the experience of war might undermine the prevailing moral standards and thus jeopardise the social order’.⁴⁷ Working-class women in particular were closely monitored to make sure they did not have any close ties to the German occupiers, while employment was provided to them and the men of their class to avoid laziness.⁴⁸ Lacemaking

was to prevent 'idleness, the mother of all vices, and to keep women away from vicious circles and meetings'.⁴⁹ It was also needed to 'help many young daughters off the streets'.⁵⁰ Seeing the destitution of many women who might turn to sex work was probably the main reason for local supporters to include as many participants as possible in the lace-aid programme, even if the latter did not meet all the criteria.

Continuous challenges

The lace-aid programme was an immediate success, enlisting nearly fifty thousand women, but met with continuous challenges. Like the CRB's food aid, its organisation operated in a pyramid structure with the headquarters in Brussels and made a call for local committees headed by regional and provincial ones.⁵¹ This structure demanded a well-organised supply and distribution of materials and a swift collection of finished products for export, a correct payment of the workers and efficient communication. Problems arose in all three areas, putting a strain on the relationships between the lacemakers and the organisations involved.

The British blockade and the German division of occupied Belgium put pressure on the supply and distribution of thread and the collection of lace for export. Constant negotiations between the British authorities, the German occupying powers and the CRB were needed to enable the trade to continue. The British were especially reluctant to open the blockade for the trade of Belgian lace. Over the years, they demanded that the whole enterprise should be charitable in nature, that the finished lace had to be exported and sold from outside Belgium, and that the weight of exported lace had to equal the weight of imported thread. The British requested these conditions as they feared that the Germans, who had erected their own *Spitzen-Zentrale* [Lace headquarters], might use the imported thread for their own enterprise and even succeed in their efforts to control a revived Belgian lace industry.⁵² The Germans might not have achieved this goal, but they gained from the lace industry through tax levies on the export of lace, from the *Etappegebiet* as well as from occupied Belgium.⁵³

The strain on the supply and distribution of thread and the collection of lace for export impacted the working conditions of the lacemakers. From the onset of the lace-aid programme, the import of cotton thread and the remaining pre-war stocks of linen and cotton threads were never sufficient to provide work to all registered lacemakers. Most regions introduced a rotation system where the women would each work for three weeks followed by a week of unemployment.⁵⁴ In this way, a larger number of

women was supported. As the war continued, the pre-war stocks were running out, while the quarterly shipments of 250 kg of cotton thread from Peat Son & Co from Nottingham became more irregular after the United States joined the war in April 1917.⁵⁵ The local committees had to introduce longer periods of unemployment. Some used the shortage of materials as an opportunity to instil middle-class values of frugality in their working-class craftswomen.⁵⁶ Most, however, requested more thread but were refused by the *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières*. The latter suspected lacemakers of 'having a tendency to exaggerate the amount of thread to be used', which demonstrates their lack of respect for the craftswomen's expertise.⁵⁷

In addition to the shortage of thread, complaints arose about the inferior quality of some brands. The subcommittee of Turnhout were dissatisfied with the first parcels of thread received from Brussels and wrote that these 'only included raw material of inferior quality. The products will suffer from this'.⁵⁸ A few months later, they received thread by Peat and they wrote that they were pleased that the material would be reserved to produce their best pieces.⁵⁹ This shows the knowledge of lacemakers, their self-confidence and their sense of entitlement to good materials.

The emphasis on the shortage of thread had eclipsed the lack of heating and lighting in winter and its impact on lace production. The winter months traditionally caused a decline in the lace's quality and quantity, but the war largely aggravated the effect, as testified by the subcommittee of Turnhout in January 1916:

In general, we are satisfied with the delivered products. However, during the winter months the colour of the lace is affected by the dirty state caused by the heating and lighting systems in poor households. There is a serious fear that some lacemakers overcome with worries will not be able to carry out their work for lack of light. As carbide becomes scarce and oil unobtainable, many houses are plunged into darkness in the evening and it will become impossible for many workers to continue after dark.⁶⁰

The problems did not end with the scarcity of materials. The transport of lace from the lacemaking regions to Brussels, where export was prepared, also met its challenges. At times, the German authorities forbade lace to leave the region and regularly refused to give passports to middlemen or to the members of the local committees who needed to cross municipality borders to distribute the thread and collect the laces in the adjoining villages.⁶¹ Sister Robertine smuggled the produced lace under her robes from Kerksken, a small East Flanders village in the *Etappengebiet*, to the headquarters of the *Comité de la Dentelle* in Brussels. She returned home with the much-needed payment for her workers.⁶² Other local committees chose not to follow this example and were urged by the *Aide et Protection aux*

Dentellières to export the lace as soon as possible, identifiable by its labels and neatly packed.⁶³ Many local committees were not impressed by these remarks and keenly reminded them of the conditions in which they worked and lived, as did the subcommittee of the West Flanders town of Torhout who explicitly drew attention to their vicinity to the front and thus to the prevailing misery.⁶⁴

The fixed payment of 3 francs a week in return for produced lace first brought immense interest to the lace-aid programme, but it also caused problems. From the start several subcommittees pointed out that unemployment support was often higher in their region than what the lacemakers would receive.⁶⁵ The subcommittee of Tielt, for example, wished 'that we could have sufficiently large subsidies to enable us to give our women workers at least the same amount of relief as is given to the unemployed. Wouldn't it be fairer to encourage work and to see it paid more than the unemployed?'⁶⁶ Individual lacemakers also complained that they did not get enough to survive. In Brussels, Jeanne de Vare wrote that she lost her unemployment benefits as she was a lacemaker and desperately asked how she was to survive on less than 0.50 francs a day supporting herself and her six and a half year-old child.⁶⁷ Many lacemakers who at first had been satisfied with the level of wages grew dissatisfied in time. These included the craftswomen from Herzele who refused, by mid-1918, to continue working against the low wages and enrolled in food aid schemes that ran without the obligation to work. Although the subcommittee from Herzele regretted this turn of action, they understood their lacemakers:

The poor lacemakers who in 1915 or 1916 were happy to find a little work to earn a few francs, would no longer accept, at the moment, to work at these prices; in fact they are enrolled in the food aid scheme which they receive without having to do any work and which is much higher than the salaries of the Lace Committee of yesteryear, which we were able to pay them with difficulty, one week out of two, due to a lack of sufficient subsidies.⁶⁸

These incidents show that lacemakers did not necessarily put up with the fixed allowance bestowed on them through the lace-aid programme. Instead they resisted the expectations of gratitude, reclaimed their agency and demonstrated their worth. They were often supported by their local committees who witnessed first-hand the ever-growing destitute living and working conditions of the craftswomen. Yet, in almost all cases, the *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières* stubbornly maintained their earlier decisions and even replied to the subcommittee of the East Flanders town of Geraardsbergen: 'As for the workers' complaint about wages, please inform them that they must accept the rate imposed by the regulations of *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières*. They remain free to take work elsewhere or to withdraw.'⁶⁹

In contrast to the regular complaints about the level of remuneration, the fixed payment also had a perverse effect on the quality of lace in one region. In the East Flanders town of Deinze, ‘the workers persist in supplying me with horrible and unsaleable lace [despite repeated objections]. They claim to be entitled to the 3-franc job. They are arrogant. With this right they take no notice of the observations.’⁷⁰ However, most lacemaking regions were pleased to note an improvement in the quality of the submitted laces, although they often exaggerated.

Communicating with the lacemaking regions predominantly happened by post, which proved to be hard. All post was subjected to German censorship and only arrived after several weeks instead of days. This was especially so for mail sent between the different zones – *Operationsgebiet*, *Etappengebiet* and *Occupationsgebiet* – which experienced delays. In addition to the difficulties caused by the occupation regime, many lacemakers and their local committees did not feel understood by the *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières*. The subcommittee of Herzele complained about a lack of empathy:

[D]espite their assurances that they [*Comité de la Dentelle*] are well aware of our difficulties, their way of acting proves that they are unaware of them; ... but we are very much afraid that it will not be remedied, because they do not listen to those who are toiling away at a remote distance.⁷¹

Conclusion: beyond gratitude

Based on research in newly uncovered Belgian archives, this chapter has been able to consider for the first time the reactions of lacemakers towards the lace-aid programme, recognising the efforts of the Belgian organisations involved in the lace-aid scheme, and thus reconstructing the relationships between the lacemakers and those involved in its organisation at a local, national and transnational level. This approach expands the existing history of Belgian war lace that has rather uncritically reflected an American perspective, resulting in a eulogy of the CRB and American benevolence with expectations of Belgian gratitude. Instead, a multisided perspective with sensitivity for the relations between gender, class and location has uncovered the lacemakers’ reactions to the lace-aid programme, demonstrating its immediate success but also the existence of protest, resistance and entitlement besides gratitude. Lacemakers contested the level of wages, resisted continuing production and felt entitled to good materials. In addition, they were not afraid to negotiate on their own behalf through their self-authored letters or through the correspondence of their local lace committees. Their actions nuance the lacemakers’ perceived passiveness and

powerlessness and instead draw together the threads of a picture of agency, expertise and empowerment within this group of working-class women surviving in wartime conditions. Recognition of the efforts of the Belgian organisations involved in the scheme shows the structure of, and the collaboration between, the levels of local, regional and national assistance. While this rereads the activities of Belgians inside the occupied territory, it also illuminates the reproduction of the gendered order by these humanitarian agencies. Men controlled the money, negotiated over the materials and set the rules, while women and some men from aristocratic and middle classes were the primary supporters of the working-class lacemakers. The reconstruction of the relationships between the lacemakers and the aid organisations involved highlights the continuous challenges they all faced during the programme's duration. These showed the difficulties of running a transnational scheme between the centre and the periphery in a time of stricter international, national and local borders. The existence of war laces without obvious references to the conflict, in combination with extensive research in local archives, culminates in a history of war lace and the CRB that goes beyond the gratitude and its performance to offer a much richer cultural history where humanitarian initiatives, craft identities and social relations intersect with each other in an attempt to preserve national heritage and labour practices.

Notes

- 1 Charlotte Kellogg, *Women of Belgium. Turning Tragedy to Triumph*, 4th ed. (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1917), pp. 158–166; Charlotte Kellogg, *Bobbins of Belgium: A Book of Belgian Lace, Lace-Workers, Lace-Schools and Lace-Villages* (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1920); Herbert C. Hoover, *An American Epic*, vol. 1, *Introduction: The Relief of Belgium and Northern France 1914–1930* (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery, 1959), pp. 410–411; Marguerite Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis* (Brussels: Weissenburch, 1990), pp. 116–132; Martine Bruggeman, *Lace in Flanders: History and Contemporary Art* (Tiel: Lannoo, 2018), pp. 87–97; Marguerite Coppens, 'The Lace Industry in France and Belgium during the First World War', in Maude Bass-Krueger, Hayley Edwards-Dujardin and Sophie Kurkdjian (eds.), *Fashion, Society, and the First World War: International Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021), pp. 122–123.
- 2 Kellogg, *Bobbins of Belgium*.
- 3 Patricia Wardle, 'War and Peace: Lace Designs by the Belgian Sculptor Isidore De Rudder (1855–1943)', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum*, 37:2 (1989), 73–90; Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis*, pp. 116–132; Marguerite Coppens, 'Les commandes dentellières de l'Union patriotique des femmes belges et du Comité

- de la dentelle à Fernand Khnopff', *Revue belge d'Archéologie et d'Histoire de l'art*, 64 (1995), 71–84; Patricia Wardle, *75x Lace* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2000), cat. nr. 75; Bruggeman, *Lace in Flanders*, pp. 87–97; Coppens, 'The Lace Industry in France and Belgium during the First World War', pp. 122–133.
- 4 Charlotte Kellogg, née Hoffman, married the American entomologist, evolutionary biologist and science administrator Vernon Lyman Kellogg (1867–1937). As son of Lyman Beecher Kellogg, first president of the Kansas State Normal School, now known as Emporia State University, and former Kansas Attorney General, he was not a descendant of the Kelloggs who invented the breakfast cereal cornflakes. Like his wife, Kellogg was also involved in the CRB.
 - 5 Kellogg, *Women of Belgium*, pp. 158–166.
 - 6 Kellogg, *Bobbins of Belgium*.
 - 7 All translations are the author's own translation unless otherwise noted.
 - 8 Peter Gatrell, Anindita Ghosal, Katarzyna Nowak and Alex Dowall, 'Reckoning with Refugeeedom: Refugee Voices in Modern History', *Social History*, 46:1 (2021), 70. This chapter considers a specific lace-aid programme developed by humanitarian organisations to support women in German-occupied Belgium. In the future, similar programmes for Belgian refugee women in France, Holland and Great Britain will be researched.
 - 9 Alyce Abdalla, 'Employees or Beneficiaries?' *Review of Middle East Studies*, 34:2 (2000), 184–188; Janice Helland, 'Working Bodies, Celtic Textiles, and the Donegal Industrial Fund 1883–1890', *TEXTILE*, 2:2 (2004), 134–155; Ann Le Mare, "'Show the World to Women and They Can Do It": Southern Fair Trade Enterprises as Agents of Empowerment', *Gender & Development*, 20:1 (2012), 95–109; Rosemary Willey-Al'Sanah, 'New Skills, Changing Status: The Bedouin Women's Voice Reflected in the Lakiya Weaving Project, Negev', *TEXTILE*, 11:2 (2013), 166–175; Emily Baughan, 'International Adoption and Anglo-American Internationalism, c.1918–1925', *Past & Present*, 239:1 (2018), 181–217; Sophia Labadi, *The Cultural Turn in International Aid: Impacts and Challenges for Heritage and the Creative Industries* (London: Routledge, 2019); Philippa Hobbs, 'Evolving a Tapestry Practice at Rorke's Drift: Women's Alliances, Agencies and Visual Synthaxes in the Loom', *TEXTILE*, 18:4 (2020), 386–421.
 - 10 Archives Hoover Institution (HI) and Herbert Hoover Presidential Library (HHPL); Hoover, *An American Epic*, vol. 1; George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: The Humanitarian 1914–1917* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1988); Johan den Hartog, 'The Commission for Relief in Belgium and the Political Diplomatic History of the First World War', *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 21:4 (2010), 593–613; Sébastien Farré, *Colis de guerre: Secours alimentaire et organisations humanitaires* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014); Sébastien Farré, 'Des États-Unis vers l'Europe: colis alimentaires et secours humanitaires durant la Première Guerre Mondiale et l'après-guerre (1914–1923)', *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, 38:2 (2017), 161–177; Kenneth Whyte, *Hoover: An Extraordinary Life in Extraordinary Times* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017); Clotilde

- Druelle-Korn, *Food for Democracy? Le revêtement de la France occupée (1914–1919): Herbert Hoover, le Blocus, les Neutres et les Alliés* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2018); Elisabeth Piller, 'Abandoning Poland. Or How to Write the History of Great War Humanitarianism as a History of Failure', in Elisabeth Piller and Neville Wylie (eds) *Humanitarianism in the Era of the Great War, 1914–24* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 187–209.
- 11 Alongside these Belgian sources, the archives at The Hoover Institution (HI) and the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library (HHPL) were searched, but they did not contain any information on the internal organisation of the lace-aid programme.
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 - 13 David Hopkin, 'Working, Singing, and Telling in the 19th-Century Flemish Pillow-Lace Industry', *Textile. Cloth and Culture*, 18: 1 (2020), 55.
 - 14 Hopkin, 'Working, Singing, and Telling', p. 55; Wendy Wiertz, 'Recuperation, Revival, Survival: A Humanitarian Lace-Aid Programme in Occupied Belgium during the First World War', *Journal of Belgian History*, 52:4 (2022), 8–28. The high number in 1850 was caused by women who became lacemakers after the linen crisis in Flanders in the nineteenth century. Éliane Gubin and Peter Scholliers, 'La crise linière des Flandres. Ouvriers à domicile et prolétariat urbain (1840–1900)', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire*, 72:2 (1996), 392.
 - 15 Pierre Verhaegen, *La dentelle belge. Les industries à domicile en Belgique* (Brussels: Lebègue, 1912), p. 39; Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis*, pp. 11–15, 105–107.
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- 19 Vrints, 'All the Butter in the Country Belongs to Us, Belgians', pp. 234–235; De Schaepdrijver, *De Groote Oorlog*, pp. 114–116.
 - 20 Éliane Gubin, Catherine Jacques, Valérie Piette et al., *Dictionnaire des femmes belges. XIXe et XXe siècles* (Brussels: Racine, 2006), pp. 79–81, 544–547; Éliane Gubin and Catherine Jacques, *Encyclopédie d'histoire des femmes en Belgique* (Brussels: Racine, 2018), pp. 270, 577–578.
 - 21 Episcopal Archive, Bruges, Archives Paulines: 2, war diary (1914–1916), fol. 6v–8v; KADOC, Leuven, Poperinge: leerwerkplaats kantwerkers: 486 register *van briefwisseling: transcription letter by sister Marie-Imelda to the Minister of Employment and Industry*, 28 June 1915.
 - 22 Verhaegen, *La dentelle belge*, pp. 149–160; Bruggeman, *Lace in Flanders*, pp. 64–67.
 - 23 Bruggeman, *Lace in Flanders*, p. 88.
 - 24 National Archives of Belgium, Brussels (hereafter NAB), *Aide et Protection aux Dentellières* (hereafter APD, folder 24: Letter from Mr Collart to Mr Flamme about raw materials, 15 March 1915: 'Today we received a visit from Count Henri de Limburg-Stirum, who is interested in the lace industry. He informed us that in Flanders this industry is doing quite well and that the Germans encourage it by buying gifts to send home'; Bruggeman, *Lace in Flanders*, pp. 88–89.
 - 25 NAB, APD, folder 1: Letter from the APD to the CRB on the import of thread from England, 28 April 1915.
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 - 27 Verhaegen, *La dentelle belge*, pp. 30, 137–138.
 - 28 Kellogg, *Women of Belgium*, pp. 158–166; Kellogg, *Bobbins of Belgium*, pp. 16–21; Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis*, pp. 11–18, 107–113; Bruggeman, *Lace in Flanders*, pp. 68–69, 87.
 - 29 Vrints, 'All the Butter in the Country Belongs to Us, Belgians', pp. 234–235; De Schaepdrijver, *De Groote Oorlog*, pp. 114–116.
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 - 31 NAB, *Comité National de Secours et d'Alimentation* (hereafter CNSA), folder 12: *Rapport semestriel du Comité Exécutif au 30 Juin 1915*, pp. 56–59.
 - 32 NAB, APD, folder 24: Report on the condition of lacemakers in Wingene, Ruiselede Tielt, Oostkamp and Beernem by the local mayors to the CNSA, 20 January 1915. A similar thought was expressed by the subcommittee in

- Beernem, a village near Bruges in early 1917. NAB, *APD*, folder 26: Report on the condition of lacemakers in Beernem by the subcommittee, 24 January 1917.
- 33 Glenn Adamson, *The Craft Reader* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), pp. 2–3, 135–136.
 - 34 NAB, *APD*, folder 8: Procès-verbal de la séance du 4 mars 1915.
 - 35 NAB, *APD*, folder 10: Report 31 December 1916.
 - 36 Verhaegen, *La dentelle belge*, pp. 31–32, 37–40, 189–190.
 - 37 NAB, *APD*, folder 8: Procès-verbal de la séance, 11 June 1915; folder 10: report *APD*, 31 December 1916.
 - 38 NAB, *APD*, folder 1: Règlement et organisation.
 - 39 NAB, *APD*, folder 8: Procès-verbal de la séance, 9 July 1915; NAB, *APD*, folder 25: Reply from *APD* to *Comité de la dentelle* on 23 March 1916 to admit unemployed lacemakers from Liedekerke to the lace-aid programme.
 - 40 NAB, *APD*, folder 103: Application letter from widow De Potter Osselaer in Grotenberge to the subcommittee of Zottegem, undated.
 - 41 NAB, *APD*, folder 10: Report *APD*, June 1915.
 - 42 NAB, *APD*, folder 47: Letter from the *APD* to the President of the Antwerp Provincial Committee, 15 June 1915.
 - 43 Coppens, ‘The Lace Industry in France and Belgium during the First World War’, p. 126.
 - 44 *Ibid.*, p. 132.
 - 45 Glenn Adamson, *The Invention of Craft* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 40.
 - 46 Isabella Campagnol, ‘Invisible Seamstresses: Feminine Works in Venetian Convents from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century’, in Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (eds), *Women and the Material Culture of Needlework and Textiles, 1750–1950* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 175. In this volume, see [Chapter 1](#) ‘Literary Visions of Craft and Cooperation in the European Handmade Lace Revival, c. 1840–1914’, p. XX.
 - 47 Antoon Vrints, ‘Les normes de conduite en Belgique occupée’, in James Connolly, Emmanuel Debruyne, Élise Julien and Matthias Meirlaen (eds), *En territoire ennemi 1914–1949. Expériences d’occupation, transferts, héritages* (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2018), pp. 87, 91.
 - 48 Vrints, ‘Les normes de conduite en Belgique occupée’, p. 96.
 - 49 NAB, *APD*, folder 41: Report subcommittee Torhout, 22 January 1917. Similar views were expressed later by the same subcommittee and by other subcommittees. NAB, *APD*, folder 41: Report Dendermonde, undated [possibly late 1916]; folder 97: letter from subcommittee Torhout to *APD*, 7 March 1917.
 - 50 NAB, *APD*, folder 9: Provincial committee of Limburg to CNSA, 15 November 1917.
 - 51 Sophie Delhalle, ‘Le CNSA, œuvre purement humanitaire? Les comités locaux de Secours et d’Alimentation pendant la Grande Guerre’, *Analyse de l’IHOES*, 107 (26 December 2012), 2. This is similar to what is described in [Chapter 9](#) of this volume, ‘Crafting Communist Paternalism’, p. XX.
 - 52 Kellogg, *Women of Belgium*, p. 160; Brand Whitlock, *Belgium: A Personal Narrative* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1919) vol. 1, p. 419; Kellogg,

- Bobbins of Belgium*, pp. 120–123; Coppens, *Kant uit het Koningshuis*, pp. 116–119; McMillan, ‘War, Lace, and Survival in Belgium during World War I’, p. 3.
- 53 NAB, *APD*, folder 26: S. Polland, CRB member, in Rotterdam to Viscountess de Beughem, CD member, 30 August 1917; folder 93: Local committee of Dendermonde to *APD*, 16 September 1916.
- 54 NAB, *APD*, folder 35: Regional committee Beernem to *APD* about the number of lacemakers in the region, 8 November 1916.
- 55 NAB, *APD*, folder 5: 9 November 1914; folder 6: 747 objet; folder 26: 3 August 1917; 5 September 1917.
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- 58 NAB, *APD*, folder 99: Report by subcommittee Turnhout, 1 January 1916.
- 59 NAB, *APD*, folder 99: Report by subcommittee Turnhout, 1 May 1916.
- 60 NAB, *APD*, folder 99: Report by subcommittee Turnhout, 1 January 1916. See also Report by subcommittee Turnhout, 1 February 1916. See also NAB, *APD*, folder 10: Report *APD*, first trimester 1916; folder 41: Mrs Thuysbaert de Vuyst of the Lacemakers’ National Committee section Lokeren to the *APD*, 16 January 1917.
- 61 NAB, *APD*, folder 41: Report by the subcommittee Kortrijk, 25 November 1916; folder 93: Letters from the subcommittee Dendermonde to the *APD*, 15 February 1917–22 March 1917.
- 62 Kellogg, *Bobbins of Belgium*, pp. 174–176.
- 63 NAB, *APD*, folder 8: Procès-verbal de séance spéciale du Comité, 5 April 1916.
- 64 NAB, *APD*, folder 97: Subcommittee Torhout to *APD*, 15 January 1916.
- 65 NAB, *APD*, folder 47: Provincial Committee Antwerp to *APD*, 12 June 1915.
- 66 NAB, *APD*, folder 41: Report subcommittee Tiel, December 1916.
- 67 NAB, *APD*, folder 65: Letter by lacemaker Jeanne de Vare to *APD*, 8 December 1915.
- 68 NAB, *APD*, folder 27: Report from the subcommittee Herzele, circa July 1918.
- 69 NAB, *APD*, folder 73: Letter by the subcommittee Geraardsbergen, 10 April 1917.
- 70 NAB, *APD*, folder 26: Countess de Bousies, president Provincial Lace Committee East Flanders to *APD*, 24 May 1917.
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Threads of friendship: Quaker women, ‘peasant handicrafts’ and educational reconstruction in Russia and Poland, 1916–1939

Siân Roberts

Imagination is needed to understand all that lies behind this brief account of a scheme prompted by a love of one's fellow men and carried out with friendship and devotion. From first to last it is a story of co-operation ... It is hoped that something of the story of the venture will be remembered by possessors of the beautiful embroidery work now in use in many Quaker and other households in this country and that when they become heirlooms to future generations they will still carry the fragrance of loving service which made their creation possible.¹

Between 1914 and 1924 the Friends' Emergency and War Victims' Relief Committee, the humanitarian arm of the British Religious Society of Friends, undertook lengthy periods of relief work for non-combatants in European theatres of war and famine.² Quaker relief workers were engaged in short-term emergency relief and longer-term educational and reconstruction work in Russia from 1916 to 1919, and later in Poland in 1919 to 1924, as part of their faith-inspired witness for peace and international understanding. The initiative that forms the focus of the opening reflections above, the Polish Peasant Handicraft scheme, was part of this humanitarian endeavour. It began on a small scale with Polish refugees in Russia to provide employment and training for women and girls in needlework and traditional embroidery, and was subsequently extended in Poland. The author, Birmingham Quaker Florence Mary Barrow, was intimately connected to the scheme as a relief worker in Russia, 1916–1918, and a former Head of the Quaker relief mission to Poland, 1920–1924. Writing here in a publication to mark the scheme's recent demise in 1941 in her capacity as chair of the British Friends' Polish Relief subcommittee, she mused on how the initiative would be remembered in the future. Her reflections capture a number of key issues that will form the focus of this chapter, including her conviction of the importance of the scheme, the significance of handicrafts

as part of a broader programme of educational and humanitarian reconstruction, and her understanding of the scheme as reflecting a distinctively Quaker humanitarian ethos grounded in cooperation, loving personal service and friendship. Most significantly, for the purposes of this collection, she evoked the power of the material handcrafted object as a pedagogical tool and a carrier of humanitarian emotion and memory that symbolised the threads of intimacy and connection between the women involved in the initiative as relief workers, the recipients of relief and the eventual owners of the artefacts at home in Britain.

This chapter draws on Florence Barrow's personal papers, and on the organisational archive held by the Library of the Religious Society of Friends in London, to explore the issues listed above.³ In so doing it makes a contribution to the somewhat limited historiography of the Quaker relief mission to Poland in this period.⁴ Like many of her humanitarian colleagues, Florence was an avid record keeper. She wrote detailed notes in journals and letters home, many of which she later reworked in various forms as autobiographical recollections, promotional materials and lectures. Complemented and supplemented by the organisational archive of the Religious Society of Friends, these personal records provide a detailed account of the circumstances and experiences of the displaced women, the nature and development of the relief work, and the motivations and intentions of the relief workers involved. The chapter will begin by briefly articulating the evolution of the scheme in Russia and its later extension in Poland. The emphasis will then shift to discuss the complex multiplicity of motivating factors that prompted the Quaker relief workers to develop and persist with the reconstructive handicrafts scheme. It will consider how Quaker relief workers conceived of the educational role of handicrafts as part of a broader suite of reconstructive initiatives that supported the gendered and national identities of the displaced women, before exploring how creative sociability was utilised for therapeutic purposes. The chapter will conclude with brief reflections on the relationships of power and friendship embedded in the ethos of personal service that was fundamental to Quaker relief principles.

Reconstructive handicrafts: the evolution of the scheme in Russia and Poland

In July 1916, Florence Barrow travelled to Russia as part of a team sent by the Friends' War Victims' Relief Committee. Born in 1876 as the daughter of former Birmingham Mayor, Richard Cadbury Barrow, Florence came from an affluent Quaker family that had long been active in civic, political and philanthropic causes in Birmingham and beyond. In February 1916 she had

embarked on a short period of relief work with displaced Serbs in a quarantine station in Frioul near Marseille, a journey that marked the beginning of a long career as a voluntary humanitarian relief worker and advocate for refugees that extended for several decades until her death in 1964. When Florence left for Frioul she took with her a range of skills, experiences and attitudes honed in Quaker organisational structures and in social reform and educational issues in Birmingham, including the Women's Adult School movement and the Birmingham Women's Settlement. Accompanied by her colleague Annie R. Wells, Florence settled in the area around Buzuluk in the Samara district of Russia, an area that had seen a large influx of women, children and the elderly displaced by conflict during the First World War from Eastern Poland.⁵ By early 1917 these refugees comprised about 30 per cent of the district's population, part of the extensive wartime population movements in which some six million people were displaced within the Russian Empire.⁶ Drawing on their previous experience as health and social visitors in Birmingham, initially Florence and Annie were charged with visiting the displaced people in the villages surrounding Buzuluk to assess the scale of the need before subsequently delivering emergency relief in the form of food, clothing and medical assistance.⁷ It wasn't long, however, before Florence's attention turned to the educational and occupational aspects of reconstructive work.

A handicraft industries scheme was established initially as an experiment in one village, before gradually expanding across a number of villages in the Samara district. By January 1917, Florence reported that 100 women and girls were working either in their own homes or in the workroom established in the village of Andreavka [sic].⁸ Women were employed in cleaning wool, spinning, knitting, weaving, embroidery, and making clothes and quilts under the supervision of a paid 'instructress'.⁹ The initiative was conceived as part of a broader programme of educational reconstruction. In addition to the women's workroom in Andreavka, for example, school classes for children were organised together with carpentry and shoemaking instruction for boys, and a circulating library was also introduced.¹⁰ A home for children and refugees was established at Mogotovo where the educational activities included a school taught by two Russian teachers, one of whom was herself a refugee, and evening classes for older girls. Training was provided in handicrafts and other skills including carpentry and gardening for boys, and embroidery and weaving for women and girls.

The political upheavals following the revolutions of 1917 forced the departure of the Quaker relief workers, and Quaker humanitarian attention subsequently turned to the Eastern villages of Poland where a relief team arrived in July 1919 to deliver aid to refugees who were returning from Russia. Beginning with anti-typhus medical work their focus soon expanded

to encompass the provision of food and clothing, agricultural reconstruction and the building of houses driven by the needs of the returning refugees. An agricultural training school and orphanage was established by the Friends in Kolpin, and the Polish peasant industry scheme for women was introduced working with some of the same women and girls who had participated in the Quaker scheme while displaced in Russia. Quaker promotional literature locates the beginnings of the Polish scheme in a social settlement at Pasieczna in the south-east of the country where the Friends ran a school training girls in sewing, lacemaking and basket work, and where older women were employed in embroidery.¹¹ From these beginnings the handicraft initiative expanded to other areas where the Quaker relief mission was active providing much-needed clothing and other necessary textiles. By April 1923, 1,953 people were employed spinning, 405 in weaving and 2,385 in embroidery, the vast majority of them women and girls.¹² The women earned a wage based on prices of foodstuff and agricultural produce, and if the harvest was poor then wages were raised to compensate for increased prices. Where possible, bonuses were paid at the end of the season and workers were also provided with occasional gifts such as soap or seeds.¹³

The money to pay the wages derived from international sales of the hand-crafted textiles in Britain, Switzerland, France and the United States.¹⁴ The first parcel sent to England for sale was dispatched to the London office in autumn 1920. Ada Jordan noted that it 'aroused considerable interest', and during spring and summer 1921 several thousand articles were sent to England.¹⁵ By 1926 a room in Friends' House, London, had been set aside for a permanent exhibition of the Polish textiles, and local committees distributed material for sale locally through Quaker meetings and drawing room 'exhibitions'.¹⁶ Goods were also displayed at other events such as *Ideal Homes* exhibitions, and some were also sold through shops. In 1923 goods to the value of £1,356 were sent to Britain, and barely a year later the value of goods sent had risen to £3,129.¹⁷ The scheme was overseen by British relief worker Jane S. Pontefract with the support of Florence who by this point had been promoted to the role of head of the Polish relief unit.¹⁸ Jane Pontefract collaborated with Polish women's organisations, and an Industries Committee was formed in Warsaw to facilitate this process with a Mrs Czarlinska as chair.¹⁹ The aim was not only to bolster support in Poland for the industries scheme but also to promote cooperation and a sense of Polish ownership, with an eye to its long-term future once the Quaker relief unit had withdrawn.

From 1923 therefore, Florence, Jane Pontefract and the other workers were focused on how the industries scheme could be sustained as a permanent arrangement after the withdrawal of the Friends. As head of the Friends' unit, Florence collaborated with the Polish authorities to establish a

joint committee of British and American Friends and Polish representatives known as the *Komitet Pomocy Polskim Kresom Wschodnim* (translated by Fry as the Committee for the Help of the Eastern Borders and known by the acronym KPPKW).²⁰ Its primary function was to run the Kolpin agricultural training school and orphanage (where two Quaker workers, the Polish Jadwiga Bielowieska and the Norwegian Erling Kjekstad, would remain) for five years with the ultimate aim of the Quakers withdrawing completely. The Industries Committee was constituted as a subcommittee of the KPPKW to oversee the maintenance of the handicraft industries scheme.²¹ From 1929, when sales still made £5,000 in England, two of the women who had been involved, Mrs Henoch and Mrs Czarlinska, ran the scheme assisted by a loan from the Friends' Service Council. By 1931 economic conditions in Poland and Britain severely depleted the value of sales to Britain and the scheme made a loss. Despite this downturn in fortunes it continued for some years until the death of Mrs Henoch in 1937.²² The Quaker women still directly involved in supporting the scheme were keen for it to continue and Ada Jordan and Jane Pontefract visited Warsaw in May–June 1934. Despite articulating various local problems and reductions in sales, Jordan concluded that closing down the scheme would be 'a serious loss' to the workers, both financially and because of its social purpose as a source of support for the women involved.²³ Despite Mrs Czarlinska's intention to carry on some of the work independently, the connection with the Friends was brought to an end by the German invasion and the outbreak of war in 1939. The remaining stock of embroidered goods in London was sold, with the proceeds divided among work with Polish refugees in Hungary and Romania in which Florence was involved, and the support of a Polish student at Woodbrooke Quaker settlement in Birmingham.²⁴

Peasant handicrafts, gendered identities and the humanitarian imagination

The original motivation for beginning the handicraft industries initiative in Russia is articulated in Florence Barrow's journals and correspondence. During her regular investigative visits to refugee families, she meticulously noted her impressions of the women's experiences and their emotional response to displacement, impressions that are often presented as direct quotations from the speech of the women and girls. Although it is, of course, impossible to know to what extent these quotations were mediated by Florence or the interpreter that accompanied her, the despondency and misery of the displaced women due to the loss of familiar environments and meaningful occupation is a constant refrain. The following journal

entry from September 1916, for example, recorded a visit to a village which was at that time housing some six hundred refugees in addition to the host population:

[T]hey all poured out their stories of the flight from home & the privations & deaths on the way & this longing for the home farm & all the comforts of home & the difficulties here of dear food & no work & reduced allowances. In one house they said (the women) 'we were so busy at home even in the winter looking after the animals in the farm & spinning & weaving & knitting we had hardly time to sleep & here we have nothing to do & we are very miserable' & they looked so poor things & one longed for organisation to make use of their energies & to give them happier lives. I do hope in some villages we can organise some work for winter. They were very anxious to know whatever English women find to do if they cannot spin & weave!²⁵

In accounts such as this one, the handicrafts initiative is consistently framed as a direct response to these conversations. Rather than an imposed scheme of work, the initiative is presented as a reaction to the women's desire to engage in familiar practices that they enjoyed, and a way of making pragmatic use of their existing skills in weaving, spinning, embroidery and traditional handicrafts to earn a wage and aid the relief effort.

From reading the relief workers' accounts, however, we can discern a broader role for handicrafts beyond satisfying purely practical needs. Historians of needlework have argued that as sewing and embroidery were a defining element of women's lives and identities, they were frequently deployed to achieve a variety of broader aims.²⁶ Moreover, as Maureen Goggin and Beth Tobin have contended, despite often being perceived as mundane activities, sewing and embroidery are creative practices that are deeply connected to memory and identity.²⁷ As the above quotation from Florence's journal suggests, in Russia the Quaker handicrafts initiative not only provided the women with a sense of purpose, but it also enabled a comforting association with the familiar routines of the lost and longed for home, and reinforced the women's pre-displacement gendered sense of identity as homemakers and mothers. Leora Auslander and Tara Zahra have argued that the meaning ascribed to familiar material objects and practices, and their significance to sustaining identities, is magnified in contexts of war and displacement, and this is reflected in the women's attachment to their craft tradition in this case.²⁸ Florence and her fellow relief workers presented the handcrafted textiles as a unique dimension of the national or regional identities of the displaced women. They emphasised that they were not introducing traditions that were foreign to the women and girls, but rather utilising their existing knowledge and expertise in 'the old crafts' of spinning, weaving and embroidery, thereby preserving the women's cultural inheritance and assisting with the educational transmission of traditional

artistic skills into the future.²⁹ The embroidered designs were ‘a family possession, handed down from mother to daughter’,³⁰ and villages had their own particular patterns and stitches which each woman worked almost entirely in red and black thread with the occasional use of blue. Although new colours were introduced to appeal to the British and American markets, the Friends were keen to stress that any adaptation or adoption of new colours was entirely of the women’s own accord without interference from the relief workers.³¹ Publicity materials stressed that any additional profit from the handicrafts scheme was ploughed back into educational and training activities that supported the aim of preserving traditional feminine crafts, including the establishment of a craft school for girls and young women.³² An account of an educational excursion for girl weavers from Horodéc to Warsaw, for example, described a visit to a museum handicrafts exhibition where the young women admired work produced by ‘the artistic hands of our grandmothers’.³³ The relief workers also consistently emphasised that these crafts derived from a ‘peasant’ identity. In this they were expressing an anti-modernist or anti-industrial sentiment familiar to us from other British contexts of the period including the Arts and Crafts movement, and which can be seen in contemporaneous Quaker initiatives, not least in the impetus to establish the Cadbury ‘village’ of Bournville in Birmingham.³⁴ As Amy Palmer has argued, an idealisation of ‘the peasant’ was a common feature in the period, and the term carried complex and contested connotations. Despite often being associated with negative or deprecatory attitudes, for folk revivalists such as the English *Peasant Arts Movement*, the term was imbued with romantic, nostalgic and idealised imaginations of pre-industrial crafts, and it is this romanticisation of ‘peasant handicrafts’ that is reflected in the texts produced by the relief workers in Poland.³⁵ The material objects produced by the women are thereby perceived by the relief workers as enabling the women to give voice to their national or regional identities while displaced in the way that more modern projects with female refugees centred on sewing continue to do.³⁶

As Liisa Malkki has demonstrated, material objects associated with domesticity and the home frequently played a significant part in the ‘imaginative politics’ of humanitarian activism, and Florence’s use of the material object to evoke emotional gendered connections reflects a similar role.³⁷ Sewing is a sensory practice and promotional materials advertising the end products made much of their ‘handcrafted’ nature, emphasising the intimate experience of handling beautiful textiles and evoking the presence of the maker. The perceived intimacy of this gendered connection functioned as a pedagogical tool as sewing and embroidery became a point of shared experience in the imagined relationship between the maker and the end purchaser of the goods, thereby reminding the purchaser of the need for relief and

reconstruction in Poland. The items produced and purchased were similarly gendered and evocative of feminine common experience. A promotional leaflet produced by the Friends' Service Council listed the items produced by the 'Polish Handicrafts' with prices and illustrations. Noting that they were 'Traditional designs on hand-woven linen', the goods listed are all items that would have traditionally been purchased by the women in a household, and focus on traditionally feminine activities such as 'baby feeders', children's clothing, workbags for knitting and other handicrafts, table linen, cushion covers and similar domestic items.³⁸ As pedagogical objects therefore, these small domestic objects not only conferred a humanitarian identity upon the woman buying the items but functioned as carriers of affective meaning. They carried the traces of the women who had made them and provided an imaginary encounter between women in very different circumstances, reflecting what Maureen Daly Goggin described as the 'complex web of relations that bind' the material object, its maker and its consumer.³⁹ For Florence, in the reflections that open this chapter, they signified material traces of the humanitarian reconstructive work and by extension the complex relationships and motivations running through it.

Loss, creative spaces and the therapeutic benefits of sociability

In utilising the women's skills and interest in handicrafts, Florence and her relief worker colleagues were also drawing on the fundamental role that sewing had played in Quaker feminine identities and a long history of the extension of the manufacture and sale of handcrafted goods to support feminine Quaker forms of social action and political expression.⁴⁰ Nineteenth-century Quaker women held charitable bazaars selling 'fancy' goods for the benefit of local infant schools and in aid of anti-slavery campaigns and other political causes.⁴¹ Members of Florence's extended family had previously utilised sewing, and the distribution and sale of handicrafts, as part of their educational and fundraising campaigns for the Birmingham Ladies Society for the Relief of Negro Slaves founded in 1825.⁴² Much of this activity had been undertaken in a communal or social environment, and sewing circles had traditionally been a significant element of Quaker women's social interaction.⁴³ Quaker relief workers were well placed therefore to perceive the potential therapeutic benefits of sociability for the displaced women and girls, and this was part of the attraction of establishing communal handicraft workrooms. As we have seen, in her accounts Florence stressed the traumatic emotional impact of the loss of home and the routine associated with the undertaking of familiar domestic crafts, all of which reduced the displaced women to a condition of hopelessness. She and her colleagues

were therefore quick to perceive the role that communal handicraft activities could play in reducing feelings of helplessness and isolation, as well as the benefits of establishing a sense of cheerful companionship through their focus on collaborative activity to create beautiful objects in an otherwise desolate environment. The eagerness of the women to come to the work rooms was a regular theme in her texts, and she emphasised their joy at feeling valued for their contribution to the relief effort and to their own family finances. Writing home from Andreavka [sic] in January 1917 she commented that:

The refugees are getting so keen on their work & talk about “our factory” with its three looms & sewing room & wool room ... You can hardly imagine what a difference it is making to them in every way. I only wish we could open up the work in other villages.⁴⁴

One promotional account of the Russian relief work described up to seventy women and girls at Lubimoffka [sic] sitting in circles on the floor in a large and beautiful room that the relief workers had been able to secure for the purpose, and maintained that it was often hard to persuade the women to leave at the end of the day.⁴⁵ Women and girls are described as singing cheerfully while they embroider, and expressing their pleasure in attending the workroom ‘where they could forget their sorrows and be cheerful’.⁴⁶

The intervention in Russia was not the first time that the Friends’ relief services had utilised handicrafts as a therapeutic device, and it became a common factor in many of the sites in which they were active during the First World War. Margery Fry and her Quaker colleagues in France had organised embroidery work for women, and Florence herself had earlier encountered the benefits of handicrafts in Frioul, where the women were encouraged to knit and sew.⁴⁷ In March 1916, Birmingham Quaker, and Florence’s close confidant, Catharine Albright described a visit to the Quaker camps established for Belgian refugees at Uden, Ede, Gouda, Nunspeet and Amersfoort in Holland, where she reported that women relief workers had organised employment in workrooms for women and girls making rugs, dolls and embroidery.⁴⁸ Margery Fry’s sister, and chronicler of Quaker relief work, Ruth Fry had no hesitation in ascribing a therapeutic aspect to this work in both France and Holland. Writing of Bar-le-Duc where an embroidery workroom was established, she stressed the value that the women participants placed on the social aspect of ‘coming together into a cheerful room and forgetting for a time their hardships’.⁴⁹ She later argued that Margery’s handicrafts initiatives were a ‘godsend’ for the women involved, recounting one example of a traumatised woman and her daughters who would do nothing but weep until they were ‘cured’ by working at embroidery.⁵⁰ Similarly she cited the example of a young Belgian refugee who, having lost

her siblings and her home to the war, arrived at a Dutch camp as a 'sad, silent and depressed little fugitive, but before long she was bright and happy, taking an intelligent interest in her work, and was a great help to the class'.⁵¹

While it is clearly difficult to evaluate the extent and impact of the therapeutic benefits of working at handicrafts in a sociable environment on the displaced women, what is apparent is that the relief workers believed in their efficacy at the time. Indeed a FEWVRC report credited the Russian handicraft workshops with altering 'the whole outlook of hundreds, and even thousands of those who before were existing merely in idleness and almost hopeless despair'.⁵² Friends also encouraged similarly gendered occupational handicraft initiatives among male 'enemy aliens' interned in the Isle of Man, which were perceived as countering the 'barbed-wire disease' brought about by confinement.⁵³ These beliefs reflect the growing interest in psychological and psychotherapeutic approaches that were beginning to influence discourses in progressive education and social action in this period, and which were common in the circles in which the relief workers moved when at home.⁵⁴ One of Florence's colleagues, John Rickman, a conscientious objector who trained in medicine before joining the Quaker relief team in Russia in 1916, became a psychoanalyst and drew on his experiences of Russian relief work to inform his practice.⁵⁵ Even allowing for the fact that promotional literature seeking to secure charitable donations would obviously promote these initiatives in a good light, it is clear that the Quaker workers saw their role as going beyond providing emergency relief. As the fundraising leaflet *The Rebirth of Poland* put it:

Friends aim not merely at relief work but also at the creation of a state of mind. It is not enough that people should be fed and clothed; they must also be encouraged to feel that life is worth living and that the present is pregnant with hope for the future.⁵⁶

The relief workers clearly felt a responsibility to promote reconstructive schemes that aimed to develop this sense of hope in the displaced women and girls.

In addition to hope, the 'state of mind' that was to be created encompassed a sense of self-respect and self-reliance. As with previous Quaker relief initiatives these characteristics would be developed through meaningful occupation that enabled the women, and by association their families, to become self-supporting and avoid a culture of dependency. As Florence reflected in her journal, work 'would help their self-respect more than just giving things'.⁵⁷ Rebecca Gill and others have noted that the development of self-respect and self-reliance was a common feature of Quaker relief culture and reflected earlier attitudes to 'self-help' and a belief in the need to avoid 'pauperising' the recipients shared by domestic philanthropic organisations

such as the Charity Organisation Society.⁵⁸ It also resonated with earlier Quaker philanthropic initiatives, and some of the relief workers' language and activities echo the rhetoric and practices of Elizabeth Fry in her gendered penal care work with female prisoners in the early nineteenth century. Fry similarly employed sewing as a means of providing hope and a skill to provide a living on release, while simultaneously supporting the development of appropriate forms of female identity and inculcating middle-class ideologies of female self-respect and dignity.⁵⁹ In a similar vein, Elizabeth O'Donnell has demonstrated how women Friends in Newcastle not only established a Friendly Society Sewing Meeting in 1811 to make and distribute garments among the poor but also promoted the use of sewing in industrial schools for working-class girls.⁶⁰ Appropriately gendered education and employment, grounded in established ideas of female domesticity, were the traditional keys to reform, redemption and hope.

We can detect similar discourses of self-respect, and a disciplinary impulse for moral regulation, in the comments of some of the Quaker relief workers. A fundraising pamphlet for the Polish handicrafts scheme lauded the way it encouraged honest and thrifty behaviour and 'its steadying effect on the younger workers', while in her account of handicraft work in the Dutch camps for Belgian refugees Ruth Fry quoted a relief worker who argued that it prevented young women from engaging in the more 'demoralising influences of the camp life into which they may so easily fall'.⁶¹ The relief workers' accounts also reflect a civilising mission informed by developmental and Orientalist discourses about Eastern Europe, ideas that were common among British women who served in the area during the First World War and among some Polish social activists.⁶² Part of the motivation to equip the displaced women and girls for a better future through a programme of occupational and educational reconstruction was underpinned by such discourses that emphasised the importance of education to 'a backward country like Poland' and the need to raise its 'primitive standard of living'.⁶³ Visiting some of the women who had participated in the scheme in 1936, Florence noted how beautifully kept their houses were, a characteristic that she ascribed to the benefit of interaction with the Friends' relief workers.⁶⁴ These echoes of domestic philanthropic discourses are, of course, not surprising given that many of the relief workers came to international relief from a background in voluntary philanthropic initiatives. Florence herself had been active in the Birmingham Women's Settlement which ran a workroom for sewing and other handicrafts with the dual aim of equipping women of the urban poor with employable skills while also encouraging self-reliance and self-respect. This being said, for Florence and some of her colleagues, this emphasis on developing self-reliance and self-respect sat alongside a belief that Quaker humanitarian practice was rooted above

all in the 'loving service' carried out with sympathy and 'in friendship and devotion' referred to in the reflections that opened this chapter and to which the final part of this chapter will now turn.

The fragrance of friendship and loving service

In the reflections that opened this chapter Florence framed the embroidered artefacts as commemorative and pedagogical objects that carried within them a lingering sensory memory of a humanitarian intervention motivated by friendship and 'loving service', and these sentiments are a common refrain in her published and unpublished writings from Russia and Poland. As she wrote in one autobiographical essay, she believed that 'Living in the villages among the people we were able to become their friends.'⁶⁵ The outlook of Florence, and some of her colleagues, was increasingly informed by discussions within British Quakerism on the need for a new socially and politically radical outlook in the interwar period as the basis for future peace, and this ethos increasingly informs their humanitarian practice. A Committee on War and Social Order was created by the Society of Friends in 1915 at the instigation of socialist Quakers, some of whom were closely associated with the Woodbrooke Quaker settlement in Birmingham.⁶⁶ The Committee drew up a more radical social and political critique than Friends had hitherto ascribed to, and which was adopted by the 1918 Yearly Meeting as the eight 'Foundations of a True Social Order'. Lucy Fryer Morland, a head-teacher from Croydon who was a member of the committee, expanded on the theme when she delivered the Swarthmore Lecture in 1918, in which she advocated that Quaker social and educational work should aim at 'doing good *with* rather than ... *to* any set of people'.⁶⁷

As a birthright member of the Religious Society of Friends, Florence's outlook on relief and charitable work was rooted in her Quaker faith, which emphasised personal service led by God. It was this faith, combined with this growing political and social consciousness, that lay at the root of her understanding of friendship and the significance of the quality of the personal dimension in the relationship between relief worker and recipient. She was politicised by her experiences during the First World War and joined the Independent Labour Party in 1919 with her brother Harrison following his release from a six-month prison sentence for contravening the Defence of the Realm Act.⁶⁸ As Eve Colpus has demonstrated, early twentieth-century philanthropic women from a range of religious denominations drew on a discourse of 'friendliness' based in 'Christian concepts of friendship and personal sympathy' to articulate their motivation for engaging in philanthropic work.⁶⁹ Although this utilisation of the language of friendship was therefore

not peculiar to Quakers, developing a meaningful personal relationship with recipients was a fundamentally important aspect of humanitarian practice for Quaker women relief workers. Tammy Proctor, Peter Gatrell, and Fiona Reid and Sharif Gemie have all argued that, despite the hierarchical circumstances in which they operated and the fact that they were not immune from discriminatory or stereotypical attitudes, the significance placed on the quality of the personal relationship in service by Quaker women relief workers resulted in the Friends' relief services exhibiting a different ethos to other humanitarian agencies, with at least some Friends demonstrating more inclusive, egalitarian and politically informed practices.⁷⁰ Because Florence perceived relief work as a constructive part of her witness for peace through the promotion of international friendship, then friendship between women across national, language and cultural divides became a manifestation of this ethos in practice.

Assessing the nature and quality of this 'friendship' is difficult in a relationship where, however well-meaning the relief workers, there was an inevitable imbalance of power. In this respect Jane Haggis and Margaret Allen's work on the ambiguous and complex ways in which concepts of friendship operated in the texts of British Protestant missionary women provides a useful parallel. Haggis and Allen argue that the concept of 'friendship' was measured theoretically along a continuum or spectrum reflecting differing qualities and dynamics of power where 'both solidarity and subjugation might be relatively intertwined'.⁷¹ An understanding that friendship could exhibit different characteristics in distinct societal and religious contexts was also part of Quaker female tradition, and Naomi Pullin has argued in relation to seventeenth and eighteenth-century Quaker women that although in principle all humanity was to be 'loved as friends', deep friendship and intimacy was retained for a smaller number of fellow Quakers.⁷² We can interpret Florence's understanding of 'friendship' in relation to the refugee women in a similar light, and the depth of her relationship with them is clearly of a different nature to the intimate attachment born out of shared faith, interests and kinship networks that she felt towards her closest Quaker female friends.

Despite these differing degrees of friendship, it is clear from her letters and journals that she frequently shared moments of friendly intimacy with the refugee women, including one occasion in Russia where they came together to throw her up and down in the air in a playful gesture.⁷³ Many of the women and children with whom the Friends worked in Poland were women and families who they had known and previously assisted in Russia. Indeed, while working with the Quaker team in Poland, Florence made a very conscious effort to track down the women and children that she had earlier befriended in the Russian villages. In one autobiographical essay, for

example, she described a long journey to track down Tatiana Wojtuchowicz and her family, including a daughter Vera who had been four years-old when the family first met Florence in Russia in 1916.⁷⁴ She also maintained formal and informal connections with some of the Polish women for many years after her term as a relief worker in the field came to an end in 1924, and corresponded with some for several years, often responding to requests for financial help. Florence also maintained an official link to the industries scheme, and the Kolpin Orphanage and training school, through the successor Quaker bodies to the FEWVRC. As part of this role she visited Poland on a number of occasions during the 1920s and 1930s, including a 'friendship' visit undertaken with Jane Pontefract in 1936, during which they visited many of the women to whom she had been closest.⁷⁵ She chaired the Friends' Service Council's Russia and Poland subcommittee throughout the interwar period and in this capacity coordinated relief for Polish refugees in Hungary and elsewhere during the Second World War.

Conclusion

Handicraft initiatives with displaced women and girls formed a fundamental part of the humanitarian practice of Quaker relief workers during and after the First World War, and the Polish industries scheme represents the largest and longest sustained manifestation of this practice. Organising the women in the handicrafts initiative fulfilled an obvious practical function of addressing the need for clothing and blankets while also providing a vital income stream for the displaced workers. Alongside these practical considerations the scheme had educational and therapeutic aims that were far broader, and which formed part of a holistic approach to humanitarian practice that went beyond the provision of emergency relief to encompass longer-term reconstructive and therapeutic aspirations. Sewing workrooms provided a social, emotional and creative outlet that sustained the displaced women's morale and validated and reinforced elements of their identities, helping to engender a sense of hope for the future. The handcrafted domestic textile goods produced in the workshops became pedagogical objects that played their part in the development of an imaginative humanitarian appeal, symbolically evoking an affective relationship between the maker, the relief worker and the end purchaser. For Florence Barrow and some of the other women relief workers involved, the material object carried an enduring memory of their gendered programme of humanitarian support for other women in need and symbolised their life-long commitment to the possibilities of personal service in the cause of peace and international friendship.

Notes

- 1 Florence M. Barrow, 'Foreword', in Ada Jordan, *Polish Peasant Handicrafts: An Account of Friends Polish Industries Work, 1919–1939* (London: Friends' Service Council, 1941), pp. 3–4.
- 2 The Friends' War Victims' Relief Committee had delivered humanitarian relief in Europe during the Franco-Prussian War and was re-established in 1914. It amalgamated with the Friends Emergency Committee (formed to assist 'enemy aliens' in Britain in 1914) to become the Friends' Emergency and War Victims' Relief Committee from 1919 and was active in several countries including France, Belgium, Holland, Russia, Austria, Germany and Poland. Its activities were later subsumed into the Friends' Service Council. The acronym FEWVRC will be used throughout this chapter as that is the form used by the Library of the Religious Society of Friends in its archival catalogue. Friends are also known as Quakers and both terms will be used interchangeably in this chapter. For a general overview of Quaker relief in this period see A. Ruth Fry, *A Quaker Adventure: The Story of Nine Years Relief and Reconstruction* (New York: Frank-Maurice Inc., 1926), and John O. Greenwood, *Quaker Encounters Volume 1: Friends and Relief* (York: William Sessions Ltd., 1975).
- 3 At the time of writing, this collection of Florence Barrow's personal papers is held by the Barrow family. However, negotiations are underway for the papers to be deposited at the Library of the Religious Society of Friends in London (hereafter LRSF). Some of the material held by the family is duplicated and complemented in smaller collections of Florence Barrow's personal papers at the LRSF, collection references Temp MSS 873, Temp MSS 590, and correspondence and records relating to her is also preserved as part of the official archive of the FEWVRC held at the Library.
- 4 See also Marek Wajsbium, 'Quakers and Poland, 1661–1919', *The Polish Review*, 11:2 (1966), 11–22; Lyndon S. Back, 'The Quaker Mission in Poland: Relief, Reconstruction, and Religion', *Quaker History*, 101:2 (2012), 1–23; Siân Roberts, 'Seeing, Feeling, Educating: British and American Quakers and the Visual Record of Humanitarian Relief Work in Russia and Poland, 1916–1924', in Tim Allender, Ines Dussel, Ian Grosvenor and Karin Priem (eds), *Appearances Matter: The Visual in Educational History* (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 129–154.
- 5 Anne Rebecca Wells was the daughter of John and Elizabeth Wells of Sibford Gower. She attended Woodbrooke, 1904–1905, and was subsequently employed as a health visitor in Birmingham. See obituary, 'Anne R. Wells', *The Friend* (26 October 1956), p. 945.
- 6 Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 3. See also Mariusz Korzeniowski, 'Refugees from Polish Territories in Russia during the First World War', in Peter Gatrell and Liubov Zhvanko (eds), *Europe on the Move: Refugees in the Era of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 66–87.

- 7 For accounts of this work, see Fry, *A Quaker Adventure*; Greenwood, *Quaker Encounters Volume 1*; Richenda Scott, *Quakers in Russia* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1964).
- 8 Barrow Family Papers (hereafter BFP), letter from Florence Barrow, 1 January 1917.
- 9 BFP, Friends' War Victims' Relief Committee, *Relief Work in Russia: The Progress of the Enterprise* (London: Friends' War Victims' Relief Committee, 1917), pp. 21–23.
- 10 BFP, Friends' War Victims' Relief Committee, *The Unchanging Russia* (London: Friends' War Victims' Relief Committee, [1918]), pp. 10–11.
- 11 BFP, Friends' Emergency War Victims' Relief Committee, *The Rebirth of Poland* (London: Friends' Emergency War Victims' Relief Committee, [c.1921]), p. 3; Jordan, *Polish Peasant Handicrafts*, p. 6.
- 12 BFP, Friends' Emergency War Victims' Relief Committee, *Five Years in Poland 1919–1924* (London: Friends' Emergency War Victims' Relief Committee, 1924).
- 13 Jordan, *Polish Peasant Handicrafts*, p. 12.
- 14 BFP, Friends' Council for International Service, *What Friends Are Doing in Poland*, (London: Friends' Council for International Service, 1926).
- 15 Jordan, *Polish Peasant Handicrafts*, p. 1.
- 16 Friends' Council for International Service, *What Friends Are Doing in Poland*.
- 17 Jordan, *Polish Peasant Handicrafts*, pp. 12, 10.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 10; Friends' Council for International Service, *What Friends Are Doing in Poland*.
- 19 Jordan, *Polish Peasant Handicrafts*, p. 10; Fry, *A Quaker Adventure*, p. 288.
- 20 Fry, *A Quaker Adventure*, p. 299.
- 21 *Ibid.*; Jordan, *Polish Peasant Handicrafts*, pp. 10–11.
- 22 Jordan, *Polish Peasant Handicrafts*, pp. 15–18.
- 23 BFP, 'Reports from Ada Jordan and Jane Pontefract of their visit to Warsaw May/June, 1934'.
- 24 Jordan, *Polish Peasant Handicrafts*, p. 19.
- 25 LRSE, MSS 590/1, letter from Florence Barrow, 19 September 1916, pp. 4–5.
- 26 Lorinda Cramer, *Needlework and Women's Identity in Colonial Australia* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), p. 2; see also Johanna Amos and Lisa Binkley, 'Introduction: Stitching the Self', in Johanna Amos and Lisa Binkley (eds), *Stitching the Self: Identity and the Needle Arts* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), pp. 1–17.
- 27 Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (eds), *Women and Things, 1750–1950: Gendered Material Strategies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1–2.
- 28 Leora Auslander and Tara Zahra, 'Introduction. The Things They Carried: War, Mobility, and Material Culture', in Leora Auslander and Tara Zahra (eds), *Objects of War: The Material Culture of War and Displacement* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2018), pp. 1–21.
- 29 BFP, Friends' Service Council, *Polish Peasant Handicrafts* (London: Friends' Service Council, n.d.).

- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Jordan, *Polish Peasant Handicrafts*, p. 9.
- 32 Friends' Emergency War Victims' Relief Committee, *The Rebirth of Poland*, p. 3; Jordan, *Polish Peasant Handicrafts*, pp. 13–15.
- 33 Jordan, *Polish Peasant Handicrafts*, pp. 13–15.
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Politics woven as missionary craft: the carpets of the White Fathers and Sisters from the 1920s

Bertrand Taithe

Like several of the chapters in this book, the research for this chapter began with an encounter in the archive. Yet it was not the handling of yellowed fragments of woven material which started this enquiry but their absence in the archives of the *Société des Missionnaires d'Afrique* (White Fathers). It was much like how Carolyn Steedman began her classic article 'What a rag rug means' by noting that she had misremembered a rag rug in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* novel. Where she had remembered a rag rug, she found that an oiled piece of fabric was set there instead.¹ In the period of the novel, rags were too valuable to be turned into domestic craft. This absence, for Steedman, started a discussion of the meanings of domesticity. I began my research into carpets because I could not see them. I only knew they had once existed because the space for them was identified on a rough sketch of a display. This display was meant to be part of an itinerant exhibition starting in Marseille in 1922 and a similar display was featured in the colonial exhibition organised by Hubert Lyautey in 1931.² The presence of these rugs at the Vincennes exhibition to illustrate sub-Saharan colonial achievements made them highly emblematic. The exhibition itself is regarded by many historians of the French empire as the apex of triumphalism for the civilising mission and French interwar imperialism.³ Somewhere, in this cornucopia of imperial goods, there was a rug.

In the records, however, the rugs also appeared as a drain on resources when, having been displayed in Paris, they failed to sell. Their commercial lack of success is to be contrasted with their iconic status. The rugs won a gold medal in their category in Marseille in 1923 and they were consistently advertised as the most interesting export from the West African colony.⁴ As a canvas for the representation of missionary work and the good work done by its '*ouvrirs*', the missionary pedagogical workshops for the young and the poor, the carpets were thus emblematic – worth shipping from Ouagadougou – and commercially problematic. This chapter focuses on the

travels and travails of carpet making in the context of missionary development work. It seeks to understand them – as objects crafted in Africa – and to chart their changing meanings within the broader context of a specific colonial project. Arguably, carpet making was intent on providing more than domestic furnishing; its promoters sought to use the work they entailed in order to redress African gender and social inequalities within a Roman Catholic framework. Beyond focusing on the charitable undertaking of educating the young into a ‘craft’, this chapter will consider how these products contributed to the commercial identity of the missionaries and fed into the ‘liquid politics’ of fair trade production and consumption, to use the concepts of Zygmunt Bauman as employed by Eleftheria Lekakis who stresses its ‘precariousness, fluctuation and disorientation’, all very apt qualifiers of a humanitarian project torn between contradictory impulses.⁵

The White Fathers and Sisters in 1929–1931

Historians of the French colonial empire have long focused on the ‘empire of God’ and how religious organisations of all denominations invested in new territories throughout the nineteenth century.⁶ Many debated whether the sword followed the cross or the degree of harmony between colonial administrators and missionaries. The former seemed often unwilling to challenge too directly the groups they governed, while the latter were often prone to subvert social and gender norms in order to open up new avenues for conversions. Within the French and Belgian empires, the most visible religious organisation was undoubtedly the *Société des Missionnaires d’Afrique*. Created in the late 1860s by one of the most significant bishops of the nineteenth century in France, Monseigneur Lavigerie, the society was a tool devised to rapidly expand the Catholic Church in North Africa. Despite some initial successes in challenging the Algerian political administration during the great famine of 1866–1868 the society failed to convert North Africa to the Church of Saint Augustine.⁷ Lavigerie’s political role in the Catholic Church ended on a controversial climax when he had his Algerian orphans play the Marseillaise and he raised a toast to the officers of the French navy – signalling thus that the Catholic Church recognised that the French Third Republic was here to stay and that Catholics should engage in democratic politics, however precarious their status might be when facing anticlerical modern politics.⁸

Following the extravagant funeral of Lavigerie, the White Fathers took a more defensive and less prominent role in North Africa. The heavily racialised politics of the colonial territory made them seem too subversive of social boundaries, and anticlerical parties led a sustained campaign against

them.⁹ Their charitable work continued throughout the period and endured even after independence, but they resolutely sought to defend rather than expand dramatically the inheritance of their founding father.¹⁰

As the Algerian space gradually closed on missionaries and restricted them to social and charitable work within the narrow confines of a heavily racialised environment, the conquest of Sahelian Africa around 1900 opened up new horizons for missionary work. The desert itself became a blank canvas for mystical missionary work through the austere missionary efforts of Père de Foucault, while caravans departing from North Africa headed for the Niger river. In the Niger river region, the White Fathers carved out an exclusive territory which enabled them to renew themselves and develop new colonial synergies with the French empire. This territory for conversion became dominated by its leaders, who received the title of apostolic vicar and bishop. The history of French Soudan and later Haute Volta (Burkina Faso) cannot be written without reference to Mgr. Joanny Thévenoud (1878–1949) who dominated the new Church and structured its educational provisions, dispensaries, orphanages and '*ouvrirs*'.¹¹

Historians of the region noted that missionaries could, by sheer obstinacy and longevity, resist most political pressures applied by the colonial administrators and often enrol them into their own colonial projects – negotiating with the republican powers a space for their work in exchange for their colonial achievements.¹² To resist occasional pressures they made use of their own humanitarian networks and channels of communication to politicians in France and they enjoyed, from the 1860s, popular support that went beyond the parishioners who gave to them in church collections.

As a new organisation in the 1860s, the society had developed a resolutely commercial approach to fundraising. It sought and obtained aristocratic patronage across the world but it also identified causes that motivated public campaigns of fundraising. The great famine of 1868 in Algeria had offered the opportunity to rescue 'orphans', and orphanages were run alongside other organisations devoted to women and the elderly excluded by society. The focus on education followed common tropes of Catholic social work in France and Europe, but it went beyond its training remit to become explicitly productive and profit generating. Indeed, the production of agricultural surpluses for the orphan villages created by Lavigerie was a matter of life or death, but it was also meant to be a demonstration of the benefits of conversion to the Catholic way of life and accommodation with modernity.

As a result of their agricultural and artisanal reputation, missionaries were the object of many copyright infringements and disputes. Wine dealers and rogue businessmen retailed unendorsed liquors, wines or champagnes to Catholic consumers whose 'liquid politics' were all too literal. These

scams could indeed function because missionaries and religious orders in France more generally had made artisanal products a source of income and had developed high standards of quality. The White Fathers would sue and systematically hunt out any infringements to their copyright because it had genuine value on the charitable and wider commercial markets and represented both a source of income and identity.¹³ The White Fathers were a brand and this brand participated simultaneously in a broader ecology of colonial commercial and religious fundraising trademarks.¹⁴

In many respects the products of the missionaries were demonstrative of missionary work itself. Other evidence of satisfactory missionary work could only be produced statistically: the data returned to the Propaganda Fide on the number of converts (live and in *articulo mortis*) could indeed figure on displays, but it lacked the materiality of a crowd of children demonstrating new skills in a controlled environment. Many photographs and postcards of educational ventures provided opportunities for the representation of that work (not to mention live performances as we will see below). The White Fathers society was twinned with a female religious organisation, the White Sisters, whose role was officially under the control of the male order. The archives are replete with the correspondence between formidable administrators which show that, in practice, the sisters developed their own agenda and ruled themselves afar from their brothers. To them was given the more specific duties of managing workshops and female professional education.

The Society of Missionaries as colonial developers

The Society of Missionaries started its pedagogical and craftwork in Algeria and, after the protectorate, in Tunisia. In this it emulated the general pattern of feminine education through needlework prevalent in orphanages in France.¹⁵ In Algeria, where the missionaries had established two villages of orphans resulting from the famines of 1866–1888, they intended to demonstrate through labour that Christian Arabs could exist autonomously from colonists and herald a golden age of Christian revival. The two villages soon became anomalies in the colonial landscapes and survived, rather than thrived, in a difficult economic context. Other orphans had been educated and skilled for more urban trades and they soon disappeared as a group in the midst of the new Algerian proletariat. While some reached higher education and were trained in France and Malta for medicine or religious service, most children were educated in the arts and crafts of rural society. In this the missionaries reflected a general defiance of the vices of urban life and their endorsement of the rural ideal of colonial development.¹⁶ They thus

set up model farms in Algeria and Tunisia which served several purposes: they were training institutions and experimental farms. They showed off the social worth of missionary work to North Africans and French colonists and they illustrated the modernity of the Catholic social project. As such, they became prized destinations for visitors from the earliest days of colonial tourism. The emphasis on 'local' arts and crafts arose thus from this dual desire to be working in Africa within a missionary tradition of inculturation (the White Fathers wore the *gandura*, a North African item of clothing for instance)¹⁷ and to 'restore' the glory of African society through Catholic work. This notion of restoration was essential to the ideological belief system of a church seeking the traces of pre-Islamic Catholic presence in every ruin or archaeological vestiges, but also in any pattern or symbol replicated in traditional fabrics. In particular, missionaries of the nineteenth century sought vestigial Christian symbolism in textile and carpet patterns, identifying among the Kabyle carpet makers a significant range of possibly Christian patterns, such as crosses of various shapes or crypto-Christian symbols which might augur a return to the faith of the ancient world.¹⁸ These fantasies of crypto-Christianism were particularly strong in North Africa where a Christian church had indeed been prosperous before the Arab invasion of the seventh century, but it became more illusory when one went further south in Africa.

Despite the limited scientific value of these early genealogies of Christian symbols, missionaries became de facto experts in North African textiles and rugs.¹⁹ This expertise was produced at a time of considerable social disruption – a period of conquest which witnessed a net decline of North African populations and a generalised disruption of trade and social hierarchies.²⁰ At a time of proletarianisation and rural exodus, the context of traditional textile production in North Africa declines with many aspects of pre-colonial society. The missionary Domaine of Saint Joseph in Thibar thus became more than a model farm and factory; it became a *conservatoire* – a preservation of skills and a self-proclaimed school of 'traditional North African skills' transmitted through the work of the White Sisters. The craft was set up as a paradox: a modern colonial restoration of skilled arts against the demise of that art because of colonial modernity. It offered an alternative to the unbridled forces of secular capitalism. Purchasing the products of Thibar could also become a form of support for an alternative development of the colonies and a challenge to ongoing changes in North Africa. Critics of the White Fathers and Sisters often articulated this political challenge more explicitly than the missionaries themselves.

As Daniela Melfa points out, it is extremely difficult to reclaim the voice of the subaltern in this social and cultural experiment when most of the archives are so clearly constructed around the priorities of a missionary

organisation.²¹ The images we have through postcards produced for visitors, and for the dissemination of the work of the missionaries, reveal the contrast between the diminutive stature of children and imposing rugs of very different designs and styles. Smaller prayer rugs, essential for Muslim rituals, are pinned to the wall and frame the statue of the Virgin Mary of Lourdes.

The *ouvroir* of Thibar represented in the postcard in [Figure 7.1](#) retailed products of high quality and the school became archetypal of social Catholic work in North Africa. Catholic social work in relation to technical education followed the precepts of Abbot Louis Roussel whose educational theories aimed at developing all the senses of children.²² His pioneering school in Auteuil was aimed at solving social delinquency and at reforming – *redressement* or rehabilitation – street urchins of Paris.²³ Work in his ideal school was intended to equip children with a trade but was primarily aimed at developing them into upright citizens with an ethos of labour which would lead them to grace: ‘to make children into skilled and laborious workers, give them serious work habits, and little by little, [through work] inspire grace and love’.²⁴

The labour of love thus implied discipline and results – the newspapers offered regular coverage of the orphan apprentices and one could subscribe to the oeuvre and/or purchase its products. As a template for modern French Catholic *ouvroirs* the philosophy of Abbot Roussel offered a combination of discipline and ergonomics entirely centred on the children learning new



Figure 7.1 *L'Ouvroir Saint Joseph de Thibar*, 1929

gestures in a clean and orderly environment as remote as possible from the corrupting atmosphere of the industrial workshops. This did not mean that all orphans would be inured to the technologies of their era. To the contrary, they would become highly skilled workers engaging with machines but on their own terms.

This idyllic vision of child labour as education lent itself well to the colonial project, which had to meet stringent economic demands and figure out the means of transforming societies to open them up to salvation. In a striking example of this exchange between colonial missionary work and metropolitan social work, the *oeuvre des apprentis d'auteuil* was saved by Daniel Brottier, a missionary, during the First World War who then led its modernisation and gained state public recognition '*oeuvre d'utilité publique*'.²⁵ There were nevertheless some fundamental differences between metropolitan and colonial contexts. Unlike little Parisians, children from North Africa or the Niger region were not just led astray from their Christian culture and values, they were alien to it and their alterity was to be corrected through labour and trading. Meanwhile, the fruit of their labour was meant to sustain them. When it came to child labour, the township of Tlemcen, then the commercial centre for Algerian carpet making, sought in vain a dispensation from the French law of 15 January 1921 which banned girls under the age of eleven from working.²⁶ Under the terms of apprenticeships and working educational provisions, however, the law did not apply to the child workers of missionary schools.

Within the religious establishments of the White Fathers a gender segregation operated which mirrored the differences between the two organisations. The White Fathers focused on agriculture, cattle rearing, including developing a new race of milking cows,²⁷ and wine making, gradually engaging with industrial weaving and high-volume textile production. The bishop of Ouagadougou was thus on the board of the colony as a 'notable agriculturalist and industrialist'.²⁸ Meanwhile, the White Sisters were invited to nurture domestic and artisanal crafts and carpet making which could be compatible with the strictly separate spheres of North African life.²⁹ Nursing roles from the 1860s were feminised, and these extended to some scientific training in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1930s when the Church lent its support to the campaign against trypanosomiasis (sleeping sickness).

Translating North Africa into Sahelian Africa

The White Sisters arrived in the Niger and Volta regions in 1912, relatively late compared with the White Fathers who had followed immediately after the conquest. Jean Marie Bouron argues that compared to their male

counterparts the sisters were better educated as a group and could thus hold their ground in the inevitable tug of war between the gendered groups.³⁰ Opening schools and *ouvroirs* alongside dispensaries were the immediate concerns of the White Sisters, and these schools targeting girls in particular were set in a specific social context and with particular gender political aims. According to Florence Bobin, the sisters aimed at reforming society at large. Their aim was to equip young women against forced marriages, to educate the subaltern and to upskill the poor.³¹ Furthermore, she argues that producing highly trained and accomplished young women could also be read as a conversion strategy, a kind of honey pot for new converts through matrimony. They thus set up a weaving school in Koupéla and a domestic skills school in Navrongo. Both focused on labour and physical education through labour. Sister Marie André du Sacré Coeur developed social work aimed at women and, with other sisters, campaigned to raise the legal age of consent and marital consent.³² The culmination of their lobbying was undoubtedly the Mandel decree of 1939 which regulated under-age marriage.³³ The *ouvroirs* were thus engaged in a specific militant campaign to change the condition of girls in African society. In this they presented a different approach to modernity and exposed a fracture in the religious colonial programme. While the White Fathers tended to be rather more positive in their defence of traditional African society (as witnessed in their contribution to the Save the Children conference in Geneva on 22–25 June 1931),³⁴ the sisters developed ‘social work before it had a name’ and clearly identified their role in gendered and emancipatory terms (within the framework of Catholic marital order) from the shackles of African traditional marriage customs.³⁵

The rugs

Carpet making, as illustrated in the White Fathers’ series of postcards (Figure 7.2), thus emerged in this context and became a complex industry. As Laura Fortin has shown, it challenged the local modes of production on several grounds: and it was primarily a female activity for the *ouvroirs* when men traditionally wove in the region; it used wool when cotton was the customary yarn.³⁶ In her anthropological enquiry she charts how transformative this innovation was and how Yoruba women to this day have turned this textile culture into a traditional craft which now claims ancient origins and which denies the influence of the missionaries. The *ouvroirs* of the White Sisters which focused on carpet making employed between 100 female workers in 1921 and 230 in 1928 when they attempted to sell their goods at the colonial exhibition.



Figure 7.2 The first carpet produced by the *ouvroir* of Ségou, c. 1920, author's copy is dated 1938 and was sent by a White Sister to a friend

The carpet itself was a deep pile woollen carpet, 3 to 4 cm thick, which imported its techniques from North Africa and the Thibar school of carpet making. The carpets of Ouagadougou were often compared with those of Morocco for their quality as ‘tapis de haute laine’.³⁷ But, unlike the *ouvroirs* of North Africa, it could not rely on established patterns or pre-colonial deep pile carpet making. While the North African carpets could claim to be rooted in the practices of the region and to be exemplars of craftwork in a traditional art,³⁸ the *ouvroirs* of Sahelian Africa were innovations in every aspect. They had no local tradition of wool weaving to rely on; the sheep that produced the wool were themselves imports by the White Fathers’ farms. To invent a tradition and idioms for carpet making, they transliterated African patterns used on other textiles or walls and shaped a specific style. These African patterns would have been familiar only to the art world of France at the time.

A fine example of how this might be explored further is in the group portrayal of weavers and missionaries at the exhibition in 1931. The papier mâché and plaster copies on display at the colonial exhibition³⁹ clearly mirrored the patterns of the carpet’s edges, while the rooms of the building contained workshops and artisanal products available for purchase.⁴⁰ In many ways the exhibit and the product mirrored each other, and the visitors were invited to admire workers and goods, the ‘human colonial zoo’ in its profound alterity,⁴¹ and to engage aesthetically with the goods missionary works had brought into existence.

As the photograph of the mission's delegation of nuns, bishop and workers displayed at the Colonial Exhibition (Figure 7.3) showed, there needed to be a background for their activities. Equipped with this idiom and these vernacular architectural references, the carpets made sense in their locality (or temporarily in a colonial exhibition). Commercially, however, their rationale was lost in translation. Despite the best effort of their promoters and many positive accounts of their technical qualities, they failed to impress in France. In contrast with North African carpets, which had been traded commercially in Europe for hundreds of years, Sahelian rugs lacked an obvious frame of reference or a pre-existing market in the West despite the vitality of African cloth making for centuries.⁴² The colonial project and politics they demonstrated needed further context to make them successful items for 'ethical consumption'.

Nevertheless, the missionaries persevered. The rugs and their weavers were part of an 'exhibitionary complex', to employ Tony Bennett's concept, which framed aesthetics as well as a raft of political networks.⁴³ The visits in 1922, 1931 and 1937 were part of a transformative engagement with a complex nexus of colonial relationships around '*mise en valeur*', as the French termed their developmentalist agenda. The exhibition spectacle may



Figure 7.3 Mgr. Thévenoud surrounded by converts and young weavers from the *ouvroirs* of Ouagadougou

have been too exotic in many ways. The format of human zoos, found in most colonial exhibitions of the interwar years, distanced the spectators and visitors from the artisans, as Walter Putnam argues. Meanwhile, the craftwork they produced acquired limited relevance to consumption patterns and were marginalised as ‘curiosities’ rather than the masterpieces the exhibition organisers intended to highlight.⁴⁴ This integration in a wider colonial objective was most clearly set out during the 1937 colonial exhibition exclusively devoted to ‘*arts et techniques appliqués à la vie moderne*’ held at the Ile des Cygnes near Paris. This exhibition had the specific aim of signifying how indigenous arts and craft faithful to the tradition needed protection. ‘If effective measures had been taken in their favour, they would have been forgotten and it would have been a great shame as these crafts reflect (*traduisent*) the character of races.’⁴⁵ The weavers of ‘*tapis en haute laine*’ were thus set out in a workroom in which they demonstrated these ‘ancient’ skills. The focus on racial order, as demonstrated by craftwork, thus comforted indigeneity while reinforcing a humanitarian narrative of colonial presence rescuing arts and craft from the march of industrialisation and oblivion.⁴⁶ The fact that these ancient skills were by then no more than twenty-five years old in the guise displayed was entirely lost. As other chapters of this book make clear, a humanitarian approach rooting for antiquity and tradition could be drawing its genealogies in a very eclectic manner. The skills were ancient but they were not indigenous or traditional. This did not matter, largely because this exhibition in France was significantly about shoring up the humanitarian narrative of colonialism as well as diffusing any anti-colonial feeling grounded in strict protectionism. The apprentices of the White Sisters fitted well with the exhibition as a whole, since it was clearly a modernised form of arts and crafts that the organisers wished to promote: ‘The best artisans of Soudan and Guinée work in this familiar environment with the tools perfected by the ingenuity of the directors of the firms who employ them.’ This followed the political lines set out from 1932 by governor general Brévié of Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF, French West Africa) who decided to ‘renovate indigenous artisanal crafts’ as part of the wider colonial development plans.⁴⁷

As an industrial project, many historians have emphasised how this project was reactionary. By emphasising artisanal craft it effectively sought to prevent the prospect of genuine industrial competition from the colonies at a time of economic retrenchment in France. Catherine Hodeir has argued that these encounters were nevertheless not uniquely one-sided and that artisans engaged in these exhibition demonstrations could also respond to local suggestions and bring back home patterns and aesthetic influences from this experience.⁴⁸ Despite the best efforts to marginalise artisanal craft as relics worthy of antiquarian interest, these ‘old’ skills were open to all forms of modern influence.

The notion of arts and crafts in this context was undistinguishable from that of colonial industry in a regional setting. The rug makers formed and educated by the White Sisters would thus be part of a coherent cultural enterprise which stressed continuities with local culture and naturalised the methods, however imported they were, into a local 'indigenous' artisanal idiom. This colonial intent to merge and fuse modernity and arts and crafts – to industrialise artisanal crafts and make them a tool for economic development – did not disappear entirely after independence and the missionaries retained a role in it. Following the Second World War, the narrowing market for colonial rugs eventually led to the demise of *ouvroir* carpet making in 1954. Rug making training was replaced in the curriculum with other textile making techniques towards the end of the colonial era. After independence the *ouvroir* converted into a '*centre de formation féminine artisanale*' from which the White Sisters retired in 1982.

Throughout their commercial history, their provenance as a missionary product was their sole commercial identity and this tied them radically to the colonial project⁴⁹ – their borrowed aesthetics did not chime with a Western decorative art tradition (unlike orientalism, which made considerable use of Arab motifs). Within Africa, on the other hand, carpet making made sense in a specific and unique manner as part of a politics of colonial *mise en valeur* and for the tourist trade.⁵⁰

The tourist rug and its images

While interwar West African tourism remained a very limited market, reserved for the richest and more adventurous travellers or colonial administrators, it nevertheless grew dramatically in the 1920s. Much like the tourists of North Africa who visited model farms and *ouvroirs*, the tourists of West Africa were invited to discover the 'AFRICAN soul' through craft workshop visits. Following the 1931 colonial exhibition, the government of AOF promoted travels across the Mossi region and signalled opportunities to visit African workshops and communities, particularly if they had been transformed by colonisation. The guidebooks thus signalled that 'amateurs of curiosities would be able to purchase everywhere indigenous weapons ... blankets from Macina and Ségou with their strange patterns and colours ...'⁵¹ This specific tourism, which Sophie Dulucq calls 'ethnologisation', became one of the pathways into 'meeting' the Africans most favoured by tour operators and the boards of tourism.⁵² Meeting the authentic Africans around their crafts and traditional arts was to discover the emancipatory potential of crafts in developing the local economy while respecting its origins. Visitors were thus invited to observe the young

women weave outside on the frames of the *ouvroirs* the rugs some might be tempted to purchase and take home.

For the many who could not afford the rugs themselves or could not ship them back, postcards were available. This particular postcard (Figure 7.4) provides evidence of the market value of the carpets themselves and of the tourist trade. The correspondent wrote on the back: ‘These beautiful rugs are made here at the White Father’s. They are thick around 3 to 4 cm and retail for 200 francs a metre square. Should we bring some back? What size?’ At 200 francs, a square metre rug represented the equivalent of the wages of ten working days for a French needleworker in 1930.⁵³ A larger rug would be the equivalent of around a monthly wage. These products were not cheap even at the site of production. The price on importation to France would be increased by one-sided import duties and transportation affecting colonial trade with the metropolitan market.⁵⁴

It is ironic that while the rugs are now difficult to trace and source, the postcards provide a body of evidence on the weaving techniques used in the *ouvroirs*. A series of images were produced and used for a variety of purposes in what we might regard as a systematic propaganda campaign. The postcard image of young children busy sorting out wool before it is processed into yarn (Figure 7.5) is thus to be found later on in an article on the medical work of the White Fathers despite being completely irrelevant



Figure 7.4 *Ouvroir de Ségo*, rugs and wool carpets, Macina model



Figure 7.5 Postcard, *The sorting of the wool, Ségou*, c. 1923

to the gist of the article, which was devoted to the ophthalmic centre of Ouagadougou and the work of Dr Goarnisson.⁵⁵

As a source, postcards document a production process and a propaganda effort centred on productive young bodies. The weaving itself took place on vertical frames (*haute lisse* or high warp) following a technique which implied that the weavers considered their work from behind. This technique associated with tapestry making held the highest possible credential in terms of its artisanal pedigree. More technical than the horizontal *basse lisse* technique, it could also be found in North Africa. The frames themselves could be more or less complex, depending on the size of the rug and its finish, and one or two workers might work on a single rug (Figures 7.6 and 7.7).

Sitting on benches, the workers were positioned in a typically occidental posture and worked for weeks on complex patterns knotting the pile carpets.⁵⁶ There is a very significant literature on the ergonomic consequences of handloom work such as the one these postcards illustrate.⁵⁷ Ironically perhaps, weaving has long been established in the historiography as the enabler of political emancipation and as fertile ground for radical thinking, while much of the medical literature highlights the physical deformities and back ache the posture of the weaver at the loom induces. Physical development through work fitted with the broader educational ethos of *ouvroirs* which put equal emphasis on deportment and skills, work ethics and



Figure 7.6 *Ségou filage de la Laine*, c. 1922

attitude. These images thus capture work activities in an often-anonymised manner but in a carefully curated way. The weavers are not the object of the images; their carpets are, and the translation of a design onto a new piece of textile stands as clear evidence of the transformative power of missionary education.

The postcards as testament to a craft activity present a number of challenges. They were produced by the White Fathers and Sisters for the tourist and passing trade as much as for the missionary fundraising networks of the society. What they were not, clearly, was a portrait of the artisans, most of whom turn their back on the camera or stand next to their products as if to provide a scale. As representatives of the members of the ‘community production’ they remained unidentifiable in most cases.⁵⁸ Only on the group portrait of the workers from Ouagadougou posing in Paris around their bishop and sisters can one identify them as individuals. This anonymity is poignant and the images do not account for the manner in which, since 1920, girls were ‘requisitioned’ or forcibly recruited through the local chieftains of the Mossi region.⁵⁹ The schools were thus entangled in the wider question of forced labour which motivated enquiries from international organisations such as the International Labour Organisation or Save



Figure 7.7 Weaving of a carpet of *haute laine*. No 33 Collection de la mission de Ouagadougou, c. 1922.

the Children.⁶⁰ Save the Children systematically employed missionaries as informers when the latter were themselves benefitting from colonial coercive methods for their pastoral and educative projects. The contradiction was not unique to missionaries of course but encompassed the entire colonial project of *mission civilisatrice*.⁶¹

Like much colonial propaganda, these images of artisanal work therefore obscure many social interactions which might question their avowed purpose. Similar stories could be found in other instances and the pictorial repertory of craftwork is unambiguously positive and centred on skills – however unwanted they might be. The craft they engaged in could be found in missionary and industrial carpet weaving schools in Morocco, Algeria or Tunisia and one finds a vast number of postcards of the same era showing similar postures though, more often than not, the weaver's features are more clearly identifiable in other colonial settings (though one might there query the orientalism that tends to codify how girls and women are portrayed).

This lack of real context in the portrayal of craftwork is, arguably, still of relevance. The full meanings of craft processes, especially when they are embedded in a development project, are seldom explicit.⁶² Yet the missionary project was at least clearly set up to challenge gender relations in Mossi society and set out to reshape domestic power relations,⁶³ as well as to bring about conversion.

Conclusion

Ouagadougou rugs, and the making of these '*haute laine*' carpets in a colonial setting, enable us to consider some of the transformative agenda of craft producing and trading in what was clearly designated as a humanitarian context and productive project, albeit a colonial *mission civilisatrice* one. Missionaries traded on a reputation for crafts and artisanal values with explicit spiritual added value and stringent quality assurance.⁶⁴ Buying a carpet would transcend the commercial act into subscribing to both a colonial project and a Christian set of values in one commercial transaction. Missionaries were also representing their work as part of a form of developmentalism with organic and rural undertones.

Far from being explicitly industrial, the White Sisters promoted domestic scale crafts which could be combined with married life and child rearing and which, while challenging local weaving male industries, would nevertheless do so without a clear engagement with the evils of urban industrialism and without challenging French artisans and industries. Paradoxically for an industry reliant on girls forcibly removed from their families in order to educate them, this project could also serve as a laboratory for alternative gender relations and for the documenting of child labour, poverty relief and gender politics. Many of these contradictions only appear in hindsight, so ingrained was the notion that access to skills could only be beneficial and enriching; a benevolent manifestation of colonial encounters.

Where there is a definite gap with what later became fair trade is thus not in the stories of development, the benefits of skilled work for women or even the emphasis on spirituality but rather on where it fitted in the commerce of arts and craft goods. Arguably, differing from North African products which were much more closely integrated into networks of commerce, the African rugs remained objects of curiosity. They relied largely on passing trade based on tourism and localised northern customers. Despite the efforts of making them feature in all the exhibitions and trade fairs of the 1930s in Europe, they did not find their market in France and the exhibits of 1931 remained unsold. They nevertheless continued to be highly praised and promoted by the administration, notably at the first regional exhibition-fair organised in the Ivory Coast in January 1934 for the export market.⁶⁵ In terms of what Lekakis calls the 'liquid politics' of imperialism, the consumers who might have engaged with them on their complex terms were not given the opportunity to do so. There is therefore no real evidence of a civic agency of consumers when the market was so clearly entangled within colonial socioeconomic interventions.⁶⁶ The invention of a market for new artisanal goods implies citizen choices but one that may have been framed

by African-sited politics. In the colonial framework of exchanges, the trade was tied up with religious or policy agendas. Similarly, there are some gaps in the 'commodity activism' that Mukherjee describes, in the sense that it is impossible to get evidence of how the actors of production may have related to their skills when they were almost literally bound to their looms by disciplinary religious organisations rather than just through market forces.⁶⁷

The exhibition of producers did not reveal fully the world of production in a liberating way meant to bridge the cognitive gap between northern consumer and southern producer.⁶⁸ The rugs and their weavers remained anecdotal in a broader missionary narrative of empire. As there was no market for African-made carpets as objects of consumer desire, and they could only appear through staged colonial encounters, the sales were framed in a very different trade and purchase culture: one based on patronage rather than consuming desires.

Notes

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- 2 Archives Générale des Missionnaires d'Afrique (AGMA), Gen 124, dossier 124/7 *expositions coloniales de Marseille, 1905 et 1922*.
- 3 Catherine Hodeir and Michel Pierre, *L'Exposition Coloniale: 1931*, vol. 68 (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 1991). This meets the contemporary assessments of its significance: Gouverneur Général Olivier, 'Les Origines et les Buts de l'Exposition Coloniale', *Revue des Deux Mondes* (1931), 46–57.
- 4 Joseph-Roger de Benoist, *Église et Pouvoir Colonial au Soudan Français: les Relations entre les Administrateurs et les Missionnaires Catholiques dans la Boucle du Niger, de 1885 à 1945* (Paris: Karthala Editions, 1987), pp. 275, 332.
- 5 Eleftheria J. Lekakis, 'A Liquid Politics? Conceptualising the Politics of Fair Trade Consumption and Consumer Citizenship', *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization*, 13:2 (2013), 317–338, 319.
- 6 James-Patrick Daughton and Owen White, *In God's Empire: French Missionaries and the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- 7 Bertrand Taithe, 'La Famine de 1866–1868: Anatomie d'une Catastrophe et Construction Médiatique d'un Événement', *Revue d'histoire du XIX^e siècle. Société d'histoire de la révolution de 1848 et des révolutions du XIX^e siècle*, 41 (2010), 113–127; Joseph W. Peterson, *Sacred Rivals: Catholic Missions and the Making of Islam in Nineteenth-Century France and Algeria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).
- 8 Jean-Claude Ceillier, *Histoire des Missionnaires d'Afrique (Pères Blancs), de la fondation par Mgr Lavigerie à la Mort du Fondateur (1868–1892)* (Paris: Karthala, 2008); Xavier de Montclos, *Lavigerie le Saint-Siège et l'Église: de l'Avènement de Pie IX à l'Avènement de Léon XIII, 1846–1878* (Paris: de

- Boccard, 1965); François Renault, *Le Cardinal Lavigerie* (Paris: Fayard, 1992); François Renault, 'Aux origines du Ralliement: Léon XIII et Lavigerie (1880–1890)', *Revue historique*, 281: 2 (1989), 381–432.
- 9 Oissila Saaidia, 'L'Anticléricalisme Article d'Exportation: Le Cas de l'Algérie avant la Première Guerre Mondiale', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 87 :3 (2005), 101–112; Oissila Saaidia, *Algérie Coloniale, Musulmans et Chrétiens: le Contrôle de l'État (1830–1914)* (Paris: CNRS, 2015); Dominique Urvoy, 'Les Conversions au Catholicisme en Algérie', *Outre-Terre*, 45 (2015), 249–255.
 - 10 François Renault, 'Principes Missionnaires et Action Sanitaire des Pères Blancs et Sœurs Blanches du Cardinal Lavigerie (1868–1960)', in Jean Pirotte and Henri Derroitte (eds), *Églises et Santé dans le Tiers Monde. Hier et Aujourd'hui* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), pp. 27–48.
 - 11 Joseph Issoufou Conombo, *Une Autre Conquête de l'Afrique par l'Amour et la Charité* (Paris: Editions Firmament, 2003).
 - 12 De Benoist, *Église et Pouvoir Colonial au Soudan Français*.
 - 13 AGMA Livinhac, Gen 124, 124/12 and 124/14. These issues of copyright were also influenced by the fact that the French government frowned upon 'industrial congregations', letter 29 October to M. Dore pharmacist in Alençon. Frauds included wine, teas, soaps, hair pomade and champagne, for example.
 - 14 Dana S. Hale, *Races on Display: French Representations of Colonized Peoples, 1886–1940* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008), pp. 47–50.
 - 15 See Rebecca Rogers, 'Tisser de Nouvelles Histoires: les Travaux d'Aiguille à l'École des Filles (France-Algérie coloniale)', in Margaret Maruani, (ed.), *Je Travaille, Donc Je Suis, Perspectives Féministes* (Paris: La découverte, 2018), pp. 155–164.
 - 16 Bertrand Taithe, 'Algerian Orphans and Colonial Christianity in Algeria 1866–1939', *French History*, 20:3 (2006), 240–259.
 - 17 Anthony Kanu Ikechukwu, 'Inculturation and Christian Faith in Africa', *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 2:17 (2012), 236–244. This is a theological concern in missiology. The inculturation could be superficial (clothing) or more profound. Arguably, the missionaries evolved their missiology towards deeper inculturation in the interwar period.
 - 18 Karima Dirèche, *Chrétiens de Kabylie (1873–1954). Une Action Missionnaire dans l'Algérie Coloniale* (Saint Denis: Bouchène, 2004); Alain Mahé, *Histoire de la Grande Kabylie, Anthropologie Historique du Lien Social dans les Communautés Villageoises* (Saint Denis: Bouchène, 2001), pp. 181–90; Patricia M. E. Lorcin, *Kabyles, Arabes, Français: Identités Coloniales* (Limoges: Presses Universitaires de Limoges, 2005).
 - 19 Rev. A. Giacobetti, *Les Tapis et Tissages du Djebel-Amour* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1932).
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 - 23 Mathias Gardet and Alain Vilbrod, *Les Orphelins-apprentis d'Auteuil: Histoire d'une Œuvre* (Paris: Belin, 2000); Antoine Grach, *Le bienheureux Père Daniel Brottier, 1876–1936: du Sénégal à l'Œuvre d'Auteuil* (Paris: Karthala Editions, 2006).
 - 24 Cited in Leménager, 'Les Quatre Sens du Corps', p. 12.
 - 25 Grach, *Le bienheureux Père Daniel Brottier, 1876–1936*. Brottier had been missionary in Senegal before leading the *oeuvre* back to the forefront of Catholic educational enterprises.
 - 26 Archive État de Genève (AEG), Union Internationale de Secours aux Enfants (UISE) Archives Privées 92.4.1 Irma Hausman, Documents relatifs au travail des enfants et jeunes gens en Afrique, ch. 2.
 - 27 *L'Afrique du Nord illustrée: journal hebdomadaire d'actualités nord-africaines: Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc*, 5 May 1928 and 4 November 1936.
 - 28 De Benoist, *Église et Pouvoir Colonial au Soudan Français*, p. 253.
 - 29 Joseph-Roger de Benoist, 'Les Missionnaires Catholique du Soudan français et de la Haute Volta, Entrepreneurs et Formateurs d'Artisans', *Actes du colloque Entreprises et Entrepreneurs en Afrique Xix et xx siècle* (n.p., 1983), pp. 249–263;
 - 30 Jean Marie Bouron, 'Dominée ou Dominantes? Les Sœurs Blanches dans l'Ambivalence des Logiques d'Autorité (Haute Volta et Gold Coast, 1912–1960)', *Histoire, Monde et Cultures Religieuses*, 30:2 (2014), 51–73.
 - 31 Florence Bobin, 'Regards Croisés sur l'Ouvroir de Ougadougou (1917–19541)', in Hélène D'Almeida-Topor, Monique Lakroum and Gerd Spittler (eds), *Le Travail en Afrique Noire: Représentations et Pratiques à l'Époque Contemporaine* (Paris: Karthala, 2003), pp. 261–282. On forced marriages see Doris Buss and Emily S. Burrill, *Marriage by Force? Contestation Over Consent and Coercion in Africa* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2016).
 - 32 Sœur Marie-André du Sacré-Cœur, *La Femme Noire en Afrique Occidentale* (Paris: Payot. 1939); J. Bertho, 'Le Problème du Mariage Chrétien en Afrique Occidentale Française', *Africa*, 17:4 (1947), 252–259; De Benoist, *Église et Pouvoir Colonial au Soudan Français*, pp. 288–295.
 - 33 Bruno Sanon and Jean Ilboudo, 'Le Décret Mandel de 1939: ses Origines, son Esprit et son Impact sur les Communautés de l'Ex-vicariat Apostolique de Bobo-Dioulasso', *Burkina* (2000), 251–264; Marie Rodet, 'Genre, Coutumes et Droit Colonial au Soudan Français (1918–1939)', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 47:187–188 (2007), 583–602.
 - 34 AGMA, Thévenoud papers 91.9. S.E.

- 35 There is on this topic a difference of interpretation between Fortin and Bobin in *Le Travail en Afrique Noire*, p. 278, who portray the sisters as being under close control of the masculine order. The significance of Soeur Marie André du Sacré Cœur in the development of the law regulating marriage makes complete subordination unlikely.
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- 37 *Exposition Coloniale internationale de 1931*, vol. 1. (Abidjan: Gouvernement Général de l'Afrique Occidentale Française, imprimerie officielle du gouvernement, 1934), p. 246; *Les Annales Coloniales*, 20 June 1923.
- 38 Although, as de Pommereau shows, this was often a largely invented tradition fostered by colonial 'indigenist' thinkers keen to revive 'indigenous arts' in which White Sisters played an educational part and which industrialists of the *chambre syndicale du tapis à points noués de France et des colonies* developed into a commercial operation. Alain de Pommereau, 'The Invention of the Moroccan Carpet', in François Pouillon and Jean-Claude Vatin (eds), *After Orientalism: Critical Perspectives on Western Agency and Eastern Re-appropriations* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 218–235.
- 39 See the chapter 'Vincennes 1931: The Exposition Coloniale as the Apotheosis of Imperial Modernity' in Alexander C. T. Geppert, *Fleeting Cities* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 179–200.
- 40 Donna V. Jones, 'The Prison House of Modernism: Colonial Spaces and the Construction of the Primitive at the 1931 Paris Colonial Exposition', *Modernism/Modernity*, 14.1 (2007), 55–69.
- 41 Patricia Purtschert, 'The Return of the Native: Racialised Space, Colonial Debris and the Human Zoo', *Identities*, 22.4 (2015), 508–523; Herman Lebovics, 'The Zoos of the Exposition Coloniale Internationale, Paris 1931', in Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch, Eric Deroo, Sandrine Lemaire and Charles Forsdick (eds), *Human Zoos: Science and Spectacle in the Age of Colonial Empires* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), pp. 369–376.
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- 44 Walter Putnam, '"Please Don't Feed the Natives": Human Zoos, Colonial Desire, and Bodies on Display', *The Environment in French and Francophone Literature and Film* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 55–68.
- 45 *Le Courrier Colonial Illustré*, 25 November 1937, p. 5.

- 46 Richard Price, *Empire and Indigeneity: Histories and Legacies* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 299–318 on the British humanitarian narratives which exploited similar missionary networks.
- 47 *Le Courrier Colonial Illustré*, 25 November 1937, p. 13.
- 48 Catherine Hodeir, 'Decentering the Gaze at French Colonial Exhibitions', in Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (eds), *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 233–252, 235.
- 49 François Wassouni, 'Les Autorités Coloniales Françaises et l'Économie Artisanale à Maroua (Cameroun) Bilan historiographique', *Documents pour l'histoire des techniques. Nouvelle série*, 17 (2009), 149–161.
- 50 Mary Mostafanezhad, *Volunteer Tourism: Popular Humanitarianism in Neoliberal Times* (London: Ashgate Publishing, 2014); Frank Trentmann, 'Before "Fair Trade": Empire, Free Trade, and the Moral Economies of Food in the Modern World', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25:6 (2007), 1079–1102.
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- 52 Sophie Dulucq, 'Découvrir l'âme Africaine' les Temps Obscurs du Tourisme Culturel en Afrique Coloniale Française (années 1920–années 1950), *Cahiers Études Africaines*, 193–194 (2009), 27–48, p. 40.
- 53 *Revue d'économie politique*, *La France économique en 1931*, 46:3 (1932), 1110–1119, p. 1112. For a calculation of local salaries, see the methodological complexity in Ibrahima Thioub, 'Économie Coloniale et Rémunération de la Force de Travail: le Salaire du Manœuvre à Dakar de 1930 à 1954', *Outre-Mers. Revue d'histoire*, 81:305 (1994), 427–453.
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- 55 Alex Arnoux, 'L'Œuvre Médicale des Pères Nlancs en Afrique Occidentale Française', *Le Monde Illustré*, 13 April 1940.
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- 59 Henriette Porret and Anne Marie Gauthier, 'Les Sœurs Blanches en Haute Volta, 1913–1960', in Gabriel Massa and Georges Madiéga (eds), *La Haute Volta Coloniale* (Paris: Karthala, 1995), pp. 199–211, 202–3; Dennis D. Cordell

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- 61 Alice L. Conklin, 'Colonialism and Human Rights, a Contradiction in Terms? The Case of France and West Africa, 1895–1914', *The American Historical Review*, 103:2 (1998), 419–442.
- 62 Kay Mohlman, 'Craft-as-industry and Craft-as-culture: Analysing Handicraft Production in Commercialized Asia and Beyond', *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 27:1 (1999), 113–126; Jane Schneider, 'The Anthropology of Cloth', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 16:1 (1987), 409–448.
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- 64 In this sense, missionary and religious orders can claim a more direct medieval genealogy to premodern sensibilities than any arts and crafts movement could. This is clearly part of a wider commercial strategy in the current branded goods sold by distributors of religious arts and crafts such as HOLYART (www.holyart.co.uk).
- 65 *Foire Exposition d'Abidjan 21–28 janvier 1934* (Abidjan: Gouvernement Général de l'Afrique Occidentale Française, imprimerie officielle du gouvernement, 1934).
- 66 Lekakis, A *Liquid Politics?*; Eleftheria J Lekakis, *Coffee Activism and the Politics of Fair Trade and Ethical Consumption in the Global North: Political Consumerism and Cultural Citizenship* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).
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Caught in the net: cooperation of lacemakers in the Vologda region, 1880s–1930s

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According to the generally acknowledged origin narrative, the practice of lacemaking was introduced to Russia around the seventeenth century through trading contacts in the Low Countries. Gradually spreading from cities to the countryside, lacemaking absorbed patterns and motifs of traditional local textile handicrafts and developed distinct regional features in both style and technique.¹ By the end of the nineteenth century, lacemaking became a common occupation among the female population in at least eleven provinces in the European part of the Russian Empire.² Vologda bobbin lace, produced in the northern province of Russia, was probably the best known and was widely distributed all around the country. Vologda province was a fast-growing centre of the lace industry, both in late Imperial Russia and during the Soviet era.³ Since most of the lacemakers lived in poverty due to unfavourable working and market conditions, they became the focus of various humanitarian initiatives.

In the late Russian Empire, philanthropic interventions in lace production were not too different from those common throughout Europe. Since the 1860s, local authorities, ethnographers, artists and connoisseurs examined local crafts, collected handcrafted laces, displayed them in museums, established lace schools and workshops, and promoted lace as a national craft in publications and exhibitions.⁴ Those projects focused on enhancing the quality of lace, improving the working conditions of lacemakers and facilitating the sales of handcrafted commodities. Such efforts were later assessed as insufficient in Soviet historiography due to the belief that ‘bourgeois patrons’ did not concern themselves with comprehensive reforms aimed at the improvement of the legislative and economic environment of the lace industry. Moreover, philanthropists’ ideas were treated as alien to the socialist society as they prevented artisans from being conscious of social injustice and workers’ oppression.⁵ However, the Soviet authorities agreed with their pre-revolutionary counterparts regarding the positive impact of cooperation on the lace industry. During the first decades of Soviet power, lace cooperatives and communal workshops were reconstructed or newly

set up in different regions of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) and the other republics. Although the cooperative policy was controversial and inconsistent, the cooperative movement was growing rapidly as a semi-independent production sector.⁶

This chapter discusses how the existing pre-revolutionary humanitarian endeavours aimed at improving the labour conditions of lacemakers and enhancing the artistic quality of lace were adapted and redefined by Soviet crafts policymakers to align with socialist ideological and political needs. In particular, it examines how benefits of cooperation and communal work promoted through philanthropic initiatives since the late nineteenth century were recognised as fundamental values in Soviet lacemaking. Cooperation in crafts takes a variety of organisational forms and can be motivated by the social, economic and political interests of artisans or external benefactors.⁷ I suggest understanding cooperation in a broader sense as communal and collective work, planned around shared interests and goals, with each participant contributing to the benefit of the group. In the following pages, I seek to explore how cooperative tendencies, which were fostered in the late Russian Empire and taken up by Soviet craft practitioners, shaped the lacemaking communities and influenced the materiality of lace produced in collective settings.

Much of the literature on Russian lace is published as richly illustrated albums with photographs and accompanying descriptions; by contrast, few publications reveal the economic or social conditions of lacemaking in Russian regions. In a series of articles and a monograph, Maria Kartashova examines the policy and state regulations of the cottage industry (*kustarnaia promyshlennost*), which consolidated small-scale production with a relatively low level of mechanisation in the late Russian Empire.⁸ She often discusses lacemaking as an exemplary branch of the cottage industry to better understand the effects of the administrative and economic measures taken to support the local crafts. However, cooperation as a reform strategy receives only passing mention in her works.⁹ Some factors of cooperation among lacemakers are outlined in an article by Elena Dianova, which compares the conditions of the cooperative movement during the periods of war communism (1918–1921) and the New Economic Policy (1921–1928).¹⁰ Despite its brevity, the article touches upon a variety of issues which deserve further attention. For example, Dianova highlights the role of cooperation in shaping lacemakers' communities and recognises the specificity of female participation in the cooperative movement.

Following the discussion about the role of crafts and shared working practices in the formation and maintenance of communities opened by contributors to the collective volume *Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics, 19th–20th Century*,¹¹ a professional group of

lacemakers in the Vologda region might be seen as emerging out of reforms aimed at improving the working and marketing conditions for the craft. Community building was not an explicit goal of the public and private efforts to support female artisans, but cooperation, as an institutional model advocated by crafts supporters, fostered a sense of belonging to a particular group with shared interests. Soon enough, the strong bond to the collective was identified as a contributing factor to the preservation of handmade lace, as it kept lacemakers from abandoning their craft.

Since lacemaking was a highly gendered practice, the studies of collective forms of craft making among female artisans illuminate the gender-specific features of voluntary or forced cooperation.¹² Placing lacemaking in the Vologda region at the intersection of political, economic and social processes, this chapter contributes to the study of the women's crafts movement in East Central Europe. On the one hand, collective forms of labour were often implemented from above and justified by officials as moral or economically beneficial. Yet at the same time, cooperative reforms ascribe agency to artisans and were premised on the belief that people were willing to actively participate in the construction and regulation of working processes. Cooperation also offered solidarity with a community and promised some kind of security at the beginning of the twentieth century when many lives were torn apart by social upheavals such as international military conflicts, civil wars and revolutions. There was a space for private interests within the cooperatives, which were balancing the promotion of collective ethics and the encouragement of professional individualism. From the modern perspective, collaborative textile crafts are often considered as activities which enhance self-awareness and a positive association with a collective.¹³ Although the following text focuses on the historical cases, it hopefully enriches our understanding of different forms of women's entrepreneurship and self-organisation, craft economy and collaborative labour, and other issues of contemporary interest.¹⁴

Loosening family ties: new forms of cooperation among lacemakers at the end of the nineteenth century

The Russian painter Vasilii Tropinin (1776–1857) created a series of portraits depicting women engaged in needlework: *The Spinner* (1821), *The Lacemaker* (1823), *The Gold-Embroideress* (1825) and *The Lady with Insertion Lace* (1830). The most well known in this series, *The Lacemaker*, portrays a young woman looking up from her pillow while making bobbin lace. All the paintings of the series represent needlework as a solitary craft of modest women. These images may lead the viewer to the false conclusion

that needlework was a secluded occupation. However, lacemaking, as with any other type of needlework, was often a collective practice that entailed cooperation, mutual learning and shared working space for several crafts-women. The prototypes of the 'communities of craft' were monastic workshops or private estate workshops where female serfs made decorative home textiles. From the second half of the nineteenth century, when lacemaking started spreading across the countryside and provincial towns, new forms of collectivity gradually emerged within the craft: family cooperation, collective training and communal workshops.

The 'natural' form of collective work among lacemakers was family cooperation, which formed an essential basis of the Russian cottage industry. Most of the small-scale production units of cottage industry were located in rural areas and were run by the members of one family or by a group of neighbours. The activities of those craftsmen and women (*kustari*) fluctuated according to the agricultural year: during the winter months when there was little work in farming, families sought the opportunity to supplement their income by selling non-agricultural products. Like many other branches of the cottage industry, lacemaking was a domestic occupation where different generations of women from one family or a neighbourhood made lace together in their houses. Girls were already taught the basics of the craft between the ages of five and seven. Young girls learnt from their more experienced female relatives by practising the easiest working operations and copying the simplest patterns. In provincial cities, women from civil or clerical servants' families also practised lacemaking and contributed to the family income by selling lace.

To a certain extent, both in villages and in the cities, the involvement of young girls in lacemaking played an important role in their gender socialisation.¹⁵ The importance of craft for the moral education of women was one of several aspirations which motivated the philanthropic interventions in lacemaking. Lacemaking was seen as an occupation that helped to cultivate proper gender and social roles, since it 'disciplines girls for work, and teaches them how to use time wisely. Making lace for sale, a woman also learned to appreciate money and to spend it on essentially useful things'.¹⁶ In a utopian scenario envisioned by advocates of the craft, lacemaking might ensure women's autonomy and help them to become economically independent from their families or husbands, even though the real income they earned was extremely low and some of them worked up to sixteen hours a day to make ends meet. By the end of the nineteenth century, few lacemakers could earn their livelihood solely by making lace. According to a report by the Vologda statistical committee, at the beginning of the 1880s, only 137 out of 500 lacemakers in Vologda made their living exclusively from selling lace. For most of the women in the provincial city, lacemaking was just an aid to

the family budget that helped them to escape poverty.¹⁷ In an essay on the economic and social situation of lacemakers in Vologda, written in 1867, Nikolai Shelgunov (1824–1891) gives an example of a mother and daughter in a family who had to work together and sell homemade lace to support an ill father, small children and teenagers during their study. Emphasising the desperate situation of such families, he describes this way of life as ‘proud poverty’, where those in need do not seek charity but earn a living through modest work.¹⁸

In the eyes of those who studied lace and developed schemes to support the craft, lacemaking could not thrive under such conditions. The women had no time to create new patterns or learn new techniques, since all their time was tightly scheduled for lacemaking: they had to plan how much they could earn with a certain length or a piece of lace. Not only were the old designs unfashionable and hard to sell but they were also often distorted if copied by an inexperienced or unskilled lacemaker. Moreover, working on their own, lacemakers were dependent on tradeswomen or middlemen, who bought the lace from the craftswomen and then made a profit by reselling it to shops or other traders. Those intermediaries cared about quantity rather than quality of lace: eventually, this led to a deterioration in the variety and finesse of lace on the market, a gradual decline in demand and a crisis in the industry. Consequently, to revitalise the industry and enhance the artistic quality of lace, as well as improve the conditions of craftwork, the entire chain of lace production and distribution needed to be changed.

At the end of nineteenth century, a key figure in the lace revival was Sofia Davydova, née von Hoyer (1841–1915).¹⁹ She acquired an interest in lace in August 1879, when she approached Vladimir Stasov (1824–1906), an authoritative art critic and librarian in the Imperial Public Library, seeking advice on what to read about Russian style. Stasov recommended narrowing down her interests to a particular topic or practical task and encouraged Davydova to set about studying the history of Russian lace if she had enough time, money and drawing skills. Fortunately, Davydova had all the necessary resources and skills, along with enough enthusiasm to begin this mission in earnest. Her study was supported by the Committee on the Study of Handicraft Manufacture in Russia, headed by E. N. Andreev, who outlined the plan and programme for Davydova’s enterprise. Her expenses were partially covered since the expedition was arranged to serve the Committee’s objectives. Before starting the fieldwork, she carefully studied all available archival sources and literature about the lacemaking, from statistical reports to columns in regional newspapers. As a result of three years of travelling and researching, in 1892 Davydova published two volumes: a detailed survey of the lace industry in Russia and Europe, and an album with photos of lace designs.²⁰

During her journey, she was actively communicating with the women artisans, entering their houses, studying working conditions and listening to their stories and pleas. Davydova claimed that she lived their lives ‘from the inside’. Her close attention and empathy for the lacemakers’ problems challenged her with the ‘idea of the necessity of coming to the aid of the industry and its workers’. She felt morally obliged to suggest methods for the advancement of the lace industry since the craftswomen, who turned to her with ‘infinite faith’, seemed to Davydova helpless, lacking consciousness in their actions and leading an ‘ignorant existence’.²¹ She was also concerned with the decline in the artistic quality of lace and hence compiled the catalogue of patterns to preserve and display the most outstanding examples for study and restoration. To lay the groundwork for her own recommendations on how to revive the industry, she reviewed and analysed the philanthropic initiatives of her predecessors. For example, one of the important influences was the above-mentioned Shelgunov, who, more than a decade before Davydova, examined the underlying factors contributing to the hardships faced by Vologda lacemakers and outlined a blueprint for improving their economic conditions. He placed a particular emphasis on the importance of cooperation among the craftswomen and encouraged lacemakers to organise working cooperatives to share the expenses and take control over sales of the produced wares. However, he insisted, in order to succeed, such workshops should have been headed by those who understood the artistic and technical quality of lace.²² Sofia Davydova undertook a mission to train such specialists for the lace industry.

Davydova’s main contribution to the lace industry was the Mariinskii School of Lacemakers. In 1882, she embarked on a trip to Europe to study ‘all means used to raise the lace industry’.²³ Davydova visited lace schools and workshops in Vienna and Berlin, but she was particularly impressed by the Burano Lace School near Venice.²⁴ Her thorough examination of governmental and private initiatives to revitalise the lace industry convinced her that such schemes had a positive impact both on the preservation of lacemaking as a craft and on the moral education of lacemakers. Upon her return, Davydova developed a programme to establish a lace school in Russia. The Mariinskii Practical School of Lacemakers was founded in 1883 in Saint Petersburg with the philanthropic support of Empress Mariia Fedorovna and baroness Editha von Rahden. Elizaveta Novosiltseva (1834–1901), well known for her expertise in organising the Lacemakers Society in Moscow, was appointed to head the school.²⁵

The school aimed to educate women from the provinces who were already experienced in lacemaking and familiar with traditional regional techniques and patterns. After a year or two of training, they were expected to return to their hometowns and villages as qualified instructors to teach

other girls advanced lacemaking skills, supervise workshops, and control the artistic and technical quality of lace.²⁶ To attract lacemakers, the school offered a place in a shared apartment and a stipend of fifty roubles per year, which was equivalent to the annual income of a lacemaker in a provincial town.²⁷ In the spring of 1883, when the school was still a few months from opening, Davydova visited Vologda, Nizhny Novgorod, Vyatka and Kazan provinces to complete her examination of the lace industry and personally invite lacemakers to join the school. Sofia Briantseva (1837–1911), an eminent lacemaker from Vologda who was reputed to have trained more than eight hundred lacemakers in thirty years of private tutelage, moved to Saint Petersburg at her invitation. She was already in her forties when she started the programme with the first four students. The following year, her younger cousin Rakhil Fioletova joined the school. After graduating, Fioletova returned to Vologda and, within two years, managed to train over 130 women in new patterns and techniques.²⁸ According to a report on the school's thirtieth anniversary, 237 lacemakers graduated from the school between 1883 and 1913. The graduates represented thirty-three provinces of the Russian Empire and the Grand Duchy of Finland. Among them were twenty-nine women from the Vologda region. The school kept in touch with the graduates by providing regular commissions, sending new drawings and inviting them to participate in exhibitions.²⁹

Over the years, women from different social classes, from respected city dwellers to poor village girls, attended the Mariinskii Practical School of Lacemakers. Since many of the latter could barely read and write, courses on basic literacy and mathematics were introduced into the school curriculum in 1885. Additionally, the students had to undergo pedagogical training, as they were expected to teach in their home provinces after graduation. The lacemakers gained teaching experience by organising open lace classes for the public in Saint Petersburg. But at the heart of the programme were courses on technical drawing, studying lace and the practice of lacemaking. From 1884 to 1896, the architect Ivan Galenbek (1855–1934) oversaw the artistic training of lacemakers and the improvement of technical drawing. After him, drawing lessons were continued by the graduates of art schools of Saint Petersburg and Moscow, particularly by the artist A. Stepanova and, after 1908, by E. Vorobyeva.³⁰ Lacemaking classes were taught by Novosiltseva and a few graduates who remained at the school as instructors after completing their studies. After 1890, in addition to lacemaking, the school offered classes in carpet making and embroidery.

The students at the Mariinskii School of Lacemakers benefited from their collective learning and practice. As well as learning from each other, they could also explore how lacemaking had developed in other provinces

of the Russian Empire. When Davydova was conducting her research, she lamented that each centre of lacemaking 'lived a completely isolated life', even in neighbouring provinces.³¹ The foundation of the school helped to overcome such isolation and bring together representatives of the different craft traditions. Life in the capital also exposed lacemakers to fashionable urban cultural trends and contemporary artistic styles such as Art Nouveau. Moreover, during their studies, the students worked together on the commissioned lace. Such experiences helped them to acquire skills of collective work and coordination of the working process in a lace workshop. By educating young lacemakers in line with cooperative values, the school's patrons indirectly influenced the organisation of lace workshops in the provinces of the Russian Empire. These workshops were considered more advantageous to the industry compared to homeworking.

Nevertheless, simply training lacemakers in the capital would be insufficient without coordinating with regional authorities and crafts enthusiasts and laying the groundwork for future initiatives. In the Vologda Governorate, the discussions about the benefits of cooperation among lacemakers were initiated by a local publicist, Aleksandr Kruglov (1852/53–1915).³² He believed that 'the path to salvation of lacemakers' lay in establishing an association and a mutual aid community fund, through which lacemakers could receive loans. Agitating for cooperation, Kruglov assumed that the association would diminish competition, sales directly through the cooperative would raise wages, and the mutual aid fund would help those in need and prevent lacemakers from selling lace at a knockdown price and flooding the market with low-quality lace. One of his practical suggestions was for lacemakers to live in communal apartments to reduce their daily expenses. In such an apartment, lacemakers could share the costs of firewood, which accounted for up to a third of individual expenses, groceries and materials for lacework. However, Kruglov was sceptical about the abilities of female artisans to initiate and administrate such a working community by themselves. He argued that sufficient capital was needed to introduce this scheme, urging the wealthy residents of Vologda to intervene.³³ But no significant private initiatives were launched.

Only in 1886, following an instruction from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, did Vologda Governor Mikhail Kormilitsyn form a Committee on Cottage Industry aimed at encouraging and supporting regional crafts. The Committee organised a warehouse with a permanent exhibition to collect the produced goods from the artisans and display the local commodities for the customers. A lace section of the warehouse offered lacemakers assistance with card patterns and sold fine threads and other materials for work. A few graduates from the Mariinskii School of Lacemakers worked

at the warehouse as instructors and consulted the artisans.³⁴ Since the committee consisted of governorate officials who were busy with other duties and unable to fully represent the interests of artisans, it could not manage to keep the system profitable. The local government (*zemstvo*) took over the administration of the warehouse in 1901 and planned further reforms. In 1902, under the patronage of the *zemstvo*, a communal workshop was set up as a department of the warehouse. Seven lacemakers from the countryside were elected to join the collective. Their duties included making lace for commissions, which they received from the warehouse's administration, as well as developing designs and drawing card patterns for lace.³⁵ One year later, the workshop was expanded into the Lace School of the Vologda Provincial *Zemstvo*. Before it was closed in 1907, twenty-three lacemakers graduated with a diploma, which confirmed their qualification and competence in teaching the craft. Even though further maintenance of the *zemstvo*'s school was assessed as too expensive to be profitable, its performance was evaluated positively: lace with new designs was in demand in the market, a few graduates started teaching in other provinces of the Vologda Governorate, and others continued making and selling lace. Essentially, the activities of the Committee on Cottage Industry and the *zemstvo* played their role in keeping the lace industry afloat at the turn of the century.

In summary, during the second half of the nineteenth century, the lace-making industry witnessed the rise of new forms of collectivity intended to replace home-based work. Philanthropists and lace patrons supported the organisation of lace schools and collective workshops. It was their belief that revitalising the industry would require forging working communities beyond family ties. Cooperation protected lacemakers from fluctuating market demand and exploitation by traders, as well as relieving them from some of the socioeconomic hardships associated with their occupation. With the creation of lace schools, workshops and training programmes, the artistic quality of lace was improved too, as lacemakers were able to practise new motifs and replace those old-fashioned or primitive patterns they used to learn from their female relatives in family settings. Since the aesthetic excellence of lace was of particular concern to philanthropists, they appreciated the new designs and promoted them at fairs and exhibitions as important achievements of the lace industry. Eventually, new lace designs, influenced by modern urban art styles like Art Nouveau, were adopted by lacemakers from the villages, who remained the majority in the industry. As a result, the significant changes in the social organisation of the craft impacted the materiality of lace as a textile, increasing pattern variety and improving lacemaking techniques.

Working together: lace cooperatives and the materialisation of Soviet ideals of communality

In 1913, Sofia Davydova published a new survey on lacemaking which provided an overview of the development in the craft over the previous twenty years. According to the updated statistics, by 1912 the Vologda Governorate was the largest centre of the lace industry in Russia. Approximately 39,000 lacemakers were involved in lacemaking in the vicinity of Vologda (*uyezd*) alone.³⁶ However, the anticipated growth of the lace industry was hindered by social and economic turmoil, compounded by the entrance of the Russian Empire into the First World War and the Russian Revolution. As demand for lace fell sharply in 1917, many lacemakers abandoned the craft to seek other opportunities to earn a living. In 1918, female artisans from the rural areas, where lacemaking was a seasonal occupation and usually started in autumn with the end of agricultural work, postponed the beginning of the lacemaking season. They were uncertain if it would be possible to sell lace since private trade, which still constituted the infrastructure of the lace market, was officially outlawed. Moreover, lacemakers were running out of threads and silk, which they received from the traders, and simply had no materials for their work.³⁷

The critical situation prompted artisans to seek support from trade associations. In October 1918, the lacemakers began mass cooperation in the Vologda region. The local cooperative unions Severosoiuz and Kreditsoiuz assisted lacemakers in establishing independent working unions (*artels*) or sections within bigger cooperative organisations. In rural areas, lacemakers from several neighbouring villages could organise such a working union to serve all the craft practitioners in the area. A lacemaker who wanted to join an *artel* had to be at least sixteen years old and pay a membership fee based on her prospective monthly earnings.³⁸ In exchange for materials and patterns for lace, a lacemaker was obliged to give finished lace back to an *artel*, which offered commission-based compensation.

The available sources offer limited and potentially imprecise statistics on the number of cooperated lacemakers in the early 1920s; nevertheless, they provide some context regarding the development of the industry in the region. A brochure published for the centenary of lacemaking in the Vologda region reported that by 1 January 1920, there were 35,000 registered lacemakers (from the total of 50,000), who represented around ninety-three cooperative organisations. One year later – that is, by 1 January 1921 – the number rose to 42,107 artisans in 123 lace *artels*.³⁹ In 1922, the number of cooperatives in the Vologda Governorate dropped to thirty-four, while the number of artisans ranged from 5,000 to 9,175.⁴⁰ Although the rapid

decrease in the number of registrations is probably due to changes in counting methods, the first cooperatives were poorly organised and collapsed quickly. However, by 1930, regional cooperation in lacemaking increased again to over 40,000 cooperated craftswomen.⁴¹

During the years of war communism and the New Economic Policy, cottage industry supplied the population with basic consumer goods and was an important sector of the transitional economy in the Soviet state. While the majority of workshops in cottage industries produced mundane goods for local consumption (from nails to home textiles), a few became famous for the artistic value of their products: carpets, embroidery, lace, carved wood and ivory, niello and painted wood. Such goods were made available not only to urban customers but also for export. The export of artistic goods flourished at the beginning of the twentieth century, following a growing interest in Russian culture facilitated by the public success of the Ballets Russes and numerous exhibitions displaying Russian crafts and fine arts.⁴² For the Soviet authorities, it was a ready market and an additional source of foreign currency. Among other crafts, lace was exported to the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Sweden, Germany, France, Japan and the United States.⁴³ The assortment of exported lace was different from the wares offered for the domestic market. While lace tablecloths, decorative napkins and curtains were mainly made for export, lace borders and insertions were in demand on the domestic market as a relatively inexpensive way to decorate everyday clothes and underwear.

Although lace, especially in its handmade form, is hardly associated with the idea of revolutionary modernity, in a certain sense it was still in fashion. Nadezhda Lamanova (1861–1941), a celebrated Russian designer who made her name in luxurious fashion before the revolution and re-established her authority under the Bolsheviks as a creator of new socialist clothing, used lace not only as an adornment but as a constructive element of a dress. For the 1925 International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris, she created designs featuring Vologda lace. By introducing handmade textiles and folk motifs to Soviet fashion, she sought to present her designs as simple and democratic dresses, suitable for Soviet women and inspired by national culture.⁴⁴ Although those exemplary samples had little impact on mass production, Lamanova salvaged handmade lace as a legitimate element of the Soviet costume.

Besides the economic and cultural reasons for supporting the lace industry, the social significance of lacemaking was also acknowledged. Most lacemakers were poor peasant women (*bedniachki*) who were seeking an additional income since their families could not make a living by agricultural work.⁴⁵ When the Section for Cottage Industry, which was organised as a department of the Severosoiuz in 1920, outlined a plan to improve the

conditions of the lace industry in the Vologda region, priority was given to raising the wages of lacemakers. It was suggested to increase women's productivity by introducing advanced techniques for faster and more accurate lacemaking. The section also proposed organising a vocational school for lacemakers and short-term courses for lace instructors, establishing a museum of cottage industries and setting up a model workshop in Vologda.⁴⁶ Although the programme was not fully implemented, local historian Mikhail Rekhachev emphasised its importance as a complex plan to reorganise the entire lace industry, from production to distribution. In his book on the history of Vologda lacemaking, he compares the comprehensive Section plan to pre-revolutionary philanthropic initiatives, which he considers inadequate in a way that reflects the typical Soviet criticism of private humanitarian endeavours.⁴⁷

By the beginning of the 1930s, the lace department within the Section for Cottage Industry had grown so big that it was reorganised as an independent trade union, the Vologda Lace Union (*Volkruzhevosoiuz*). To persuade lacemakers to join the cooperatives, in 1932, the union doubled the hourly wage for associated workers. This decision had two major consequences. On the one hand, since the Union offered better wages and working conditions, more lacemakers were willing to register to the *artels*. On the other hand, the rise in salary affected the retail price of laces and was followed by a sales slowdown. In 1933, when the Union's principal customer *Centrosoiuz* – which bought 70–75 per cent of produced lace and redistributed it within the trade network – failed to pay its debts for lace, the Union delayed salary payments, which led to a further exodus of lacemakers from cooperation.⁴⁸

In response to the fluctuating membership numbers, several measures were introduced to strengthen connections between lacemakers and the *artels* within the Union. From 1935, threads and card patterns for lace were distributed through common workshops or brigades, and each lacemaker received the materials according to the working plan. The instructors also collected the finished lace on-site, as it made it easier to control the quality of lace and to consult lacemakers on their techniques. The declared purpose of these measures was to reduce the amount of time that lacemakers spent fetching materials and delivering their works.⁴⁹ They were also meant to strengthen the bond between lacemakers and *artels*, since the 'collectivisation of lacemaking' was announced as a guiding goal for the industry.⁵⁰ Everyday working practices, however, did not significantly change; the majority of the cooperated lacemakers were working from their homes as *nadomnici*, or homeworkers. Such organisation of work made it difficult not only to introduce new patterns and manage productivity but also to maintain work discipline and educate female artisans in a socialist work ethic. To raise a 'cooperative spirit', the Union encouraged craft practitioners to

organise common workshops where up to twenty-five lacemakers could work together and learn from each other under the guidance of experienced instructors. The Union administration also made use of small groups of workers known as *brigades*, consisting of five to eight lacemakers who shared a working space and formed a basic unit of the cooperative. If there was no common workshop in their village, a brigade gathered in private houses; each member of the brigade had a duty to host the group.⁵¹ Artels and brigades participated in ‘socialist competition’ and the Stakhanovite movement, and thus lacemakers were assimilating the ideals of socialist labour culture.

To educate a lacemaker in line with socialist ideals of communality, the Union’s administration engaged with the ideological guidance at the workplace. The workshops were equipped with radios and libraries, while regional party agitators were invited to lecture on the socialist way of life and work. A good Soviet worker should have been well informed about the news in their own country as well as international events. At the exhibitions, lace with patterns on the themes of Soviet everyday life was proudly displayed as a material embodiment of the Union’s efforts to turn rural artisans into exemplary Soviet workers. Designed by the students at the Vologda vocational lace school, these patterns were based on the repeating forms of stars, sickles, hammers, lightbulbs, sheaves of crops, aeroplanes and tractors. Each piece of lace had a declared practical function. For example, the lace edge with tractor pattern was meant to be a valance, which was used to decorate bed sheets (Figure 8.1). However, rather than being mass produced for the market, such samples became exhibition or museum pieces. Such lace was demonstrated as an example of lacemakers’ creativity in adapting Soviet imagery to textile work.⁵² The very fact that a lacemaker could create such patterns was presented as an achievement of the socialist approach



Figure 8.1 Lace border with a tractor pattern. Designed in the Vologda Lace School, Vologda, 1930s. Cotton threads, handmade tape laces. 26 × 118 cm.

to the organisation of training and working processes in lacemaking. This was aimed at making evident and tangible that lacemakers had time and sufficient artistic training to come up with original and impressive designs.

The ideals of cooperation, communal work and working discipline were materialised in large-scale compositions of monumental lace panels (*panno*) and curtains (*zanaves*). Considering their size and sophisticated design, these panels were to be made by a group of lacemakers who worked in parallel, each creating an allotted fragment. When all the pieces were finished, they were sewn together to form a single lacework. In addition to artistic and technical challenges, such projects also posed an organisational problem. To conceal the fragmentation of a panel, the lacemakers in a group had to work at the same density and manner. Accordingly, they had to be equally well trained and experienced in making different composite stitches. The exceptional arduousness of the working process and the complex iconography of the panels made them into objects of public admiration. Displayed in museums and during special exhibitions, such panels fascinated the audience by combining the delicacy and intimacy of lace with the monumentality of the form and striking ideological imagery. For example, the panel *Achievements of agriculture and animal husbandry* was commissioned in 1939 to decorate a newly opened Leningrad and the Northeast RSFSR pavilion at the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition in Moscow. The work was entrusted to lacemakers at the Lace Artistic Laboratory, an experimental department of the Vologda Lace Union, which was established in 1936 to design new lace motifs and cultivate productivity in the workplace.⁵³ The panel's imagery represents the main areas of the regional economy. Framed in the centre, flax flowers symbolise the Vologda linen industry. Around the central frame, in separate medallions, there are silhouettes of animals: a bull, a horse, a ram and a rooster, which resembles the bird motif of traditional embroideries. The corner medallions are decorated with a motif of clovers, with bees flying above the flowers. The rhythmic pattern of the border is made with laced wheat spikes. While figurative elements of the composition were meant to celebrate a landmark in the development of the regional agricultural sector, the lace panel itself, its materiality, embodied the triumph of the lace industry.

The photograph from the Vologda Lace Museum's collection provides a glimpse of how such panels and curtains were made (Figure 8.2). A group of lacemakers sit in an open space of the communal workshop, each working at her pillow.⁵⁴ Three of them are leaning towards lace pieces, which are recognisable as fragments of the *Peacocks* curtains (1938). The composition of two birds with luxuriant plumage on either side of the Tree of Life was a widespread folk motif in traditional northern embroidery and peasant painting. The lacemakers adjusted it to the medium of lace and



Figure 8.2 Lacemakers making a curtain in the workshop. Group photo.
The Vologda Lace Union, Vologda, 1930s.

used this familiar scene to adorn the colossal panel, measuring 248 by 180 cm (Figure 8.3). Despite the relative ideological neutrality of the imagery, this lace panel became political by redefining lace beyond its conventional functions as merely a decorative textile for individual use. Truly ‘Soviet’ lace served not only the interests of private costumers but also the official state propaganda and cultural policy.

These panels could be considered a Soviet lace manifesto, an embodiment of the social, technical and political achievements of the Soviet state and socialist organisation of labour.⁵⁵ Designing and making lace panels was a collective endeavour of several lace professionals: lacemakers, lace artists, instructors and art historians. However, the collectiveness of work did not mean turning lacemakers into anonymous artisans: on the contrary, as part of the collective, Soviet lacemakers gained professional status, name recognition and authorship. They could have individual merits and achievements, which were encouraged and praised by the administration of the cooperatives. Moreover, every skilfully made piece of lace was associated with a certain workshop, which to some extent could be compared with a product brand name. Before the revolution the names of lacemakers were mostly unknown, and the possibility of being recognised as a member of the



Figure 8.3 *Peacocks*. Lace curtain. Designed by artist-lacemaker E. Vorob'eva. The Vologda Lace Union, Vologda, 1938. Linen threads, handmade tape laces, 248 × 180 cm.

collective, or even as an 'author', was considered an outstanding achievement of the Soviet crafts policy.⁵⁶ Therefore, as a practitioner in an *artel*, a lacemaker not only acquired a professional identity as a member of a respected group but could also expect her name and personal biography to be preserved among the other names and written in the history of the working collective. Supporting professional identity among lacemakers was crucial for cooperative authorities since they believed it influenced the work discipline and motivation of lacemakers and, as a result, improved the quality of lace produced in cooperatives.

Conclusions

It was not until the end of the 1930s that cooperation in the lace industry was finally shaped under the administration of the Vologda Lace Union. The gradual reformation of the lace industry led to the emergence of new professions within the craft. Lacemakers, lace artists, instructors, quality inspectors and administrators had their own distinctive working roles, which were cultivated as part of the Soviet modernisation of craft. For lace practitioners, registered *artels* became the only place of official employment recognised by the state. While some lacemakers may have taken private commissions, the official sources did not mention such activities, since they were not considered a formal occupation. It was expected that a 'professional' lacemaker would be a regular member of the workshop, capable of completing a production plan and participating actively in the *artel's* operation. Regional cooperative officials insisted on the greater involvement of lacemakers in managerial tasks.⁵⁷ This approach was promoted in contrast to pre-revolutionary schemes, where lacemakers were merely objects of care rather than agents of change.

A comparison between humanitarian schemes of the late nineteenth century and early Soviet cooperative campaigns, discussed in this chapter, has revealed that both endeavours aimed to reshape social relationships within the lace industry. The ideals of cooperation, which served as a fundamental principle for managing sustainable craft communities, were developed and adapted under different political regimes. The Soviet organisers of crafts were quick to embrace humanitarian values of communal work in lacemaking and reinterpreted them through the lens of the socialist political philosophy and working ethics. The introduction of new forms of collectivity (lace classes, shared workshops and cooperatives) resulted in the professionalisation of the industry and had an indirect impact on handmade products. When the lace industry was composed of individual lacemakers working for middlemen, systematic improvement in the artistic qualities of lace and the

introduction of modern designs was complicated by the conditions of production. Before the Revolution, the joint achievement of private and public initiatives to reform the craft resulted in a larger assortment of lace and a greater variety of patterns, while lace panels were the most striking result of the Soviet socialist modernisation of the craft. Thus, it is not surprising that most of the panels were created during the 1950s, the early years of the Cold War, in the midst of ideological competition over the image of the future.

Considering the growing understanding of the economic, cultural and political interconnection between East and West during the Cold War, György Péteri suggested the Nylon Curtain as a metaphor to describe ‘what was actually separating the worlds on the two sides of the Cold War front line’.⁵⁸ The Lace Curtain might contribute to this metaphorical interplay of meanings by highlighting not only the permeability and transparency of the divide but also the consistent efforts of the Soviet authorities to use arts and crafts to propagate the socialist way of organising social, economic and cultural life. In 1954, seventeen lacemakers from the Vologda Workshop completed the lace curtain *Peaceful Moscow* or *Light of Peace above Moscow*, based on the design by the lace artist Vera Veselova (1919–2006) (Figure 8.4). In the centre, the Spasskaya Tower of the Moscow Kremlin is framed by arch ornamentation, above which, on either side of a semi-circular rising sun, two doves hold olive branches in their beaks. Displayed in exhibitions and museums, this panel, in line with official state rhetoric, embodied the artistic representation of the policy of peaceful coexistence and was intended to maintain the image of the Soviet state as a supporter of the international peace movement. Previously associated with privacy and intimacy, since the 1930s lace had become a textile of public display and a medium of state propaganda.⁵⁹

By discussing the impact of collectivism on crafts practitioners and on the products of their work, this chapter has sought to bridge the gap between the social organisation of crafts communities and the materiality of their practice. While this approach was applied to examine the nature of cooperation among lacemakers in the Vologda region, it has prompted many questions that need to be addressed. Could lacemaking have continued outside the cooperatives, and if so, what forms did it take? What motivated lacemakers’ decision to join the cooperative workshop besides the chance to overcome extreme poverty and obtain basic social guarantees? To what extent could an average lacemaker participate in collective decision-making about the workshop’s operation? In what ways did the professionalisation of lacemaking affect work engagement and productivity of labour? Did lacemakers consider their work a creative occupation or simply as sweated labour, and what influenced their attitudes towards it? Was there a space for creativity beyond working for state commissions and mastering new



Figure 8.4 *Light of peace above Moscow*. Lace panel. Designed by artist-lacemaker V. D. Veselova. The Vologda Lace Union, Vologda, 1954, 232 × 161 cm.

designs according to the production task? Aside from official accounts of cooperative work, little is known about the lacemakers' personal reactions and attitudes to the possibilities and limitations of novel forms of collective work, especially during the early period of mass cooperation in the late 1920s and 1930s. Some insights are suggested by Nicolette Makovicky's contribution to this volume, which explores lacemakers' response to the paternalist crafts policy of post-war socialist Poland. Further comparison of these cases illuminates the regional specificities of interventions in the lace industries, which in turn enriches our understanding of women's experience of manual labour and craft in Eastern Europe during the twentieth century.

Notes

- 1 Valeria Faleeva, *Russkoe pletenoe kruzhevo* [Russian pillow lace] (Leningrad: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1983), pp. 5–6.
- 2 Sofia Davydova, *Russkoe kruzhevo i russkie kruzhevnitsy: Issledovanie istoricheskoe, tekhnicheskoe i statisticheskoe* [Russian lace and Russian lacemakers: A historical, technical, and statistical investigation], vol. 1 (Saint Petersburg: Tipografiia A. S. Suvorina, 1892). The introduction to the first volume was translated and published as: Sofia Davydova, 'Russian Lace and Laceworkers: A Historical, Technical, and Statistical Investigation', *Experiment*, 22:1 (2016), 161–72. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2211730X-12341285>
- 3 Rekhachev gives the following numbers: in 1900, there were about 20,000 lacemakers in Vologda province; in 1910, according to local government statistics, 35,181 women and 245 men were engaged in lacemaking, and in 1912, there were about 39,000 lacemakers in the region. According to Davydova, in 1912, 39.5 per cent of the total lacemakers in Russia lived in Vologda Governorate. During the first decade after the revolution, after a sharp drop, the number of lacemakers in Vologda increased from 5,000 to 40,000. As reported by the Vologda Lace Union, 25,000 to 28,000 women worked in the lace industry in the early 1930s. See Mikhail Rekhachev, *Vologodskie kruzheva* [Vologda laces] (Vologda: Obl. kn. red., 1955), p. 15; Sofia Davydova, 'Ocherk kruzhevnoi promyshlennosti v Rossii' [A report on the lace industry in Russia], in *Kustarnaia promyshlennost' Rossii. Zhenskie promysly: ocherki* [Cottage industry in Russia: Reports] (Saint Petersburg: Tipolitographiia 'Iakor', 1913), p. 173; E. Konicheva, *Volkruzhevsoiuz za 5 let* [Volkruzhevsoiuz, 5 years report] (Vologda: izd. Volkruzhevsoiuza, 1936), pp. 7, 18.
- 4 Hanna Chuchvaha, 'Quiet Feminists: Women Collectors, Exhibitors, and Patrons of Embroidery, Lace, and Needlework in Late Imperial Russia (1860–1917)', *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture*, 27:1 (2020), 45–72. <https://doi.org/10.1086/711189>; Wendy R. Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia: Reviving the Kustar Art Industries, 1870–1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 5 Rekhachev, *Vologodskie kruzheva*, pp. 18–20.

- 6 Alexandr Davydov, *Kooperativy sovetskogo goroda i gody NEPa: Mezhdru 'voennym kommunizmom' i sotsialisticheskoi rekonstruktsiei* [Cooperatives in the Soviet city during the NEP: Between war communism and socialist reconstruction] (Saint Petersburg: Aletheia, 2011).
- 7 Kimberly M. Grimes and B. Lynne Milgram (eds), *Artisans and Cooperatives: Developing Alternate Trade for the Global Economy* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2000); Susan Luckman and Nicola Thomas (eds), *Craft Economies* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).
- 8 Maria Kartashova, *Kustarnyi promysly Rossiiskoi Imperii v poslednei treti XIX–nachale XX veka: Statistika, lokalizatsiia, gosudarstvennaia podderzhka* [Kustar crafts in the Russian Empire in the last third of the 19th–early 20th century: Statistics, localization, governmental support] (Nizhnii Novgorod: Kvarts, 2018), pp. 312–313.
- 9 Maria Kartashova, 'Rossiiskaia gosudarstvennaia politika po razvitiu professional'noi obrazovatel'noi seti v srede kustarei (1883–1917) (na primere shkol kruzheva)' [Russian state policy on the development of vocational education of craftsmen (1883–1917): A case study of lace schools], *Obshchestvo: filosofii, istoriia, kul'tura*, 2 (2016), 58–60.
- 10 Elena Dianova, 'Kooperatsiia zhenskogo kruzhevnogo promysla severnogo kraia (pervaia tret' XX v.)' [Cooperation of women's lace crafts in the Russian North (first third of the twentieth century)], *Izvestiia Komi nauchnogo tsentra Ural'skogo otdeleniia Rossiiskoi akademii nauk*, 1:5 (2011), 74–77.
- 11 Janice Helland, Beverly Lemire and Alena Buis (eds), *Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics, 19th–20th Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).
- 12 Nicolette Makovicky, 'Material Moralities: Craft, Networks and Family Cosmology in Central Slovakia' (PhD thesis, University of London, 2006); Anna Sznajder, *Polish Lace Makers: Gender, Heritage, and Identity* (London: Lexington Books, 2019).
- 13 Jill Riley, 'Weaving an Enhanced Sense of Self and a Collective Sense of Self Through Creative Textile-making', *Journal of Occupational Science*, 15:2 (2008), 63–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2008.9686611>
- 14 Luckman and Thomas, *Craft Economies*, p. 7.
- 15 Occasionally, males were also involved in lacemaking and needlework. As reported, at the beginning of the twentieth century, boys from seven to fifteen years old accounted for 0.9 per cent of the total number of people engaged in lace production. A. N. Maslennikov (ed.), *Vnezemledel'cheskie promysly Vologodskoi gubernii* [Non-agricultural crafts in the Vologda province] (Vologda: Izdanie Vologodskogo Gubernskogo Zemstva. Tipolitografiia Shakhova i Klykova, 1903), p. 19.
- 16 Nikolai V. Shelgunov, 'Vologodskie kruzhevnitsy' [Vologda lacemakers], in *Sochineniia* [Collected writings], vol. 3 (Saint Petersburg: Izdanie russkoi knizhnoi torgovli, 1871), pp. 52–65.
- 17 Davydova, *Russkoe kruzhevo*, vol. 1, p. 114.
- 18 Shelgunov, 'Vologodskie kruzhevnitsy', p. 62.

- 19 K. Andrea Rusnock, 'Sof'ia Davydova and the Study of Lace in Imperial Russia', *Experiment*, 22:1 (2016), 157–160. <https://doi.org/10.1163/2211730X-12341284>
- 20 Davydova, *Russkoe kruzhevo i russkie kruzhevnitsy*; Sofia Davydova, *Russkoe kruzhevo i russkie kruzhevnitsy: Issledovanie istoricheskoe, tekhnicheskoe i statisticheskoe* [Russian lace and Russian lacemakers: A historical, technical, and statistical investigation], vol. 2, tables (Saint Petersburg: Tipografia A. S. Suvorina, 1892).
- 21 Davydova, 'Russian Lace and Laceworkers', p. 169.
- 22 Shelgunov, 'Vologodskie kruzhevnitsy', p. 64.
- 23 Davydova, *Russkoe kruzhevo*, vol. 1, p. iv. A detailed report on Davydova's visits to the lace villages near Genoa, Venice and Silesia was published in *Trudy Komissii po issledovaniuu kustarnoi promyshlennosti v Rossii* [The proceedings of the Commission for the study of cottage industry in Russia], vol. 9 (Saint Petersburg: Tipografia V. O. Kirshbauma, 1883).
- 24 See David Hopkin's chapter 'Literary visions of craft and cooperation in the European handmade lace revival, c. 1840–1914' in this volume.
- 25 Davydova, *Russkoe kruzhevo*, vol. 1, p. 142.
- 26 Younger and less inexperienced girls studied longer (up to three years), while skilled lacemakers finished their schooling in a year.
- 27 N. A. Abushenko and V. S. Rasumbaeva, 'Istoriia osnovaniia mariinskoi prakticheskoi shkoly kruzhevnits' [The history of the foundation of the Mariinsky practical school of lacemakers], *History of Saint Petersburg*, 22:6 (2004), 78.
- 28 Davydova, *Russkoe kruzhevo*, p. 146.
- 29 *Kratkii ocherk deiatel'nosti sostoiashchei pod Avgusteishim pokrovitel'stvom Ee Imperatorskogo Velichestva Gosudaryni Imperatritsy Marii Feodorovny Mariinskoi prakticheskoi shkoly kruzhevnits, 1883–1913* [Report on the activities of the Mariinskii Practical School of Lacemakers under the auspices of Her Imperial Majesty the Sovereign Empress Maria Feodorovna, 1883–1913] (Saint Petersburg: Tipografia V. O. Kirshbauma, 1913), www.booksite.ru/fulltext/mari/inka/ (accessed 17 May 2024).
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Davydova, *Russkoe kruzhevo*, p. ii.
- 32 Aleksandr Kruglov, 'Vologodskie kruzhevnitsy' [Vologda lacemakers], *Vologodskie gubernskie vedomosti* [Vologda Provincial Gazette] (10 March 1873), pp. 28–30.
- 33 Kruglov, 'Vologodskie kruzhevnitsy', p. 30.
- 34 Irina Rabotnova, *Vologodskoe kruzhevo* [Vologda lace] (Moscow: NIIKhP, 1962), p. 6.
- 35 Nadezhda Kutekina, 'Deiatel'nost' uchebnoi masterskoi po pleteniiu kruzheva, kruzhevnoi shkoly i kustarnoi shkoly v Vologde 1902–1907 gg' [Activities of the training lace workshop, the lace school and cottage industry school in Vologda, 1902–1907], in *Istoriko-kul'turnoe nasledie Russkogo Severa: problemy sokhraneniia i perspektivy razvitiia: Materialy nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii* [Historical and cultural heritage of the Russian North: Conference

- papers] (Vologda: The Vologda State Museum-Preserve, 2018), pp. 125–134. <https://vologdamuseum.ru/i/files/Sbornik/Sbornik.pdf> (accessed 17 May 2024).
- 36 Sofia Davydova, ‘Ocherk kruzhevnoi promyshlennosti v Rossii’, p. 173.
 - 37 V. Frolov, *Kruzhevnoi promysel v Vologodskoi gubernii: k stoletiiu ego sushchestvovaniia v krae (1820–1920)* [Lace craft in the Vologda province: on the occasion of the centenary of its existence in the region (1820–1920)] (Vologda: Tipografiia Soiuz Severnykh kooperativnykh soiuzov, 1921). www.booksite.ru/fulltext/kru/zhe/vof/rol/ov/index.htm (accessed 17 May 2024).
 - 38 *Ibid.* Several other sources indicate the minimum age for joining cooperatives as twelve: see Rekhachev, *Vologodskie kruzheva*, p. 22.
 - 39 Frolov, *Kruzhevnoi promysel v Vologodskoi gubernii*.
 - 40 Rekhachev, *Vologodskie kruzheva*, p. 25; Konicheva, *Volkruzhevsoiuz za 5 let*, p. 7.
 - 41 Konicheva, *Volkruzhevsoiuz za 5 let*, p. 7. Cooperated lacemakers made up about 3.8 per cent of the total population of the region.
 - 42 Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia*, pp. 161–164.
 - 43 Konicheva, *Volkruzhevsoiuz za 5 let*, pp. 36–42; P. A. Berlin, A. G. Gallop et al. (eds), *Entsiklopediia russkogo eksporta* [Encyclopedia of Russian Exports], vol. 3 (Berlin: Kniga Verlag, 1925), pp. 417–423.
 - 44 Nadezhda Lamanova, ‘O kostiume’ [About costume], *Zhenskii zhurnal* [Women’s magazine], 1 (April 1926), 16–17.
 - 45 ‘Kustarka-kruzhevnitsa dolzhna sama stroit’ svoiu artel’ [The kustar lacemaker should build her own artel], *Kooperatsiia Severa*, 11 (October 1927), 10–11.
 - 46 Rekhachev, *Vologodskie kruzheva*, pp. 22–24.
 - 47 *Ibid.*, pp. 18–20.
 - 48 Konicheva, *Volkruzhevsoiuz za 5 let*, p. 14.
 - 49 Rekhachev, *Vologodskie kruzheva*, p. 33.
 - 50 Konicheva, *Volkruzhevsoiuz za 5 let*, pp. 20–24.
 - 51 *Ibid.* In the early 1930s, only 14–35 per cent of registered lacemakers worked in the communal workshops and brigades. See also regular publications on lace cooperation in the Vologda local magazine *Kooperatsiia Severa*, 1921–1928.
 - 52 Ekaterina Rychkova, *Kruzhevo: ot intimnoi mody do ideologicheskikh panno* [Lace: From intimate fashion to ideological panels. Exhibition catalogue] (Moscow: Kuchkovo Pole, 2016), p. 152.
 - 53 Among the first artist-lacemakers were A. K. Sokolova, A. G. Petrova, V. D. Veselova and M. N. Grunicheva. Rabotnova, *Vologodskoe kruzhevo*, p. 8.
 - 54 This photo is likely staged and hardly conveys the daily routine of lacemakers, but rather is an idealised portrayal of their collective work. Nevertheless, it makes visible their invisible labour, which is often omitted from the visual representation of the craft.
 - 55 The catalogue of the exhibition *Lace for Show*, which was held at the All-Russian Decorative Art Museum in March–November 2016, features a wide variety of Soviet lace and ideological panels. Rychkova, *Kruzhevo*.
 - 56 Rabotnova, *Vologodskoe kruzhevo*, p. 13.

- 57 'Dorogu kustarke' [Give way to kustarka], *Kooperatsiia Severa*, 9 (September 1927), 10.
- 58 György Péteri, 'Nylon Curtain—Transnational and Transsystemic Tendencies in the Cultural Life of State-Socialist Russia and East-Central Europe', *Slavonica*, 10:2 (2004), 114. <https://doi.org/10.1179/sla.2004.10.2.113>
- 59 Vologda lacemakers regularly received commission on panels after drawings by Anna Antonovna Korableva (1918–?), a lace artist from the Moscow Scientific Research Institute of Art Industry. For example, panels such as *Order of Victory* (1947), *House in Gori* (1952), *Three hundred years of reunification of Ukraine and Russia* (1954) and the curtain *Moscow Kremlin* (1957) with expressive ideological iconography were all based on her designs.

Crafting communist paternalism: the voices of lacemakers in Koniaków, Poland, 1947–1962

Nicolette Makovicky

Introduction

While doing ethnographic fieldwork among lacemakers in the Polish village of Koniaków, I stumbled upon a pocket-sized pamphlet celebrating the artistic achievements of the craftswoman Maria Kulej (1928–1998). Produced by the Polish Association of Folk Artists in the early 1980s, the brochure contains her professional biography, images of her work, and a picture of the artist surrounded by her mother, daughter and a young granddaughter. All four are dressed in folk costume and a large, rectangular lace doily lies spread across Kulej's lap, showcasing the delicate and three-dimensional floral motifs characteristic of fine Koniaków laces. Turned slightly away from the camera and with eyes cast down, all four appear to be concentrating on their crocheting apart from Maria's elderly mother who looks out at the camera with a questioning eye. Maria Kulej, the short text tells us, kept prominent company through her labours as an artisan, having completed tablecloths and doilies for statesmen as diverse as Josef Stalin, John F. Kennedy and Charles de Gaulle. According to the author, however, she gained the greatest pleasure from making lace tablecloths for the popes John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II. With its jumbled references to Soviet dictators, French generals and Roman Catholic Popes, the pamphlet manages to present Kulej as both an emancipated socialist woman forging an illustrious artistic career and as a rural woman steeped in local vernacular culture and conservative rural tradition. Here, images of family, faith and rural tradition are mixed with references to Cold War geopolitics.

The characterisation of Maria Kulej as both family matriarch, rural artisan and cultural diplomat reflects the complex political and symbolic field in which Koniaków's lacemakers operated throughout Poland's communist period.¹ Identifying vernacular crafts as a key aspect of national culture and identity, Polish artists and urban intellectuals established a large number of philanthropic and state-backed initiatives supporting rural artisans from the

late nineteenth century.² After the Second World War, these initiatives came under the economic and ideological control of the Polish United Worker's Party (PZPR). Keen to draw rural artisans into the new Soviet-style planned economy, party officials enjoined them to join craft cooperatives under its leadership. Regarded as an ideologically progressive form of production and ownership, the cooperative system promised to bring steady work, assured sales and a modicum of self-governance to artisans. Bringing rural crafts under the purview of state institutions, nationalisation, however, also paved the way for their politisation. Seeking to present itself as the legitimate heir to Poland's existing national traditions, the PZPR set about repackaging romantic ideas of peasant culture and lifeways with the aim of creating a new, socialist vernacular culture.³ This involved the extraction of rural traditions from their everyday context and their deployment for aesthetic and political effect in public spaces and events. It also saw the discursive 'folklorisation' of rural culture, including the rebranding of artisans and homeworkers as 'folk artists' and the material culture of the peasantry as 'folk art'.⁴

This chapter examines the post-war reorganisation of Koniaków's cottage industry as a radical experiment which reimagined the economic, cultural and social role of rural craft for the twentieth century. Drawing on archival material and oral histories, it documents lacemakers' experience and understanding of socialist reform. As multiple chapters in this volume attest, communities of lacemakers across Europe were a popular target for humanitarian projects during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the face of poverty, unemployment or war, wealthy patrons established philanthropic initiatives which aimed to create fair conditions of labour by facilitating a direct relationship between producer and consumer. Such projects were framed by relations of class and moral economy, relying on ideas and images of the (un)deserving poor, the virtuous female homemaker and the socially responsible consumer. In contrast, the Polish post-war experiment was explicitly anti-capitalist and anti-class by nature. At its heart, it promised an end to the exploitation of the peasantry and rural working classes and to secure their welfare through their incorporation into a more equitable socialist economy. Furthermore, this project of social emancipation was a paternalist project in which the state took on the role of commercial and artistic patron rather than a philanthropic scheme appealing to the moral conscience of the consumer. Indeed, profit sat low on the authorities' list of motives for supporting local craft production. It was trumped by the ideologically more important goal of ensuring employment for rural populations and designing products which could showcase Poland's vernacular culture as an organic part of socialist modernity.

A number of scholars have documented the economic and ideological appropriation of ‘folk arts’ by communist regimes across the Eastern Bloc, focusing predominantly on the institutional histories of state-run folk art organisations. Few, however, have documented the ways these processes of reorganisation and resignification were negotiated by rural artisans themselves. In this chapter, I use archival materials and ethnographic interviews to capture the experiences of Koniaków’s lacemakers using their own voices. Their experiences present some interesting challenges to thinking about humanitarian handicrafts in general and efforts to revive lacemaking traditions more specifically. At first glance, it appears that the socialist experiment had success in furnishing lace and its producers with a new social and economic role, while stripping lace of all its traditional associations with luxury and Christian tradition. Yet, with more scrutiny, it becomes clear that the project of socialising folklore suffered many of the same contradictions and tensions as philanthropic schemes in capitalist countries. Lacemakers found their opportunities for work and self-expression were both encouraged and curtailed by the planned nature of the socialist economy: the cooperative system appeared to offer them agency and the opportunity for self-governance, but also made them employees of an organisation within an inflexible, centralised economic system. Furthermore, the humanitarian impulse which underpinned socialist paternalism – expressed both in the form of central planning and in the perception of craft work as a kind of ‘social benefit’ (given out according to need rather than talent or market demand) – was in constant tension with lacemakers’ own self-perception as skilled artisans.

Koniaków lace

Koniaków lace is delicately floral, made by the successive looping of fine cotton or silk threads using a crochet hook to build up complex motifs which are linked together to form doilies, tablecloths or items of clothing (Figure 9.1). Like the technique of crocheting itself, however, Koniaków lace is not a wholly indigenous invention but arose from the meeting of local peasant crafts with urban, bourgeois tastes during the interwar period. Ethnographers have traced the origins of the tradition to the introduction of a general course in needlecraft and domestic economy at the village school from 1886.⁵ The development of a repertoire of indigenous motifs took off when local women adopted the technique for making and decorating the *czepiec*, or matron cap: a small white bonnet worn by women under their headscarves. An obligatory part of a married woman’s attire, the matron’s cap had previously been decorated with a strip of bobbin lace or machine-made lace. By 1900, however, caps were being made using the crochet



Figure 9.1 An elderly lady attending a festival in Koniaków wearing a traditional lace *czepiec*

technique, the frontispiece containing ever-more elaborate motifs which imitated the floral machine lace.⁶ By the 1920s, more than sixty women in the village were engaged in making and selling lace *czepce* in the nearby market town of Jablunkov (now in the Czech Republic).⁷

The transformation of the nearby market towns of Wisła and Ustron into spa towns in the early 1900s brought further impetus for commercialisation and stylistic change to Koniaków lace. With the help of Maurycy Roth, the Jewish owner of a general goods shop Wisła, and Wanda Sochaczewska, a Warsaw socialite with connections to the artistic circles in Krakow, women in the village began to turn out doilies and tablecloths in lace for an urban audience.⁸ Given that piecework could be completed at home, lacemaking was compatible with childcare and running the family smallholding, the traditional responsibilities of women in the Polish Highlands. From 1931, lacemakers gained support from the Society for the Promotion of Folk and Domestic Industry (*Towarzystwo Popierania Przemysłu Ludowego i Domowego*) in the nearby urban centre of Cieszyn. Reflecting a combination of salvage ethnography and philanthropy typical of the time, the Society aimed to counter the creeping 'urbanisation of rural life' and 'vanishing of folk art' by documenting the contemporary, vernacular ornamentation of Cieszyn Silesia. It was just one of several organisations, including the Katowice-based Union of Polish Women's Societies (*Związek Towarzystw Polek*), which sought out exhibition space and commercial outlets for Koniaków lace in Wisła, Katowice and the capital, Warsaw.⁹ By the outbreak of the Second World War, a lively cottage industry had been established in the village, turning out lace edgings and doilies – affectionately named *różycki* (rosettes) by lacemakers because of their round form and floral design.

The manufacture of *różycki* for an outside audience continued after the cessation of the war and the establishment of the communist-led Polish People's Republic. The post-war period ushered in a significant change in the organisation of craft production and sale, as the disparate philanthropic initiatives led by well-meaning urbanites were disbanded in favour of a network of state-sponsored folk art cooperatives. In 1947, the local lacemaker Maria Gwarek (Figure 9.2) and a dozen colleagues established a small lacemakers' cooperative (*Spółdzielnia Koronkarska*), which was subsequently incorporated into the Katowice-based Cooperative of Folk and Art Production 'ArW' (*Spółdzielnia Przemysłu Ludowego i Artystycznego 'ArW'*). Founded with the aims of 'creating the best possible conditions for professional and social work for employing women and young people, as well as invalids and persons with limited capacity for labour',¹⁰ the Cooperative brought together Koniaków's lacemakers with embroiderers, weavers, knitters and other artisans from the wider area. It pledged not only to organise 'cottage industry activities' and the 'purchase and sale of the



Figure 9.2 Lacemaker Maria Gwarek

subject of this activity’ but to offer members and their families ‘the possibility of using social, cultural and sports services and facilities’.¹¹ In practice, this activity translated into the running of a socialised form of putting-out system: the ArW supplied artisans with materials and tools, and guaranteed a steady stream of product orders from the regional sales bureau located in Katowice. Until her death in 1962, it was Maria Gwarek who distributed orders among the members and collected and dispatched the finished lace to the cooperative headquarters.

Like all other folk art cooperatives across post-war Poland, the ArW was brought under the executive control of the Cooperative-State Central Agency for Folk and Art Industry (*Spółdzielczo-Państwowa Centrala Przemysłu Ludowego i Artystycznego* – CPLia) ‘Cepelia’ in 1950.¹² Established in 1949 through the consolidation of more than eighty existing craft cooperatives and small-scale manufacturers, the official remit of Cepelia was the ‘organisation of folk production and folk manufacture as part of the small folk and art industries’ and the ‘care of folk craftsmanship due to its artistic

values'.¹³ In practice, this dual role translated into two – at times conflicting – institutional objectives. The first was the commercial goal of coordinating the production of craft items by supplying cooperatives with raw materials, designs and tools, and subsequently to market and sell these products through a state-run network of branded folk art shops across Poland and abroad. The second objective was to reshape craft into a contemporary expressive medium by bringing together ethnographers, art historians, designers and artisans to develop attractive goods on the basis of vernacular traditions. This involved redesigning products of functional use into decorative objects for a mainly urban audience,¹⁴ as well as educating consumers on their aesthetic virtues and their place in the new socialist materiality.¹⁵ It also supported the artistic development of cooperative members by staging regular competitions and exhibitions at regional and national level, allowing artisans to showcase independent work to the public.

The establishment of the ArW illustrates that lacemakers – and other female artisans in the area – were receptive to this discourse. Apart from a wage, membership of the cooperative offered women access to social benefits and a state pension reserved for those with the ideological status of 'toilers' (that is, state employees). It also gave lacemakers an active stake in the ArW as an enterprise. Membership was subject to the payment of an annual fee which bought artisans a share in the cooperative. Owning shares gave them the opportunity to earn a modest dividend from any profits earned, but it also made members liable for covering any losses which could not be offset by the organisation's reserves. Membership also gave craftswomen the right to attend and vote at the cooperative's general meetings which decided on policy, elected a governing executive and approved annual reports. While the overall fiscal strategy and artistic direction remained in the hands of functionaries in Katowice and Warsaw, certain administrative and executive posts were open to artisans. Lacemakers regularly became members of the ArW's governing council, as well as of subcommittees which oversaw matters of quality, membership and the use of cooperative resources for social and cultural purposes. The involvement of artisans in the formal structures of the ArW meant they were not only responsible for the day-to-day running of the cooperative's activities in Koniaków (doling out and collecting work and wages) but also had insight into and a degree of influence over the way roles and resources were managed from year to year. In this way, membership could serve as a pathway for women to forge careers as managers and artisans.

The incorporation of the ArW into Cepelia thus brought certain advantages to Koniaków's lacemakers. The cooperative structure provided a stable, state-backed framework for the existing cottage industry, allowing craftswomen to continue exercising their trade in much the same way as before the war. It also promised them a degree of self-determination by

inviting them to profit from their (collective) labour and to participate in the management of the cooperative's work, finances and artistic authority. Koniaków's lacemakers, however, faced two significant challenges to their ability to exercise control over their work. The first challenge arose from the lack of flexibility and practical limitations imposed by the principles of the command economy. As I show below, the planning of production, distribution and sales by central authorities often took little account of the realities of supply and demand, creating tensions between artisans, cooperatives and the Cepelia leadership. The second was the patriarchal attitude of the communist authorities to female employment. Despite an official commitment to gender equality, officials perceived women's abilities and need to work through the prism of family life: work was seen as a 'necessary evil' for single women and lone mothers, or as a source of supplementary income to that of a low-earning male 'breadwinner'.¹⁶ While many lacemakers in the village shared such conservative attitudes towards craftwork as employment, the official perception of employment as secondary to women's domestic and reproductive duties had consequences for the way their concerns about production, profitability and artistic integrity were addressed.

Factories of 'folk art'

In October 1951, the ArW held its third quarterly meeting in the mountain resort of Wisła, with members coming together to elect associates for its governing body, discuss its accounts and hear the production plans for the coming year. A representative from Cepelia's offices in Katowice opened the meeting with a summary of the cooperative's achievements over the preceding year. Noting that the ArW was one of the largest cooperatives in the region with 303 members, he praised the assembled artisans for their efforts over the preceding year. The ArW, he declared, was performing 'at the forefront in terms of production' and had overfulfilled its planned production quota by 125 per cent.¹⁷ Next, a member of the cooperative treated the assembled membership to a lecture on the 'significant importance of cooperative movement in the period of the 6-year plan'.¹⁸ Drawing rural populations into the national economy, cooperatives were the ideal tool for addressing the 'problems caused by the disproportion between the development of industry and the development of agriculture'. Making up one-third of the cooperative membership, Koniaków's lacemakers found themselves singled out for special attention. The chairwoman of the ArW's board, Lidia Materna, noted that since gaining 'control of the cottage industry in the centre for lacemaking in Koniaków', the ArW had succeeded in 'raising the artistic level and number of employees' from the village.¹⁹ She announced

a further plan to arrange a twenty-day vocational training course for lace-makers in the first quarter of 1952.

Replete with references to state economic policy and its official discourse of productivity, the minutes of the meeting reveal official expectations of the organisation and role of folk craft in a modern socialist society. The most important of these was that the manufacture of craft items and ‘folk art’ could be directed in the same way as production in other industries. At Cepelia’s first general meeting, the Minister of Arts and Culture Włodzimierz Sokorski emphasised that the remit of the organisation was to facilitate *the mass production* of folk craft.²⁰ He presented the cooperative system as a mechanism for introducing standardised product designs and work methods which would transform ‘individual artistic prowess into industrial production on a national scale’.²¹ Following the Marxist-Leninist maxim that labour was key to production of value, officials also assumed that higher production rates would bring economic prosperity. Following the principles of Stalinist central planning, production targets and employment conditions for individual cooperatives were set by the Ministry of Small Industry and Crafts (*Ministerstwo Przemysłu Drobneho i Rzemiosła*) and the Central Union of Labour Cooperatives (*Centralny Związek Spółdzielni Pracy*). In the spirit of Soviet-style Stakhanovism, artisans were encouraged to embrace ‘socialist competition’ in order to achieve ever-higher production targets. Indeed, production plans were often raised by up to 20 per cent annually with few accommodations being made for the specific nature of craftwork and domestic production, and no attention at all being paid to the presence (or absence) of consumer interest in craft objects.²²

Reading through the minutes of the ArW’s quarterly meetings in the period 1950–1962, it soon becomes clear that this production-driven model of artisanal manufacture was incompatible with both domestic production and the realities of post-war Poland. Members of the ArW’s board admitted that ‘it was not easy to apply competition amongst homeworkers’,²³ many artisans in the cooperative being unable to produce large quantities of goods and remaining unreceptive to calls for rivalry with their colleagues. The ever-increasing production quotas were a particular problem for lacemakers, who undertook intricate, labour-intensive work which could not be standardised or mechanised.²⁴ They often struggled to fulfil the orders, especially during the summer months when agricultural work competed with craftwork for their attention. And even when they were motivated to work, they were held back by a chronic lack of good-quality cotton thread for crocheting.²⁵ These supply-side problems were compounded by a lack of consumer interest in traditional products. Wartime destruction and the demise of private enterprise following the Communist Party takeover created a shortage in basic goods such as textiles, furniture, crockery and clothing. Despite Cepelia’s

commitment to reforming public taste and 'adjusting the assortment to the needs of the market',²⁶ post-war consumers had little appetite for decorative items and traditional craft goods which could be easily substituted by more practical, inexpensive industrial products. Indeed, throughout much of the 1950s, Cepelia subsidised the production of items such as lace doilies with the production of more popular products like furniture and toys.²⁷

Problems of overproduction and missing demand were compounded by the authorities' expectation that Cepelia and its constituent cooperatives operate as self-financing business enterprises, subjecting them to 'market commercial pressures in a non-market economy'.²⁸ For Koniaków's lacemakers, the resulting pricing structure translated into low piece rates. Low levels of remuneration for their work, however, threatened to jeopardise their membership of the ArW. In 1950, membership required the purchase of 2000 zł worth of shares, to be paid in four instalments of 500 zł. Yet, at a meeting in October that year, lacemakers told the assembly they were unable to afford these payments and requested permission to pay their dues in smaller monthly increments of 200 zł. This arrangement was reconfirmed at regular intervals over the next decade. Thus, while lacemakers were numerically strong, their work made a proportionally smaller economic contribution to the activities of the cooperative than that of other artisans. The sense that lacemakers were the 'poor cousins' of the cooperative was compounded by the unprofitability of their product. In 1958, the ArW projected a modest profit of 5 per cent on lace doilies, but accounting showed profits to be closer to 0.8 per cent per item.²⁹ Lacemakers queried whether it was even worth their while making lace doilies. Their concerns were dismissed by the ArW chairwoman Lidia Materna, who told members present that 'Koniaków lace would stop being unprofitable because the production was set to increase, and most of it would be shipped abroad for export.'³⁰

Materna's answer illustrated the biases of contemporary productivist thinking which located value in manufacturing (rather than in sales), as well as Cepelia's increasing dependence on foreign markets for the profitable disposal of unwanted inventory.³¹ Indicating that lacemakers should not concern themselves with the profitability of their products, however, it also dismissed their legitimate concerns about the viability of their craftwork and their membership of the cooperative. This awkward exchange suggests that the self-perception of Koniaków's lacemakers was somewhat at odds with the agenda of Cepelia's representatives – and perhaps even with aspects of the socialist project of state-sponsored craftwork as a whole. Indeed, as I show below, lacemakers often displayed an ambivalent attitude towards employment in the cooperative. While all women appreciated craftwork as a regular source of income, the majority never fully embraced the title of 'folk artist' and often resented the imposition of craftwork on their roles as

mothers and rural housewives. Some members appeared reluctant to accept directions given by Cepelia officials. Rather, the archival material suggests that they tried to mould the cooperative system to suit their own aspirations using their pre-war experience. This included contesting certain decisions made by the cooperative leadership, as well as attempting to draw financial resources from the ArW and Cepelia to the village in order to gain more control over the production and sale of lace.

Enterprising women: artists, workers ... or rural housewives?

Drawing women into the workforce was a central concern for the PZPR government, which sought to rapidly redevelop the heavily deprived areas of the countryside after the destruction of the war. The conflict had not only depleted many villages of their male workforce but had dissolved many of the traditional structures and social ties of rural society, sometimes requiring women to take on the role of breadwinner. A particular concern of the authorities was the question of how war widows and wives of disabled or low-earning husbands might be supported to find profitable employment.³² This concern translated into several initiatives aimed at creating jobs for women, including the so-called Action for Employment (*Akcja Zatrudnienia*) in 1947. This three-year programme included vocational training and the establishment of cooperatives specifically aimed at offering employment for women 'whose material situation was particularly burdensome'.³³ The training offered was overwhelmingly for 'typically cooperative and artisanal professions, such as cap-making, gastronomy, bag bonding, cutting and sewing, haberdashery, slipper manufacturing, brush-making, and the like, as well as typing and nursing'.³⁴ A similar initiative to develop 'female' cooperatives in sectors such as toy manufacture, linen production and knitting was launched in 1956 by the Central Cooperative Movement.³⁵ Despite the fact that Stalinist discourses presented employment as a path to female emancipation, gender equality and social justice, these efforts remained constrained by a conservative (but perhaps realistic) understanding of the limitations agricultural and family duties put on women's employment.³⁶

Lacemakers in post-war Koniaków welcomed the offer of employment in the cooperative, but this was often seen as supplementary to existing income streams and household duties. As one elderly lacemaker told me: 'Here in the mountains, we did not have the luxury of being able to put away money. The men had far to go to work and we value men's work. And they did not earn much, so it [lacemaking] was done more so that there was some small money, to help the men with supporting the home and the children' (PL,

eighty-eight years, 2009). The reality of membership in the ArW, however, belied this vision of lacemaking as flexible, part-time homework. Orders for doilies, tablecloths and sartorial elements such as collars and cuffs were handed out on a monthly basis, and a high quality of execution was expected from lacemakers.³⁷ As one craftswoman pointed out at a ArW cooperative meeting in 1960, lacemakers were only able to complete their quotas if they could dedicate themselves full time to the craft. However, lacemaking was not paid well enough to justify full-time employment: 'if someone takes care only of the crocheting, they can earn. But when there is a farm, you have to look after the farm. Because I would lose more on my farm than I would earn on it [lacemaking].'³⁸ The result was that lacemakers worked long hours and simplified the craftwork itself by repeatedly using a limited number of lace motifs or by making lace using coarser thread.

Most lacemakers employed by the ArW thus shared a pragmatic attitude towards craftwork, rather than viewing it as a source of artistic identity or even occupational identity. They were not alone in rejecting the label: surveys run by Cepelia's internal research department in the 1970s and 1980s show that this perception was typical for members of Cepelia's artisanal cooperatives across Poland: most artisans characterised themselves as employees or as workers in their trade, reserving the title of 'artist' for colleagues who were particularly creative and skilled.³⁹ Unable to directly influence the setting of production targets and piece rates, lacemakers thus tended to find other ways to make their concerns and voices heard. One of these areas was the allocation and use of the cooperative's communal funds. Their purchase of shares (and any profit accrued) contributed towards the running costs of the cooperative and various 'socio-educational' and charitable causes: a sports club, a folk-dance troupe and one-off donations to other institutions, such as a home for the elderly. However, time and again, lacemakers queried the necessity of using cooperative funds for the support of social and educational purposes, as well as the legitimacy of sick pay and claims for financial support from non-productive members. At the meeting of the ArW membership in July 1958, for example, they protested against the allocation of over 3000 zł to the Sports Association 'Start' (*Zrzeszenie Sportowe Start*), which supported physical activity for the general public and rehabilitation activities for the disabled. What direct benefits, they asked, could this association bring homeworkers like themselves?⁴⁰

Another way in which lacemakers asserted their agency was to push for more independence from the cooperative structure. In the spring of 1961, they petitioned the head office of the ArW in Katowice – and through them, Cepelia in Warsaw – to be allowed to open a retail outlet directly in Koniaków to sell lace to the increasing number of tourists that had started to visit the area. This suggestion ran counter to all structures of production,



Figure 9.3 Photographs and diplomas of the lacemaker Helena Kameniarz displayed at her former residence. Kameniarz represented Koniaków's lacemakers in the Association of Folk Artists.

sale and supply within Cepelia, bypassing all the established processes of administration and decision-making in the organisation. It also challenged the prevailing opinion among the Cepelia leadership that folk arts should be removed from small, provincial ‘bazaar shops’ and their sales concentrated into ‘snob shops’ in major Polish cities where their quality and desirability would be validated.⁴¹ Koniaków’s lacemakers asserted that selling locally would boost the quality and quantity of their products, encourage savings in the consumption of raw material and – most importantly – guarantee them better piece rates for their work. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their request was turned down by the ArW and Cepelia on the grounds that it was administratively and economically unworkable. However, it signalled lacemakers’ willingness to challenge the principles of the cooperative system, an impulse which later led many to become members of the Association of Folk Artists (*Stowarzyszenie Twórców Ludowych*) (Figure 9.3). Founded in 1968 by and for artisans wishing to operate outside the constraints of the cooperative system, the Association gave its members the legal right to operate as self-employed craftspeople, as well as offering them dedicated exhibition spaces and commercial outlets.

Conclusions

Communist parties across the Eastern Bloc brought rural crafts under the control of the state after the Second World War, regarding vernacular culture as an ideal tool for economic, social and political integration. In Poland, the production and sale of vernacular crafts was organised in a series of local and regional cooperatives under the purview of the Warsaw-based Central Agency for Folk and Art Industry ‘Cepelia’. These cooperatives replaced a patchwork of private workshops and philanthropic organisations which sought to support the production of rural crafts from the late nineteenth century. The reorganisation of craft into a state-supported model was partly driven by a need to reimagine the economic and ideological role of rural craft for socialist society, as well as a desire to ensure employment for rural populations which had been devastated by the conflict. They formed part of the wider ideological promise made by the Polish United Worker’s Party to steer post-war reconstruction and industrial modernisation along socially equitable principles, and to secure the welfare of rural communities after the devastation of the war. The consolidation of rural crafts into a state-run cooperative structure was therefore wrapped up in promises of emancipation along the lines of class and gender, and the promise of a national revival of vernacular culture under the paternalist protection of the socialist state.

Drawing on archival and ethnographic research among lacemakers in the village of Koniaków, I have sought to uncover how artisans experienced the socialist reorganisation of rural craft, constructed their professional identities and perceived the promises of the communist regime. Early adopters of the cooperative system, Koniaków's lacemakers joined the Katowice-based Cooperative of Folk and Art Production (ArW) in ever-increasing numbers from 1947 to 1989. The cooperative became the biggest employer of women in the village, giving them access to a small but steady income from craftwork, as well as the right to social benefits and a pension. It also allowed them a limited involvement in the organisation of artisanal production on a local level and the use of cooperative funds for educational and social activities. The collectivisation of craft production thus offered women the chance to become employees of the state – workers in a worker's state. It also entailed a reshaping of artisanal labour to suit a Soviet-style planned economy driven by a productivist ideology and assumed that artisanal manufacture could be managed using the same principles as any other sector. The mismatch between the labour-intensive nature of crochet lacemaking and this production-driven model meant that women often struggled to fulfil their orders on time. At the same time, the paradoxical disregard for consumer tastes on the part of the Cepelia leaders and the requirement that ArW turn a profit left lacemakers working for low rates. At times, producing crochet lace was actually unprofitable for the cooperative, but they retained their membership by virtue of the socialist state's policy of full employment.

These systemic problems had consequences for the relations between lacemakers and the cooperative leadership, as well as their own professional identities. Despite its purported democratic nature, the cooperative structure tended towards hierarchy and inflexibility. While they were invited to take an active role in running the cooperative and to air their concerns at cooperative meetings, lacemakers often found their voices were overruled by ArW and Cepelia functionaries. As a result, craftswomen accepted the economic security offered by the cooperative system but were frustrated by the lack of control over production, sales and remuneration that state patronage entailed. The archival record reveals that Koniaków's lacemakers struggled to reassert their agency vis-à-vis the ArW leadership by seeking greater control over the sale of their product and contesting the use of cooperative funds. It also shows that despite the overtly socially progressive rhetoric of the socialist state, latent issues of gender and class remained. Rather than being genuinely equitable, the system reproduced many of the tropes we see in other – non-socialist – interventions into craft communities: low wages, and the reproduction of handicrafts as an occupation for those difficult to employ due to sex, physical ability or youth. Contrary to the overtly emancipatory rhetoric of the communist authorities, the paternalist

system of craft production was underpinned by traditional notions of gender and gender roles. Given that many lacemakers shared conservative attitudes towards female employment, this disjuncture may have made them even less receptive to the professional identities constructed for them by the authorities. The majority never embraced the role of ‘folk artist’ offered by the regime, a role which presented female artisans as both socialist workers and the embodiment of vernacular tradition.

Handicrafts have often become part of humanitarian schemes in response to conflict, economic crises, environmental disaster and the displacement of populations. As the contributions to this volume show, such schemes have a rich history which is often framed by relations of class, race and colonial power. Emerging from the specific historical and ideological context of the early Cold War, Poland’s post-war experiment with socialised craft production also strove to use the production and sales of crafts as a mechanism for development which was directed by the state (rather than by private individuals through philanthropic initiatives). Its architects sought to address similar concerns about poverty, exploitation and securing the future viability of craft communities using a non-capitalist model which symbolically (and economically) downplayed the commercial aspect of craftwork and displaced the consumer from the heart of humanitarian action. As such, the moral discourses and cultural tropes which characterised many of the other schemes presented in this book (e.g. images of the deserving poor, of virtuous domesticity and of the socially conscious consumer) were replaced by romanticised notions of rural tradition with a socialist favour. And yet, the cooperative organisation of craft production under Cepelia faced many of the same challenges as other, non-socialist schemes. One of these was how to balance a desire for authenticity with the need to modernise the product range to the suit the populations’ increasingly urban, industrialised lifestyle. Another was balancing the ideological imperative of giving artisans access to stable, equitably paid work while needing to turn a profit.

Notes

- 1 Poland was ruled by the communist Polish United Worker’s Party from 1947 until 1989.
- 2 Ewa Klekot, *Kłopoty ze Sztuką Ludową. Gust, ideologie, nowoczesność* (Gdańsk: Fundacja Teritoria Książki, 2021); Piotr Korduba, *Ludowość na sprzedaż* (Warszawa: Fundacja Nowej Kultury Bęc Zmiana/Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2013).
- 3 Józef. Burszta and Bronisława Kopczyńska-Jaworska, ‘Polish Ethnography after World War II’. *Ethnos*, 47:1–2 (1982), 50–63.

- 4 Burszta and Kopczynska-Jaworska, 'Polish Ethnography after World War II'; Aleksander Jackowski, *Cepelia: Tradycja i współczesność* (Warszawa: Fundacja "Cepelia" Polska Sztuka i Rękodzieło, 1999).
- 5 Barbara Poloczkowa, 'Koronki koniakowskie', *Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, 22:4 (1968), 209–240, 245–246; Małgorzata Kiereś, *Koronka Koniakowska* (Istebna: Gminny Ośrodek Kultury, 2010).
- 6 Kiereś, *Koronka Koniakowska*.
- 7 Agnieszka Dobrowolska and Tadeusz Dobrowolski, *Strój, Haft i Koronka w Województwie Śląskiem* (Kraków: Nakładem Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności, 1936).
- 8 Kiereś, *Koronka Koniakowska*.
- 9 Janina Orynżyna, *Przemysł ludowy w Polsce* (Warszawa: Nakładem Tygodnika "Polska Gospodarka", 1938).
- 10 ArW, Protokół, Walnego Zgromedzenia Członków, 3 November 1950, Katowice.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 From 1962 the Union of Cooperatives in Folk and Artistic Industries (Związek Spółdzielni Przemysłu Ludowego i Artystycznego).
- 13 M. Woźniak, 'Problemy Wytwórczości Ludowej w Pracach Zakładu Badawczego Związku "Cepelia"', *Etnografia Polska*, 14:2 (1975), 91–108, p. 93.
- 14 For Koniaków's lacemakers, this meant increased orders for sartorial accessories (gloves, collars and cuffs) and domestic accessories (doilies, tablecloths), as well as special orders (such as diplomatic gifts and Christmas decorations). Lacemakers were not furnished with design templates to work from, but orders outlined the number and dimensions of the products required, and occasionally specified the nature of motifs to be included.
- 15 Piotr Korduba, *Ludowość na sprzedaż* (Warszawa: Fundacja Nowej Kultury Bęc Zmiana/Narodowe Centrum Kultury, 2013).
- 16 Natalia Jarska, 'Gender and Labour in Post-War Communist Poland: Female Employment 1945–1970', *Acta Poloniae Historica*, 110 (2014), 49–85.
- 17 ArW, Protokół, Walnego Zgromedzenia Członków, 9 December 1951, Gliwice.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Daniel Stone, 'Cepelia and Folk Arts Industries in Poland, 1949–1956', *The Polish Review*, 54:3 (2009), 287–310, p. 297, my emphasis.
- 21 Korduba, *Ludowość na sprzedaż*, p. 153.
- 22 Korduba, *Ludowość na sprzedaż*.
- 23 ArW, Protokół, Walnego Zgromedzenia Członków, 9 December 1951, Gliwice.
- 24 Some lacemakers in contemporary Koniaków blame the inflexible, centralised nature of production for ArW for what they see as a gradual decline in the quality of local lace: 'Cepelia insisted that the motifs were identical. So, there was no artistic development of lacemakers. Women wanted to earn money because there was no industry in the mountains, so they made big, easy things. So creativity got neglected.' Interview, TR, 65 years, Koniakow, 2009.

- 25 Deflecting questions about chronic shortages, the cooperative leadership called for artisans to exercise the 'greatest possible efficient resource-management' and 'to combat waste and inaccurate working patterns' (ArW, Protokół, 1951). At a 1955 meeting of folk artists arranged by Cepelia's Katowice offices, Maria Gwarek argued that lacemakers struggled with a 'lack of raw materials for the production of lace' and that there was 'great difficulties in determining prices' as a result (Kiereś, *Koronka Koniakowska*, p. 42).
- 26 ArW, Protokół, Walnego Zgromedzenia Członków, 9 December 1951, Gliwice.
- 27 Stone, *Cepelia and Folk Arts Industries in Poland*; Korduba, *Ludowość na sprzedaż*.
- 28 Stone, *Cepelia and Folk Arts Industries in Poland*.
- 29 ArW, Protokół, Walnego Zgromedzenia Członków, 21 March 1958, Katowice.
- 30 *Ibid.* Cepelia started exporting textiles, woven baskets and dolls from the early 1950s. By the latter years of the decade, it established retail outlets in major European cities such as Brussels, Frankfurt and Milan. In 1960, a shop was opened on New York's Fifth Avenue (Korduba, *Ludowość na sprzedaż*).
- 31 Korduba, *Ludowość na sprzedaż*.
- 32 Jarska, 'Gender and Labour in Post-War Communist Poland', p. 56.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 78.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- 36 Jarska, 'Gender and Labour in Post-War Communist Poland'; Małgorzata Fidelis, *Women, Communism, and Industrialization in Postwar Poland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- 37 Finished products were then evaluated first by an inspector nominated from their own ranks and then by a central committee in Warsaw from within Cepelia, and categorized as a higher-quality 'type 1' or lesser-quality 'type 2' product. The remuneration for a 'type 2' product was significantly reduced.
- 38 ArW, Protokół, Walnego Zgromedzenia Członków, 28 May 1960, Koniaków.
- 39 Maria Woźniak, 'Wytwórcy Ludowi Między Własnym Środowiskiem a "Cepelią"', *Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, 38:1–2 (1983), 9–17.
- 40 ArW, Protokół, Walnego Zgromedzenia Członków, 21 March 1958, Katowice.
- 41 Korduba, *Ludowość na sprzedaż*.

Humanitarian handicrafts as (dis)empowerment of women ‘left behind’: a Swedish help to self-help project in the northern Greek village of Vlasti, 1963–1988

Maria Småberg

Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss how humanitarian handicrafts can support gender empowerment in a humanitarian post-war setting. I will take my departure from the Swedish humanitarian organisation *Individuell Människohjälp* (Swedish Development Partner, IM¹) and its work in a small Greek village, Vlasti. IM was a small, agency-based humanitarian actor, aiming at creating individual help to self-help based on personal relations and equal partnerships. The narratives and practices of the Vlasti project, however, reveal tensions between good intentions of enabling women to develop voice and agency through traditional textile handicrafts work and dimensions of preserving patriarchal gender structures and norms.

The Vlasti project started in 1963 after the Dutch Oxfam worker Frankie Hamilton wrote a letter asking if IM could start a weaving project there: ‘In Macedonia there is a village called Vlasti. The village was once rich, but now the poverty is enormous. After two wars and a civil war, there are only widows in black and fatherless children left. What can they live on?’. Hamilton describes how she walked around in the village and entered some of the small stone houses. There she discovered wonderful woven fabrics in bright colours and beautiful patterns. They served as bedspreads and they covered the doors and the interior walls. Here were talented women weavers and the patterns were well known all over Greece. Hamilton was sure that the Swedes would love these woven fabrics.²

A former school-house became a weaving centre where Vlasti women were invited to work for IM and gain an income.³ The teacher Ragnhild Ågren and the former IM worker and curator Ingrid Gunnäs were employed to lead the work. Dafnoulla, Nounta, Tasoula and many other Vlasti women, who

had learnt weaving as young girls by their mothers, worked at the centre.⁴ This turned out to be a long-term project: IM was to stay in the village for twenty-five years, until 1988. IM was involved in the processes of design, development, production, marketing and sales. It was described as a successful project of help to self-help that saved a whole village, preserved a cultural heritage as well as provided Swedes with fabrics of the highest quality and beauty.⁵ In fact, the handicrafts became an important medium for communication and action at home in Sweden. At the same time, the goal of a local takeover of the business was never fully realised.⁶

Gender empowerment has become a humanitarian buzzword today.⁷ Here, gender empowerment deals with ensuring women's equal participation with men in decision-making processes and their inclusion in the economic sphere, as well as strengthening the resilience of affected populations by portraying women and girls as 'ideal' victims and agents of change. Today, these projects often promote a femininity that embodies a self-driven, agentic and entrepreneurial subjectivity.⁸ However, this focus on individual empowerment tends to overlook the various forms of structural inequalities that have triggered crises.⁹

In Vlasti we find women in a traditional Greek rural setting, affected by patriarchal structures.¹⁰ The women also lived with the impacts and memories of occupation and civil war in the 1940s, the takeover of the military junta and dictatorship (1967–1974), as well as social and economic hardship. It is a time of urbanisation, labour migration and family separation. When most men had died in the wars or left for work in other places, women, children and the elderly were left behind. The concept of 'left behind' can imply passivity and lack of agency, which is not my intention. In fact, both war and migration can be a window of opportunity for women who remain. In the absence of husbands, they have the potential to have the autonomy and freedom to make decisions. They then end up being empowered financially, socially and politically.¹¹ This social change is gradual, though, and there may be resistance to change.¹² IM identified that support systems for these groups were needed to help them cope with the detrimental impacts of various crises. They found it in the textile traditions of the village, not in women taking over agricultural or employment opportunities usually reserved for men, which are commonly recognised strategies. However, when sticking to these traditional female-coded tasks performed in the domestic sphere and connected to cultural transmission, IM may also have deprived women of more agency.¹³

Following Naila Kabeer's definition of empowerment as the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them, I view women's empowerment as

multidimensional and context specific.¹⁴ By studying newsletters, reports and biographical and historical accounts published by IM, as well as external material such as Swedish newspapers and a Greek documentary film, I will analyse how the humanitarian practices and narratives linked to handicrafts and empowerment were shaped by gender tensions and other dilemmas.¹⁵ I will also examine the transnational entanglements in this specific humanitarian context.¹⁶ My aim is to historicise and problematise the complexities of humanitarian aid from both Greek and Swedish contexts through a qualitative content analysis.¹⁷ When doing this, I will analyse narratives and practices with a specific focus on IM's perceptions of the recipients of aid who were empowered and its own role in promoting gender empowerment through textile handicrafts – the strategies used to overcome traditional gender norms, as well as the challenges and frictions in the work. In what way, then, can we understand humanitarian handicrafts as empowerment of local women from the case of IM's project in Vlasti? What were the strategies used and what challenges did IM meet?

Humanitarian handicrafts and gender empowerment

As outlined in the introduction to this edited volume, handcrafted textiles were the focus of some humanitarian activities from the late nineteenth century onwards.¹⁸ Earlier research on humanitarian and development aid in Greece has mainly focused on the First World War and the refugee crisis after the population exchange of 1923,¹⁹ the Second World War and the great famine,²⁰ and the role of the Marshall Plan.²¹ Many of the projects initiated by American Near East Relief (NER) and the League of Nations in the 1920s were in fact help to self-help projects, concentrating on vocational programmes helping refugee women to preserve traditional embroidery and weaving techniques.²² Historians such as Davide Rodogno, Michelle Tusan and Keith Watenpaugh have shown how these initiatives were often large-scale relief operations based on paternalism and a view of the refugees as passive and apathetic – as having no agency.²³ Thus, many times self-help projects led to objectification rather than empowerment. On the other hand, the historian Eleanor H. Tejirian states that these self-help activities actually became a model for later development organisations. It may have been a temporary help for people to improve their situation.²⁴ From a small, agency-based project perspective, I will explore how strategies of humanitarian handicrafts played out in a later period, which was influenced by a totalitarian rule contested by the West.

In this edited volume, it is also argued that humanitarian handicrafts were most often a gendered endeavour.²⁵ However, as a feminine-coded

practice, textile handicrafts have a low status in society.²⁶ Moreover, they are strongly connected to domestic work. Swedish scholars and feminists have therefore argued that it is a practice which has locked women to the private sphere and therefore hindered them in breaking borders of subordination connected to their sex.²⁷ In the 1960s and 1970s, the time of our study, many Swedish women broke with the textile tradition because of an eagerness to find their place in other, male-coded, contexts. In order to cross the borders of gendered patterns and break with the gender regime of the time, they felt a need to dissociate themselves from textile handicrafts.²⁸ From this point of view, it is difficult to see how handicrafts could bring empowerment to women. At the same time, textile handicrafts have been used as a feminist strategy. As keepers of a tradition and cultural heritage, women have created an arena for agency and change for themselves without threatening the power of men.²⁹ Thus, we have two different camps of research arguing for either the disadvantages or the advantages of handicrafts for women's empowerment. I will discuss this ambivalence when bringing Swedish organisational models to Vlasti.

The strategies of empowering the Vlasti women must also be viewed with reference to research on the complex position of Greek women.³⁰ Janine Mills discusses how scholars of anthropology, drawing on ethnographic studies of rural women, have argued that Greek women had a subordinate role to men and relatively limited freedom.³¹ Traditionally, the domestic arena was the responsibility of Greek women.³² Thus, here we find a value system deeply embedded in traditional parochial culture. These perceptions have, however, undergone considerable criticism. Scholars have demonstrated that Greek women today, as well as before, have more power than perceived. Much of this literature equates domestic power (and the control of household finances) with having freedom. There is also a tendency to connect women's earning of money – and the increased power that this brings an individual – to emancipation.³³ However, as Mills points out, this power is confined to the domestic arena and can still leave women under the control of men.³⁴ Thus, we must recognise the complex position of women in rural Greece and the question of whether women's earning of money through domestic work, in our case weaving, can lead to emancipation.

'Give them knitting needles and yarn'

When studying humanitarian handicrafts and gender empowerment,³⁵ IM is an interesting actor to focus on. IM started its work in 1938 by helping Jews in Prague and then extended its work to several locations in Europe during and after the Second World War.³⁶ IM, with a clear Christian profile at the

beginning, argued for humanitarian aid based on personal relationships.³⁷ In this way, they wanted to build networks of trust, which empowered people in need through raising their self-esteem and strengthening their belief in the future as well as their agency. The aid should be help to self-help – not passive charity – as a first step towards rehabilitation and a life in dignity.³⁸

Textile handicrafts became a crucial tool in IM's work of rebuilding European communities after the war. With sewing workshops, IM intended to help women refugees to gain an income and it was stated that working with the hands could heal traumas. One early example is their work in *Lager Wegscheid* refugee camp outside Linz in Austria. In 1952, IM established a sewing and weaving centre there where women came to work for a few hours. IM sold the embroideries in their shops in Sweden and the refugee women received an income. Similar work was conducted among Spanish and Portuguese refugees in Paris in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, in the 1980s and 1990s, IM started handicraft centres in Portugal, India, Tibet, Nepal, Zimbabwe, El Salvador and the Baltics.³⁹ In 2009, IM became a member of the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO) and the shops changed name to IM Faire Trade.⁴⁰ Thus, we here find an early agency-based organisation working with bottom-up initiatives in local contexts and with ethical and sustainable aims.

The women 'left behind'

Gender regimes in Europe were profoundly transformed by political and societal changes brought about by the two world wars.⁴¹ During the time of the occupation, Greek women entered the public sphere *en masse* for the first time. Resistance activity gave them self-confidence, equality and esteem – opportunities for initiatives and activities that had been unavailable in peacetime. However, in post-war Greece, women were forced back to their 'traditional' duties and domestication.⁴²

When initiating the project, IM described the receivers of aid – the women behind the goods – in ambivalent ways as both victims and agents. Some perceptions can be discussed under the term othering. In the newsletter there are, for example, many photos of hardworking local women. They are working in activities such as carding, weaving and colouring. It is also highlighted that the women are interested in work, that they work with joy and that they are talented and skilful.⁴³ They also have the potential to grow and develop their skills. Moreover, they are thankful. IM co-worker Ragnhild Ågren writes that when they packed the first deliveries to Sweden, the women asked her to put a piece of paper in each item with a message of good wishes and thanks: 'We want the Swedes to know how thankful we

are to have a job.⁴⁴ They are then represented as worthy of help, which is a recurring trope in humanitarian narratives (see [Figure 10.1](#)).

However, the women are also represented as poor, living under primitive conditions. Some struggle with illnesses and disabilities. With perceptions of victimisation and othering, the beneficiaries remained strangers even if the appeal for help was based on a common humanity.⁴⁵ Ågren writes how Kleoniki is a poor old woman without teeth, but with a warm smile. She is twice a widow. She wears worn clothes and a black scarf.⁴⁶ The elderly Karaisko sisters live together in a single room with an earth floor. One of the sisters is blind and they have no family who can support them.⁴⁷

Another marker is that the women are lonely and live in isolation. Tasoula is one of the women who lives alone. Her husband and her only son died in the war. Nounta, also a widow, is in her seventies and lives with her mentally disabled daughter who is in her forties. She is in need of new glasses; her eyes hurt when she is knitting or does finer works.⁴⁸ Living alone also means being self-supporting and being responsible for children and the elderly. Mrs Sersemis had baby twins while the husband was away shepherding. The babies were screaming from abrasions caused by being wrapped and put in a cradle. The mother could not breast feed and gave



Figure 10.1 Vlasti was the home of many talented weavers. IM identified that the textile traditions of the village could be used as a support system for the women to cope with detrimental impacts of various crises.

the babies ordinary milk with water. Next time Ågren comes for a visit, the baby boy has died.⁴⁹ The causes for the difficult situation are not only connected to political and economic structures in IM's eyes, but also lack of civilisation and modernity.⁵⁰

Moreover, the women are portrayed as traditional, dressed in black. The author Andres Küng, when visiting the village in 1980, notices how they are more open-minded than in other places he has visited, and that they greet him and shake his hand without hesitation. IM co-worker Ella Brita Lefvert explains, though, that progress in gender equality has not come as far as it has done in Sweden. If a man dies, the wife and the daughters need to stay inside for three years and then the widow needs to wear black for the rest of her life. 'If a woman dies, the husband and the son can sit at the café the next day.'⁵¹

The local villagers are also represented as exotic and mysterious. IM worker Ingrid Janissa reports of old customs in Vlasti. She describes patriarchal customs where the daughters live under strong control. Young men pick their coming brides on a 'marriage market' and the wedding is celebrated with traditions and excesses. Janissa writes that everything is enchanting and not at all of our time – a fairy tale or a legend.⁵² In another report, we learn of women who tell the future through turning the coffee cup over.⁵³

The European Mediterranean has been part of a 'moral geography', where the south is a zone of archaic mobility and backwardness in contrast to the protestant north, the origin of capitalist and industrial modernity. To designate this moral geography, which includes stereotypes and imaginations about this region, scholars have coined the term 'Mediterraneanism'. This term describes the substantiation and essentialisation of the geographical environment as well as the historical and cultural characteristics of the region and is analogous to Said's 'Orientalism'.⁵⁴ Thus, these humanitarian narratives reinforce ethnic and cultural differences.⁵⁵ The representations become a contrast to the modern life and welfare system in Sweden.⁵⁶ In this way, distance from the recipients of aid was created.⁵⁷ At the same time, an imagined familiarity is recognised when highlighting individuals behind the products sent to Sweden (see [Figure 10.2](#)).

We also see a mix of representing the strength and resilience among the women with victimhood. In an article on humanitarian narratives, Diana Tietjen Meyers writes about the pathetic and the heroic victim paradigm.⁵⁸ The representations of both innocent and passive victims, as well as more heroic agents and women with the capacity to shape their destinies, may be chosen with a view to encouraging readers to donate money to humanitarian charities.⁵⁹ The IM representations of the women were part of such humanitarian language and government of emotions.



Figure 10.2 The new Swedish weaving centre built in Swedish style with wooden materials

Strategies of empowerment

From this case of a small agency-based humanitarian project, with a focus on women who were 'left behind', I now want to discuss and analyse the complexities in empowering women through help to self-help projects based on textile handicrafts. According to Naila Kabeer, empowerment is a dynamic process in which women are enabled to develop voice (the power to articulate preferences) and agency (the power to make decisions). On a micro level, it can be interpreted as an idea of self-efficacy and realisation among individual women that they can be agents of change. However, according to Kabeer's framework, a woman's ability to become empowered at the individual level depends on the environment in which she lives. I will in particular look at how a humanitarian development project supported women in getting access to human, social and economic resources or material assets.⁶⁰ In Vlasti's case, such empowerment strategies dealt with skill development and self-efficacy, access to wider networks and to role models outside the family, and with earnings.

Education and skill development

Women in Vlasti had over generations weaved for their own homes and for sales as an extra income for the household. In the 1960s, they had been dependent on rich businessmen in the larger cities. The production was adapted to what they thought the tourists would want to buy when coming in larger groups with the emerging charter companies. The weavers tried to modernise the patterns and abandoned the softer nuances of the colours of plants in favour of stronger colours. The women worked hard on their old-fashioned looms, but the income was very low. When IM came to Vlasti it was decided to focus instead on the existing local knowledge and skills of weaving. IM aimed for a weaving centre with modern equipment, where about fifty women could get education and work. The next step would be to engage women who worked in their homes. The village council supported the idea and IM took over an old school building for its project.⁶¹ Here was a local heritage to save. The ambition was to help with keeping the traditional patterns. At the same time, IM brought modern equipment and gathered the production workers together in a building. From the start, we find an ambivalence and blend between the traditional and the modern within the project (see [Figure 10.3](#)).

Training and professionalisation were parts of the work from the beginning, both concerning the IM co-workers and the local Vlasti women. When



Figure 10.3 The teacher Ragnhild Ågren led the work in Vlasti from the start

establishing a weaving school in Vlasti, IM hired competent co-workers. Ragnhild Ågren became its first director. Ågren was a primary school teacher with a knowledge of modern Greek language and culture. She had worked in Greece for other organisations as a volunteer. She was also trained in weaving.⁶² Many other IM co-workers in Vlasti also had a background in handicrafts themselves and were educated in prominent weaving schools in Sweden.⁶³ Language, cultural and pedagogical skills as well as competence in weaving were prioritised.

IM intended to support the existing local practical knowledge and skills of weaving. However, they also wanted to develop the competence of the local co-workers with the aim of creating self-support and independence through a self-governed cooperative owned by the village. Since IM focused on traditional patterns and techniques, the products were hard to sell in Greece. They did not fit into the tourist industry. Restructuring was then needed to increase profits and IM wanted to give its support. From then on, the fabrics should be made capable to sell in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe.⁶⁴ The Swedish textile designer Thea Wedin visited Vlasti in the summer of 1966 to orientate the Vlasti seamstresses to Swedish fashion.⁶⁵ One of the most talented weavers, Eleni Dervisi, who had also shown administrative skills, was sent to the most prestigious weaving school in Sweden, *Sätergläntan*. On her return to the village, she became local supervisor of the Vlasti weaving school.⁶⁶ Thus, IM did not only retain the traditional ways of weaving; they also changed them. We may assume that women developed their new syntaxes through individual initiatives and creative alliances at the loom.⁶⁷

Access to role models and wider networks

In the IM strategies there were also examples of role models connected to gender empowerment. I understand gender as a relational concept built on normative power structures between the genders, which enable or restrict the ability to act in a public space. When the IM co-workers from Sweden arrived in the village, different norms of masculinities and femininities were negotiated. We also find how the humanitarian narratives were formed by gender.

Early on, it was recognised that the house of the weaving school was in bad shape. The Swedish building contractor Paul Gustafsson then advised IM to build a new house. He engaged people from his own village in Sweden, Tibro, in plans for the construction work and collected money for the project in the local community.⁶⁸ Wooden material and furniture were then sent by railway. Moreover, a team from Gustafsson's company arrived in Vlasti in 1965 to help with the construction work. All the equipment was a gift. Gustafsson and his son Lars had designed the house that was going to be built, a wooden house in Swedish style.⁶⁹ In the documentary

film *The Weavers*, one of the locals expresses how they found the Swedish equipment a bit strange, but that the people were friendly.⁷⁰

In the newsletter there are representations of muscular, fit and driven Swedish men. They are also represented as a brotherhood of idealist volunteers who can be interpreted as heroic and can act as examples for character building. Bertrand Taithe highlights how gendering of humanitarian work has been focused on 'toxic' masculinity or 'hypermasculinity'.⁷¹ When discussing the cultural encounters between humanitarian workers, Ann Laura Stoler points at 'fraternisation', which is based on imbalanced gender relations.⁷² In our case, the male IM workers are portrayed in moral terms, as 'do-gooders' with, as Liisa Malkki puts it, 'a need to help'.⁷³ In an interview, Paul Gustafsson speaks of how he enjoys 'working with his hands being useful for those in need'.⁷⁴ It is also highlighted that Gustafsson is deeply religious and describes how he used to pray to God during his work, asking for help 'to build a house in Your honor'.⁷⁵ Thus, there was a softer kind of humanitarian masculinity ideal here. Later on, a group of volunteering actors came from Malmö Theatre in Sweden, as well as homosexual men who worked with the weaving project in the 1970s, opening up multiple masculine identities.

Moreover, IM tried to negotiate gender structures when trying to involve more men. The Lund headquarters came up with the idea of arranging a competition of woodwork for men in Vlasti in order to make them more involved. They then thought it would be appropriate for a man to arrange it: 'If you want to be taken seriously, well, then a man with authority must be leading it for IM's sake.' Paul Gustafsson was their first choice, since he enjoyed great respect among the men in the village.⁷⁶ At the same time, IM lived up to local gender norms and kept them going when separating the work of men and women and sticking to male hierarchies.

Single Swedish women also came to work in the village. They were outspoken, took the initiative and moved freely in public, dressed in modern clothes and drove Volvo cars. In many ways, they expanded the norms for what women could do in the traditional village. However, both Ragnhild Ågren and Ella Brita Lefvert were both appreciated and loved by the villagers. They supported individual Vlasti women and sometimes brought them out for a car ride or excursions to Athens. The villagers were also positively surprised that Ågren and Lefvert went to the local Greek Orthodox Church on Sundays and holidays and participated in festivities.⁷⁷ They then lived up to Greek gender norms.⁷⁸ Moreover, the Swedish women worked with textile handicrafts, a traditional women's business. However, they were also told not to walk alone in the streets in the evenings because 'there were young men who had their eyes on the beautiful Maria (a nickname for Ågren)'.⁷⁹ They were, after all, seen as causing sexual desire.⁸⁰

Despite negotiating gender norms in the field, there was no official statement on gender equality within IM. From the 1950s onwards, Britta Holmström officially promoted women's ordination within the Church of Sweden.⁸¹ Swedish state policy in general also promoted gender equality.⁸² However, in the newsletter of 1975, it is told that IM does not fight for women's emancipation per se. IM rather forms 'a pattern where giving oneself leads to emancipation, joy and confidence which comes from not having the ego at the centre but the Lord.' It is argued, though, that IM has had many women leaders at all levels. IM's 'weapon has been the home – maternity, love – all that is not recognised today or given value in the modern woman's struggle for equality and more rights.' They still think they have something essential to say to the Swedish women, which can be found when meeting all the 'brave, individualist and strong women' who work for IM all over the world. 'They have something to say to you. Maybe they are tracing a secret!'⁸³ We may therefore assume that the women in IM did not promote a radical change of gender norms when acting as role models.

Earnings and material assets

The work in the weaving school developed. Many young women who had left the village came back and learnt weaving techniques. Old patterns were reconstructed. They started to make broader collections: tapestries, tablecloths, bags, belts, slippers, fabrics for clothes, curtains and furniture, lace, knitted socks. They also made skirts and dresses. The quality improved. Women had their special tasks and, in fact, they were driving the development. The Greek authorities acknowledged the improvements and decided to electrify the village and build new roads to the isolated village. IM supported the infrastructure with start-up capital.⁸⁴

In 1966, the new weaving school was inaugurated; this was the beginning of what IM described as the 'Vlasti success'. It can be interpreted in terms of empowerment. To celebrate, young women acted as models in a fashion show in Vlasti. We here find a shift in the reports. Instead of only focusing on poor old women, the young are also included in the narratives and image (branding) of Vlasti. The Swedish vicar Gunnar Anshelm writes about the joy and feelings of hope that he met in the village on a visit: 'This is the biggest fairy tale in the history of the village', he is told by the villagers.⁸⁵ There were notions of self-esteem, revolution of minds, break of isolation and new economic standards.

Fashion shows became a catalyst and tool for change. The first fashion show outside Vlasti took place in Thessaloniki. Greek officials attended the inauguration of the new weaving house. They were delighted to see the outcome of the project and invited IM and the young girls to put on a catwalk

show in Thessaloniki. Fourteen girls were selected as models and eleven girls performed traditional dances in the pauses. Moreover, two men from the village were models. Altogether, thirty-five people travelled by bus from Vlasti, including musicians, the mayor and some co-workers. The bus was also packed with garments. In Thessaloniki, the Vlasti group was welcomed by officials, they stayed for three days at a new hotel and were invited to nice restaurants. Ågren writes that most of the girls had never been outside the village before so this became a great experience for them.⁸⁶ And the performance was a success. The hall was packed with people, including the minister, governor and high-ranked militaries. Journalists from the big newspapers wrote about the event. Vlasti was officially recognised as a new textile art centre.⁸⁷

This event boosted the villagers. One of them commented: 'The weaving house has meant stimuli for the whole village. We have understood that we are capable and able to produce goods that meet demand.'⁸⁸ Åke Olausson writes that the fact that the women are at the forefront of the village has been revolutionary in the villagers' mindset.⁸⁹ The whole village of Vlasti came alive, it is told. The villagers did not only gain higher self-esteem; they also got more money to spend. The craftsmen had better business. The shops around the square could offer a larger range of products. The cafés flourished. Houses were renovated. Weddings were celebrated with extravagance.⁹⁰

Meanwhile, in Sweden – marketing, consumption and help to self-help in return

Within humanitarian handicrafts the dimension of humanitarian representation is strong.⁹¹ The Vlasti products were advertised in the IM newsletter as, for example, presents for friends, home interiors and fashion.⁹² In Sweden, IM shops sold bags, tapestries, skirts, slippers and belts. The fabrics were launched as typical Northern Macedonian products, 'not the variegated fabrics known from Mykonos that are chosen with tourism in mind'. The Vlasti products were seen as genuine and authentic. However, it is said that the fabrics with the traditional Vlasti patterns were sometimes used in new manners.⁹³ The sales, however, did not always keep pace with production and IM initiated new ways of marketing the products. The products were sold at outdoor markets and IM arranged exhibitions in galleries and church community halls, as well as advertising in various shop windows.⁹⁴ Arranging travel tours to Greece, including Vlasti, in combination with visits to the Holy Land, also became a strategy.⁹⁵ The marketing revealed the makers and the 'moral' circumstances of the production.⁹⁶

The Vlasti textiles were also important in the marketing work of IM in general. Informative media material on Vlasti was produced, for example slides in colour with audio tapes suitable for church community evenings, sewing circles and women's organisations.⁹⁷ It is obvious that IM was mainly trying to attract women with connections to the church and handicrafts. However, IM also tried to reach a wider audience through exhibitions.⁹⁸ In fact, Britta Holmström, in a letter from 1969, writes that 'the handicrafts are better than posters and anything else'.⁹⁹ These were products that the audience could feel and see and they then gave tangible and tactile dimensions to the mediation of IM. It therefore became important for co-workers to bring Vlasti products when touring to local groups around Sweden and when presenting IM's work in venues such as schools and libraries.¹⁰⁰

Fashion also became a way to make the Vlasti products attractive. In 1968, IM started their own sewing atelier in Lund.¹⁰¹ It is portrayed as a unique initiative, and the 'Vlasti collections' of suits and skirts were regularly advertised in the IM newsletter and sold in IM shops all over Sweden.¹⁰² The head of the atelier Karin Larsson sometimes travelled to London 'to soak up the new fashion'. She liked 'the well-tailored, a bit strict but elegant lines that also best suit the Vlasti fabrics and customers. However, this does not prevent you from finding some personal and fun details.'¹⁰³ Wedding gowns and so-called after-ski dresses were also sold at reasonable prices.¹⁰⁴ In 1986, it was reported that about six hundred garments were produced in the Lund atelier and that they had customers all over Sweden, mainly women in the fifty-five to sixty age group 'who do not fit in mass produced clothing and have high demands on quality and fit'.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, fashion shows were arranged with young and old IM co-workers as models. The audiences were reported to rejoice over the creations and placed orders.¹⁰⁶ The sales increased. Fashion shows reflected contemporary notions of femininity.¹⁰⁷ However, men also had various roles as comperes and models.¹⁰⁸

IM fashions made connections between the Greek and Swedish contexts. Britta Holmström declared in interviews that IM wanted to create beautiful and sustainable clothes and at the same time give life opportunities to a poor village. Moreover, IM wanted to bring quality to Swedish women, who did not have time but also did not want 'wear and tear'.¹⁰⁹ Swedish women's needs for beauty and quality were knitted together with Greek women's need for incomes.¹¹⁰ At the same time, they wanted to reverse the trend of depopulation in the countryside and to resist mass consumption in both Greece and Sweden.¹¹¹

The Vlasti garments also became markers of identity and ethical consumption.¹¹² When Britta Holmström and her daughter Monica Markström were invited to meet with Queen Silvia in 1979, they were both wearing Vlasti dresses and suits and they also brought pieces of Vlasti products to show

the queen.¹¹³ From other photos we also understand that Britta Holmström wore Vlasti suits when she received the papal honorary Benemerenti medal in 1977 and when she preached in Lund Cathedral in 1978.¹¹⁴ When wearing the Vlasti clothes, IM donor women saw it as an action of solidarity and a way to perform international awareness. Many well-situated women in Lund, for example wives of professors, wore clothes from the Vlasti collection (see [Figures 10.4](#) and [10.5](#)).¹¹⁵

IM struggled with the negative sides of modernity at home in Sweden. The newsletter expresses the idea that Vlasti could also be a help to self-help for Swedes: ‘In a more rational society with less and less room for individuality, this village gives us a sense of peace, beauty, presence, a sense of individuality – a help to self-help.’¹¹⁶ The newsletter discusses the transition to a post-industrial society. IM fears an inhumane setting where people’s ability to show compassion is threatened. Swedes are in need of nourishing more sustainable and authentic relations.¹¹⁷ This can be found through the ‘pleasure of giving’.¹¹⁸ Seeing and answering to the needs of others is an enriching engagement. However, there are differences in the help to self-help. Swedish women’s empowerment entails the wearing of a stylish dress, while Greek women’s empowerment entails access to an income, breaking isolation and



Figure 10.4 The Vlasti dresses were sold to Swedish women ‘who do not fit in mass produced clothing and have high demands on quality and fit’

recognition of a cultural heritage.¹¹⁹ Swedish women are in a way invited to care for less fortunate 'sisters' by celebrating their own privilege with an act of stereotypical feminine consumption.¹²⁰

At the same time, IM portrayed the garments as an intermediary, a reason for something more: 'the hand that is bringing the gift and the hand that is receiving it finally find each other – beyond the gifts'. The help is not unilateral but mutual, a mix of being donors and receivers. In IM's eyes, justice and charity are not in contradiction. The newsletter highlights the need to change economic, social and political structures as well as personal relationships and individual help.¹²¹ People are dependent on each other, and it is held that the feeling of being needed creates human value.¹²²

Dilemmas, challenges and frictions

Even if the Vlasti project is presented in positive terms by IM, there were also dilemmas, frictions and conflicts which were not hidden in the material and the reporting. To some degree, they are connected to the memories of war and the takeover of the military junta in 1967, which created fear and suspicion. We also see challenges that are connected to economic crises and urbanisation. Here, commercialisation and consumption are not only part of a solution, as above, but also become issues of contestation.

The political landscape

A military junta ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974. The dictatorship was characterised by far right-wing policies, restrictions on civil liberties, and the imprisonment, torture and exile of political opponents.¹²³ Sweden, together with Denmark, Norway and the Netherlands, brought the Greek case to the European Commission of Human Rights, alleging violations of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) by the Greek junta.¹²⁴ Sweden also became a refuge for Greek dissidents and asylum seekers.¹²⁵

IM had troubles when working in this authoritarian political setting. From the outset, IM had aimed at counteracting repressive and totalitarian ideologies in Europe – Nazism, fascism, Stalinism – and at supporting refugees and other people in need. Instead of the oppression of totalitarian ideologies and exclusions that they met in Greece, IM wanted to promote the individual value of each person.¹²⁶ In the IM newsletter, it is reported that the junta was suspicious of foreigners in general but also of IM, since Sweden was one of the countries that stood up against the new regime.¹²⁷ Moreover, there were accusations against IM in Swedish newspapers for working in and selling goods from Greece and even propagating the regime

when there was a Swedish boycott of Greek goods.¹²⁸ Thus, their position in Greece was contested from different sides.

Britta Holmström answered the critique by citing the organisation's guidelines from 1944, which wrote of helping people no matter their background. She describes how IM contributed by improving the lives of many families in the village before the junta came into power and how the village now has electricity and better roads. If IM withdraws from their work in Vlasti, these families would suffer. She also holds that there is no motivation for a withdrawal because many people dislike the regime – IM carries out its work no matter what the political circumstances are. She also clarifies that all the funding from IM goes directly to the village and not through Greek authorities.¹²⁹

In 1973, the Greek authorities decided that the Swedish IM workers had to leave the country. However, the local governor of the Kozani region refused to announce the decision, and the bishop asked the government to change its mind. IM in Lund also wrote to the government in Athens, but never got a reply. In 1974, the military junta was removed, and IM received permission to stay. In a letter, the new government thanked IM in Lund for their 'Greek-friendly sentiments' and gave thanks for their 'noble minded engagements' in Vlasti.¹³⁰

The conflict over wages and bonuses

In the shadow of the military junta, a conflict broke out, which became another challenge for the IM workers. Stereotypes of 'others' were revealed. With authoritarian rule, people in Vlasti became less open-minded and tolerant and more suspicious towards foreigners, according to Åke Olausson. The trustful cooperation in the weaving school deteriorated in the autumn of 1970. Some women wanted higher salaries. A rumour was spread that IM made a substantial profit on their sales in Sweden, and the Greek women wanted their share.¹³¹ Olausson writes that the 'Greek temper exploded'.¹³² There were constant quarrels in the weaving school. The mayor and the priest were also involved.¹³³ The village council even forbade Swedish people from going out in the evenings in order to not get into trouble.¹³⁴ Three women colourists also wanted a higher salary than the others, arguing that their work was more difficult. IM wanted, however, to keep to the principle of equal pay and fired the women when they did not give in. The colourists then went to court and IM was ordered to pay severance pay. After the facts had been clarified, an amicable solution was found.¹³⁵

When explaining the conflict, we find degrading words and stereotyping in IM reports:

the isolation of the village, the close kinship between the villagers, their naivism mixed with their stubbornness and cunning, their undisturbed way of life for generations also created problems. ... the people should understand the value

of IM's efforts instead of raising demands. But we have to give them some time, keep on working and trying to accept their myopia.¹³⁶

Kenneth Cope, the IM leader in Vlasti, writes that IM managed to 'sort out misunderstandings and solve the problems of different languages, foreign tempers and ways of thinking'. After a reconciliation gathering, things got back to normal. During the conflict, no fabrics had been sent to Sweden. Now, the atmosphere in the village became friendlier, IM changed the system of wages and the production increased.¹³⁷ However, nothing is written about the empowering dimensions of women raising their voices. The need to communicate the aims of IM better are instead emphasised.

The economic market

In connection with the conflict, Fred Ljunggren, the manager in Lund, wrote a letter to Kenneth Cope. Here he emphasises that IM is not running a business aimed at economic profits in Vlasti: 'This is a purely humanitarian aid project dealing with obtaining decent livelihoods for as many people as possible.' He also writes that pricing is based on covering the overheads. In his opinion, the relatively low prices are the reason why IM has managed to sell the goods from Vlasti. He makes a comparison with Swedish handicrafts, which need to apply commercially acceptable prices, and how many handicraft shops in Sweden have therefore closed. He concludes that IM invests the 'profit' instead of paying dividends, which means increased aid efficiency. This must be made clear to the villagers.¹³⁸

With the economic crisis due to the oil market changes in 1973 onwards, the sales of the Vlasti products became a constant worry and topic in the annual reports. The economic crisis affected Greece as well as Sweden and led to recession and inflation in both countries, which in turn affected the sales of the Vlasti products.¹³⁹ When reading the newsletter, we also see how the market expands and how IM starts selling textile products from Portugal and India in the 1980s. In Vlasti they started to blend the fabrics with wool from New Zealand in order to improve the quality even more – the fabrics became softer and more radiant. IM also expanded to nearby villages.¹⁴⁰ As shown above, various campaigns in Sweden also become part of the efforts to change the trend. In 1986, Folke Sundquist, a well-known Swedish actor and volunteer in Vlasti, writes in the newsletter about the future in Vlasti. He finds it hard to believe that people in Sweden have lost interest in the fate of Vlasti. He understands, though, if they and their friends already have enough Vlasti products in their homes. Instead, he asks the readers to help them expand the market – to working places, local associations, decoration of hospitals, retirement homes, banks, hotels: 'Please, help us reach out with our wonderful products! ... We need to do something before it is too late.'¹⁴¹

Through commercialisation, IM tried to reach out with the Vlasti products and adapt to a market-oriented society from the 1960s and the whole period until 1988. Business activities and marketisation became tools for financial income. Today, market development and economic growth are seen as sustainable methods for reducing poverty.¹⁴² NGOs can play basic roles as implementers, catalysts and partners, David Lewis and Nazneen Kanji hold.¹⁴³ It is argued that this is a chance for NGOs not to be dependent on external grants and funding. Empowerment and self-reliance are likely to be achieved.¹⁴⁴ IM is at the same time expressing scepticism towards consumption. The IM co-worker Siv Follin wrote in 1978 that consumption has changed the perception of human beings,¹⁴⁵ arguing for the importance of putting human relations before success and status and having compassion for the individual at the centre.¹⁴⁶

The dream of a cooperative that never came true

In spite of economic fluctuations, political turbulences and socio-cultural challenges, IM was able to continue its work in Vlasti for many years. The aims of help to self-help had proved to work after all. Folke Sundquist declared that 'Vlasti is unique as a living mountain village in Greece but the goal is not reached until the village can function on its own.'¹⁴⁷ The village had succeeded in many ways. It had recovered economically and had been modernised – there was now electricity and water, and the majority of the families had telephones. Many tourists also visited the place. A school of higher education in sheep breeding was inaugurated. Many old villagers, who had moved out, returned in the summer and built new houses. Moreover, the cultural heritage of textiles had been rescued.¹⁴⁸ The Vlasti textiles were even recognised internationally for their good quality and art by the World Craft Council in exhibitions in Western Germany and Guatemala.¹⁴⁹ The women weavers had been agents of this change.

Thus, after twenty-five years IM could leave. The weaving school was handed over to the local council in a ceremony in 1988. IM workers symbolically gave the key to the mayor who had supported the project throughout the years. However, the weaving did not last for long and the cooperative that IM had aimed for never came to be. Olausson writes that Vlasti had survived the difficult years. The isolation was broken and a new time had come that gave young people other opportunities for employment. The experiences, though, from Vlasti helped in IM's new work to support poor women in Portugal through a cooperative.¹⁵⁰

IM had focused on women and traditional textile handicrafts. Through these women, IM had in turn given the whole village self-esteem, courage and better living conditions. Still, there was no cooperative. Even if



Figure 10.5 Marker of authenticity. On the label is written: 'Studio sewing. Design Thea Welin. IM Lund'.

the local women were very skilled weavers, they were not ready to take over the administration and sales.¹⁵¹ Georgios Tsákonas, former president in the Greek trade organisation Queen's Fund, who had helped IM with contacts for export, tried to explain why: 'You must know that the history of the country and the political development for centuries under intruders and occupiers, have resulted in a deep distrust among people towards everything and all, except themselves and their own family. It is utopia to build a cooperative on this basis.'¹⁵² By supporting local coping mechanisms and a long-term relationship between donors and beneficiaries, IM had after all helped strengthen the agency of the women individually and collectively.¹⁵³

Conclusion

In this study of the Vlasti case, I have discussed strategies concerning humanitarian handicrafts as a means to empower women 'left behind'. Various aspects of gender empowerment connected to human, social and economic resources have been analysed. Education and skill development is here interpreted as practical knowledge and development of textile quality, which in

turn resulted in recognition and self-esteem. The women, however, were not educated to become entrepreneurs. Access to networks and role models broke the isolation of the women and changed their mindset. However, the gender hierarchies also prevailed. Earnings and material assets have been discussed throughout, showing how the IM project gave women an income and, in turn, better living conditions, new economic standards and a better infrastructure. The income also made for women's higher status in the family and community – giving them a voice. At the same time textile work is not considered 'real labour' – it has less symbolic value than a man's job. Thus, we find ambivalences when giving women a voice and making them agents of change. The voice and agency in the actual textile making could also be explored further.

Can textile handicrafts, then, add something more to our understanding of gender empowerment? IM saw the Greek women as keepers, mediators and reconstructors of cultural heritage, which can give a sense of meaning in life.¹⁵⁴ Scholars of handicrafts also highlight the power of creativity and sensory dimensions connected to aesthetics and beauty. Moreover, working with textile handicrafts may also bring joy, recreation and well-being as well as time for reflection, comfort and problem-solving – emotional resilience and resistance.¹⁵⁵ Others would add the benefits from domestic work as combined with daily duties within the home or even security, as women are not exposed to the sexual harassment faced in workplaces. Adequate laws protecting women from sexual violence were not enacted in Greece until 1984.

It is obviously necessary to raise the value and status of women's textile handicrafts in society. However, changed gender structures and norms in the context in which women live are also needed in order for them to make strategic life choices. We therefore need to discuss contemporary notions of femininity and gender constructions more thoroughly, as well as the deep entanglement of notions of gender and humanitarian handicrafts in narratives and practices. Humanitarian handicrafts can support both gender empowerment and disempowerment.

Notes

- 1 I want to thank the editors of this volume, the Peace and Conflict Research seminar at Lund University, the Swedish Research Institute seminar in Istanbul, Malin Gregersen, Karina Hestad Skeie, Seija Jalagin, Inger Marie Okkenhaug, Thomas Småberg and Frederick Whiterling for insightful and useful comments. I am also grateful for the help provided by former IM directors Birthe Müller and Erik Edling as well as film director Dimitris Koutsiasakos. The literal translation is 'individual human assistance', but the organisation is today called Swedish Development Partner in English.

- 2 Frankie Hamilton cited in Brit Kamstedt-Holgersen and Ingrid Ydén Sandgren, *Soldaterna tog våra strumpor och skor. Om Britta Holmström och Individuell Människohjälp* (Jönköping: Sankt Eriks Bokförlag, 1998), p. 77. My translation.
- 3 Kamstedt-Holgersen and Sandgren, *Soldaterna tog våra strumpor och skor*, pp. 79–80; National Archives, Lund. IM: Correspondence, Vlasti, 1965–1967 (EIIfa:1) Helge Widberg, Report from a trip to Greece to the board of IM, 24 May 1963.
- 4 Kamstedt-Holgersen and Sandgren, *Soldaterna tog våra strumpor och skor*, pp. 79–80; National Archives, Lund. IM: Correspondence, Vlasti, 1965–1967 (EIIfa:1) Helge Widberg, Report from a travel to Greece to the board of IM, 24 May 1963.
- 5 *IM Rundbrev*, 1969, p. 14.
- 6 Kamstedt-Holgersen and Ydén Sandgren, *Soldaterna tog våra strumpor och skor*, p. 76; Åke Olausson, *I Medmänsklighetens tjänst. Individuell Människohjälp under ett halvt sekel* (Täby: Larsons förlag, 1996), p. 126.
- 7 Julie Billaud, 'Gender empowerment' in Antonio De Lauri (ed.), *Humanitarianism: Keywords* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2020), pp. 74–76.
- 8 Ofra Koffman, Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill, 'Girl Power and "Selfie Humanitarianism"', *Continuum*, 29:2 (2015), 157–168.
- 9 Billaud, 'Gender Empowerment', p. 75.
- 10 Janine Mills, 'Freedom and Power: The Debate Over the Position of Greek Women', *Women's Studies: An Inter-disciplinary Journal*, 32:1 (2003), 1–19.
- 11 On women's empowerment in the aftermath of war, see e.g. Miriam J. Anderson, *Windows of Opportunity: How Women Seize Peace Negotiations for Political Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016). On migration and women 'left behind', see e.g. Adnan M. S. Fakir and Naveen Abedin, 'Empowered by Absence: Does Male Out-migration Empower Female Household Heads Left Behind?', *International Migration & Integration*, 22 (2021), 503–527; Hein de Haas and Aleida van Rooij, 'Migration as Emancipation? The Impact of Internal and International Migration on the Position of Women Left Behind in Rural Morocco', *Oxford Development Studies*, 38:1 (2010), 43–62. Some scholars suggest and portray a potential backlash for women in the aftermath of war; see Donna Pankhurst, 'The "Sex War" and Other Wars: Towards a Feminist Approach to Peace Building', *Development in Practice*, 13:2–3 (2003), 154–177; and Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay and Meredith Turshen, *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation* (London: Zed Books, 2002).
- 12 Matthew Taylor, Michelle J. Moran-Taylor and Debra Rodman Ruiz, 'Land, Ethnic, and Gender Change: Transnational Migration and its Effects on Guatemalan Lives and Landscapes', *Geoforum*, 37:1 (2006), 41–46; Hein de Haas, 'International Migration and Regional Development in Morocco: A Critical Review of the Literature', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 35:10 (2009), 1571–1593. For the Greek context, see e.g. Tassoula Vervenioti, 'Left-wing Women between Politics and Family' in Mark Mazower (ed.), *After the War Was Over: Reconstructing the Family, Nation and State in Greece, 1943–1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 105–121.

- 13 Nira Yuval-Davies, *Gender & Nation* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1997); Iris M. Young, 'House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme', in Iris M. Young (ed.), *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2005), [Chapter 7](#).
- 14 Naila Kabeer, 'Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurements of Women's Empowerment', *Development and Change*, 30:3 (1999), 435–464.
- 15 Esther Möller, Johannes Paulmann and Katharina Stornig (eds), *Gendering Global Humanitarianism in the Twentieth Century: Practice, Politics and the Power of Representation* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
- 16 See e.g. Clare Midgley, Alison Twells and Julie Carlier, *Women in Transnational History: Connecting the Local and the Global* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).
- 17 Ole R. Holsti, *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969); Klaus Krippendorff and Mary A. Bock (eds), *The Content Analysis Reader* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008).
- 18 See the introduction of this edited volume. See also Kassia St Clair, *The Golden Thread: How Fabric Changed History* (London: John Murray, 2018); Clare Hunter, *Threads of Life: A History of the World through the Eye of a Needle* (London: Sceptre, 2019); Helland, Lemire and Buis, *Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics, 19th and 20th Centuries*; Liisa H. Malkki, *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2015).
- 19 See e.g. Michelle Tusan, *Smyrna's Ashes: Humanitarianism, Genocide and the Birth of the Middle East* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Keith D. Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015); Davide Rodogno, 'The Near East Relief Humanitarian Politics and Practices in the Aftermath of the First World War', in Fabian Klose (ed.), *The Emergence of Humanitarian Intervention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 185–207; Davide Rodogno in collaboration with Shaloma Gauthier and Francesca Riana, 'The League of Nations Mission in Western Thrace: Relief and Rehabilitation Operations (1922–1924)', in Johannes Paulmann (ed.), *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 147–169; Mark Mazower, *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews* (London: HarperCollins, 2004).
- 20 Richard Clogg (ed.), *Bearing Gifts to the Greeks: Humanitarian Aid to Greece in the 1940s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
- 21 See e.g. Günter Bischof and Dieter Stiefel (eds), *Images of the Marshall Plan in Europe* (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2009); Howard Jones, *A New Kind of War: America's Global Strategy and the Truman Doctrine in Greece* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Stelios Zachariou, 'Struggle for Survival: American Aid and Greek Reconstruction' in Martin Schain (ed.), *The Marshall Plan: Fifty Years After* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), pp. 153–163.

- 22 Tusan, *Smyrna's Ashes*; Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones*; Maria Småberg, 'Material Help and Self-help: Materiality and Cosmopolitan Care in the Swedish Humanitarian Work among Armenian Refugees in Thessaloniki, 1923–1947', in Andreas Schmoller (ed.), *Middle Eastern Christians and Europe: Historical Legacies and Present Challenges* (Orientalia–Patristica–Oecumenica 13 (Wien: Lit, 2018), pp. 79–104.
- 23 See note 18.
- 24 Eleanor H. Tejirian, 'Faith of Our Fathers: Near East Relief and the Near East Foundation – From missions to NGO', in Eleanor H. Tejirian and Reeva Spector Simon (eds.), *Altruism and Imperialism: Western Cultural and Religious Missions in the Middle East* (New York: Middle East Institute, Columbia University, 2002), pp. 295–316.
- 25 See the introduction of this volume and, for example, St Clair, *The Golden Thread*; Hunter, *Threads of Life*; Janice Helland, Beverly Lemire, and Alena Buis, *Craft, Community and the Material Culture of Place and Politics, 19th–20th Centuries* (Farnham: Ashgate, 1988).
- 26 See Penny Sparke, *As long as it's pink: the sexual politics of taste* (London: Pandora, 1995).
- 27 Birgitta Svensson and Louise Waldén, 'Att hävda det textila', in Birgitta Svensson and Louise Waldén (eds), *Den feminina textilen. Makt och monster* (Stockholm: Nordiska Museets Förlag, 2005), pp. 10–11; Anneli Palmsköld and Johanna Rosenqvist, 'Handicrafting Gender: Craft, Performativity and Cultural Heritage', in Wera Grahn and Ross J. Wilson (eds), *Gender and Heritage: Performance, Place and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 44–60.
- 28 Svensson and Waldén, 'Att hävda det textila', pp. 10–11.
- 29 *Ibid.* Moreover, the importance of women's textile work is recognised in a study on female entrepreneurship in Sweden from the seventeenth century until today. See Anita Du Rietz, *Kvinnligt entreprenörskap under 400 år* (Stockholm: Dialogos Förlag, 2013).
- 30 Janine Mills discusses the research field: Mills, 'Freedom and Power'.
- 31 Mills, 'Freedom and Power'.
- 32 Jill Dubisch, 'Greek Women: Sacred or Profane', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 1:1 (1983), 185–202; John Kennedy Campbell, 'Traditional Values and Continuities in Greek Society', in Richard Clogg (ed.), *Greece in the 1980s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1983), pp. 184–207; John Kennedy Campbell, *Honour, Family, and Patronage: A Study of Institutions and Moral Values in a Greek Mountain Community* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).
- 33 Jill Dubisch (ed.), *Gender and Power in Rural Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1986); David Sutton, '"Tradition and Modernity": Kalymnian Constructions of Identity and Otherness', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 12 (1994), 239–260.
- 34 Mills, 'Freedom and Power'.
- 35 The source of the 'Give them knitting needles and yarn' section title is Britta Holmström quoted by Ingrid Ydén-Sandgren in the introduction to *Det djupast mänskliga. Koncentrerade citat ur artiklar och föredrag av Britta Holmström*

- (Lund: Individuell Människohjälp, 1984). My translation. See also Folke Holmström, *Medmänsklighet. En väg ut ur nuets kris?* (Lund: C W K Gleerup, 1957), p. 40.
- 36 Andres Küng, *Dessa mina minsta. En bok om Britta Holmström och IM* (Vällingby: Harriers Bokförlag AB, 1981), pp. 17–20; Olausson, *I Medmänsklighetens tjänst*, pp. 20–23.
 - 37 IM had religious roots and was characterised by a contextual value-driven commitment. The founder Britta Holmström and her husband Folke Holmström, a theologian, were active members of the Lutheran Church of Sweden. They belonged to a progressive branch of the church and actively promoted women's ordination and pacifism. During the period of this study, many co-workers had religious motivations and driving forces for their engagement. The organisation was also supported by church networks and individuals. For example, many board members were church leaders. The bishops Torsten Ysander and Sven Danell were heads of the organisation for long periods. However, from the very beginning, there was no intention to proselytise and the aid was to be given unconditionally to fellow human beings in need, regardless of national origin or political and religious beliefs. At that time, in the 1940s, this conviction and way of working was unusual for faith-based organisations. On the founding ideals of the organisation, see Holmström, *Medmänsklighet*; on the driving forces of co-workers, see the collected interviews in Karin Tengstrand, *I vardagstjänst för medmänniskor. Intervjuer med fältarbetare inom IM* (Lund: Individuell Människohjälp, 1974); Maja Lundborg, *Medmänsklighet som drivkraft* (Lund: Individuell människohjälp, 2005).
 - 38 Holmström, *Medmänsklighet*. The aid should be provided via smaller work teams in places where the needs were most immediate. IM should alleviate hunger and material hardship but also work for mental well-being. Moreover, the aid should be provided within the framework of a cosy home where people who had lost everything would feel warmth and security.
 - 39 Ingrid Ydén-Sandgren, *IM. Individuell Människohjälp. En studiehandbok* (Stockholm: Verbum, Studieboksförlaget, 1971), pp. 28–29; Olausson, *I Medmänsklighetens tjänst*, Chapters 7, 8, 11, 16, 20, 21, 22, 23.
 - 40 www.imsweden.org/vad-vi-gor/bistand/fattigdomsbekampning/fair-trade/ (accessed 7 June 2022).
 - 41 See Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel and Margaret Collins Weitz (eds), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1987).
 - 42 See Vervenioti, 'Left-Wing Women between Politics and Family'. Tassoula Vervenioti holds that this trend was often a life-or-death matter. Participation in social revolution meant persecution and imprisonment at a time when older domestic and patriarchal values were reasserting themselves.
 - 43 Ragnhild Ågren, 'Kvinnoöden i byn', *IM Rundbrev*, 1963, p. 182. My translation.
 - 44 Ragnhild Ågren, 'Vardag i Vlasti', *IM Rundbrev*, 1964, p. 7. My translation.
 - 45 Paulmann, *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid*.

- 46 Ågren, 'Kvinnoöden i byn', p. 182. On so-called primitive living, see also *IM Rundbrev*, 1965, pp. 124–126.
- 47 Ågren, 'Kvinnoöden i byn', p. 182.
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 *Ibid.*, pp. 184–185.
- 50 Paulmann, *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid*.
- 51 Küng, *Dessa mina minsta*, p. 64. My translation.
- 52 Ingrid Janissa, 'Festligt överdåd i fattig by. Man firar bröllop i Vlasti', *IM Rundbrev*, 1969, pp. 154–158.
- 53 Küng, *Dessa mina minsta*, p. 65.
- 54 Vaso Seirinidou, 'The Mediterranean' in Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsenyi (eds), *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), p. 90; Martin Baumeister and Roberto Sala (eds), *Southern Europe? Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece from the 1950s until the Present* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2015), pp. 31–34.
- 55 Paulmann, *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid*.
- 56 *IM Rundbrev*, 1965, p. 75.
- 57 Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006).
- 58 Diana Tietjens Meyers, 'Two Victim Paradigms and the Problem of "Impure" Victims', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 2:2 (Fall 2011), 255–275. See also Diana Tietjens Meyers, *Victims' Stories and the Advancement of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 59 Samuel Martínez and Kathryn Libal, 'Introduction: The Gender of Humanitarian Narrative', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 2:2 (Fall 2011), 161–170.
- 60 Naila Kabeer, 'Conflicts Over Credit: Re-evaluating the Empowerment Potential of Loans to Women in Rural Bangladesh', *World Development*, 29:1 (2001), 63–84. Kabeer discusses how in rural communities in Bangladesh, microcredit has been introduced as a means of economic and social development.
- 61 Olausson, *I Medmänsklighetens tjänst*, p. 119.
- 62 *IM Rundbrev*, 1963, 'Tre systrar på väg', p. 151; Olausson, *I Medmänsklighetens tjänst*, p. 119. Ågren was trained at IM's weaving centre *Tivedsgården*.
- 63 Kamstedt-Holgersen and Sandgren, *Soldaterna tog våra strumpor och skor*, pp. 77–84.
- 64 Olausson, *I Medmänsklighetens tjänst*, p. 119.
- 65 *IM Rundbrev*, 1967, 'Verksamhetsberättelse, 1966/67', p. 135.
- 66 Olausson, *I Medmänsklighetens tjänst*, p. 124; Küng, *Dessa mina minsta*, pp. 66–67; *IM Rundbrev*, 1967, 'Verksamhetsberättelse, 1966/67', p. 135.
- 67 Philippa Hobbs, 'Evolving a Tapestry Practice at Rorke's Drift: Women's Alliances, Agencies and Visual Syntaxes in the Loom', *TEXTILE*, 18:4 (2020), 386–421; Palmsköld and Rosenqvist, 'Handicrafting Gender'.
- 68 Gustafsson visited various companies in and around Tibro, asked for support and collected 18,500 SEK. See Tengstrand, *I vardagstjänst för medmänniskor*, p. 27.

- 69 Olausson, *I Medmänsklighetens tjänst*, p. 122.
- 70 *The Weavers*, 2020.
- 71 Bertrand Taithe, 'Humanitarian Masculinity: Desire, Character and Heroics, 1876–2018', in Esther Möller, Johannes Paulmann and Katharina Stornig (eds), *Gendering Global Humanitarianism in the Twentieth Century*. Palgrave Macmillan Transnational History Series (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 35–59.
- 72 Ann L. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).
- 73 Malkki, *The Need to Help*, pp. 35–59.
- 74 Tengstrand, *I vardagstjänst för medmänniskor*, p. 27. My translation.
- 75 *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 76 National Archives, Lund: Correspondence, Vlasti, 1965–1967 (EIIfa:1), Gunilla Willis, report, 15 March 1966. My translation.
- 77 *The Weavers*, 2020.
- 78 In both urban and rural communities, women play an active role in Greek Orthodox church life.
- 79 Kamstedt-Holgersen and Sandgren, *Soldaterna tog våra strumpor och skor*, p. 82. My translation.
- 80 At this time, it was common to associate Swedish women with 'the Swedish sin'. It is an internationally known phenomenon that has influenced foreigners' views on Swedish women for years. The source of the epithet is a speech given by US president Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1960, in which he claimed that 'sin, nudity, drunkenness and suicide' in Sweden were due to welfare policy excess. Most of all, the concept has been associated with Swedish nude films which became controversial in the 1960s. The concept also emerged in connection with various early political decisions such as compulsory sex education in schools, legalisation of contraception and a more liberal view of homosexuality but also the formation of popular movements such as the Swedish Association for Sexual Enlightenment (RFSU).
- 81 The first woman was ordained priest in the Church of Sweden in 1958.
- 82 See e.g. Susanna Hedenborg and Ulla Wikander, *Makt och försörjning* (Lund: Studentlitteratur 2003); Yvonne Hirdman, *Att lägga livet till rätta: studier i svensk folkhemspolitik* (Stockholm: Carlsson, 1989); Ann-Sofie Olander and Ulla-Britt Strömberg, *Tusen svenska kvinnoår. Svensk kvinnohistoria från vikingatid till nutid* (Stockholm: Norstedts Akademiska Förlag, 2008); Jens Rydström and David Tjeder, *Kvinnor, män och alla andra. En svensk genushistoria* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2009).
- 83 Ingrid Ydén-Sandgren, 'IM och den svenska kvinnovärlden', *IM Rundbrev*, 1975, p. 75. My translation.
- 84 Olausson, *I Medmänsklighetens tjänst*, pp. 120–122.
- 85 Gunnar Anshelm, 'Folkfest i Vlasti, när vävskolan invigdes', *IM Rundbrev*, 1966, p. 12.
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Humanitarian handicrafts: in conversation

*Catherine Bertola, Claire Barber, Helen Dampier,
Rebecca Gill and June Hill*

This conversation took place at Slaithwaite Community Centre in West Yorkshire, next door to a church with bells that strike the hour, and was one in a long line of conversations between editors Claire Barber, Rebecca Gill and Helen Dampier, and historians and practitioners in socially engaged textiles. We had first met during the research Helen and Rebecca were undertaking on female peace activism. Helen and Rebecca were introduced, by a mutual acquaintance, to Claire, a textile practitioner who had been working with socially engaged practitioners at Oxfam, and a series of conversations followed which led to us putting on an exhibition called *Humanitarian Handicrafts* in 2019.¹ This also brought in Bertrand Taithe, who at that point was working on Hudfam.² Claire was also keen to reach out to her long-term collaborator, the writer and curator June Hill, who had worked on textile projects in the local community and who had recently curated *Unbound: Visionary Women Collecting Textiles*, which showcased histories of women's textile collecting from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some of these women were familiar to Helen and Rebecca, such as Louisa Pesel, a collector of Greek embroidery, who had also taught embroidery to wounded soldiers in Bradford during the First World War. Catherine Bertola is an artist who has collaborated with historians and reflected on these interdisciplinary relationships.³ Catherine was keen to investigate the feelings of labour (as much as to appreciate factual evidence) discovered during site-specific commissions such as *Below the Salt* created in 2020.⁴ The conversation took place around a large table; on the table were crafted textile objects that had been exhibited two years earlier at the *Humanitarian Handicrafts* exhibition at Holocaust Centre North (HC) on the University of Huddersfield campus. Many of the objects had been acquired specifically for the exhibition, including brightly coloured pencil cases made by the Shika project based in Sinone, Northern Tanzania, and purchased at the University of Huddersfield Student Union shop, and a handbag in soft weave and brown leather straps acquired in a Pay What You Can café in Bradford. The provenance of some of the objects is communicated on the

labels. One tag reads: ‘Made in Nepal’. Also, on the table were a series of photographs from the exhibition. One image, shown here (see [Figure 11.1](#)), depicts a mottled pink fabric with a masking tape label stating ‘Eucalyptus tea, cochineal, turmeric – three hours’ taken during the natural dye workshop held by Lise Bjørne Linnert of the social enterprise Ni En More.⁵

The conversation took place on a bright summer’s day on 15 July 2021. It was recorded, transcribed and then edited by each of the contributors. The conversation reflects upon our experience of programming a conference engaging with the histories of humanitarian handicrafts alongside an exhibition of contemporary work by socially engaged textile practitioners, as well as the process of grappling with ideas of presenting historical research at a conference that brought delegates into contact with the crafted object and a natural dye and stitch workshop. Catherine was keen to probe us on the relationship between the two disciplines of history and craft practice. She asked us to consider how a sensory experience of the making process might inform the way we look at archival material, and how an understanding of past projects helps to contextualise and shape approaches to contemporary practice. Where do the different approaches collide? Are there connections with recent conversations within the museums and heritage sector about



Figure 11.1 Photograph of our conversation and object handling with heightened significance of touch and physical engagement with textiles following our experience of lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic

decolonising collections and the widening of the narrative around objects and places to reframe the way history is represented? In which case, where do the voices of the people whom these humanitarian projects support lie in this research? Catherine was also interested in bringing the question of value to bear on this conversation in terms of the value of people, labour and skills, but also how those link with the value of the products and how they are consumed.

This was a rare moment where we handled objects together and the discussion that unfolded was an insight into our individual experiences and perspectives of creative and artistic practice, curating, social engagement and historical research. The excitement of what we felt as we touched pieces inviting our engagement was heightened as touching access had been restricted due to lockdown regulations. Our enthusiasm for textures, colour and sensual material qualities deepened our awareness of the tactility of handcrafted objects which are carried with us as ethical gestures into the everyday. We quickly discovered that we may have had unexamined assumptions about the maker's experience and motivations and that we attributed feelings of romanticism and catharsis for the maker that we realised needed to be unpacked as an interpretation of the consumer.

* * *

Claire: Let us begin by giving you some insight into why these objects are on the table.

Rebecca: We bought them from an exhibition of *Humanitarian Handicrafts* we put on in 2019, which was our first collaboration as a group.

Claire: Although I teach textiles and crafts I had not come across the term before. The first time I heard 'humanitarian handicraft' my response was that I found it quite jarring; it was not a term I would use in my daily practice or feel comfortable with using.⁶ Socially engaged textiles are an established art form, but handicrafts somehow sit beyond this artistic framework. It caught me off guard at how blinkered I had been to potential precedents to my textile discipline. During my initial meeting with Rebecca, I started to ponder why I rarely encountered the term 'handicrafts' and wondered if there is a dismissiveness of certain areas of textile crafts even within the Textiles department where I teach.

Catherine: I mean, handicraft is quite a loaded word, isn't it?

Rebecca: Yes, I used this term as the word handicraft had been used quite a lot with many projects in the past, but the one that comes to mind immediately is Hungarian Handicrafts, which was a scheme run by Save the Children Fund in 1919, hence we began to use the term 'humanitarian handicraft' in discussing the trend more widely for using craft in humanitarian

contexts. But I was not aware of the terminology of socially engaged textiles until I met Claire.

Catherine: They conjure up a kind of image, I suppose, in your head, about what a humanitarian handicraft might look like, or might be, or where it might be from. It's a very particular kind of aesthetic. It's like you are trying to challenge the definition of that through this project.

Claire: I don't think that Rebecca and I initially focused on challenging the definition. I was initially keen to try to be involved in this research area, especially if it may help to inform another field of contemporary textile practice that involves working with other people.

Catherine: Or perception? Maybe not definition, but perception.

Rebecca: It's not a term that you find in history, or even in humanitarian practitioners' work today. So it was a bit of an invention for Claire and I to use that term to begin with, and it was a way of distinguishing some traditions and a way of bringing something to focus. I think at the same time we realised that it could exclude other things, or it might give a false sense of a long trajectory or there being a kind of distinct historical trend.

Claire: And so this conference, *Humanitarian Handicrafts*, came out of this initial discussion as an opportunity to share some of the ideas we had been deliberating. And we felt that a complementary exhibition would be an interesting way to try and bridge the gap between historians' and contemporary artists' perspectives on this. By placing contemporary experiences with historical pieces of community-made textiles, you then naturally bring various types of readings depending on how they are encountered with one another. But the contemporary artists presenting their work in the exhibition probably wouldn't use the term handicrafts to categorise their work. One of the objects we have here is a dress that comes from the Ni En More brand co-founded by the artist Lise Børne Linnert. I am interested in how Lise brings her skills as a socially engaged artist to this humanitarian clothing brand, spending many years integrating with the local residents living in the town of Juárez to support some of the women to create a sustainable business.

Rebecca: In this object, on the one hand, we can see an echo of what has gone before, particularly the persistent role of the workshop as a site of humanitarian handicraft and the deliberate balancing of the artisanal with what is marketable, but on the other hand, to note what is distinctly contemporary about Lise's project, not least her direct engagement with the grassroots feminist movement in Mexico. So we'd be careful not to collapse together humanitarian handicraft schemes of earlier ages with the contemporary socially engaged practitioner. Nevertheless, there is no set meaning to these projects or these objects, and how meaning is negotiated between the different practitioners – donors, consumers, producers, artists and practitioners – will never be identical. So the everyday ethics and assumptions

that as historians we can see at play in our case studies are also worthy of consideration in contemporary projects. The values of the maker and the meaning of textiles for different communities and constituents require attention. And the position of the artist and their art practice was also enabled through talking to Claire and Lise at the conference.

Claire: We introduced the conference delegates to a natural dye workshop led by Lise. It became an invitation for us to connect physically to a humanitarian product being produced by women in Juárez.⁷ This may have instigated a shift from a receptive mode of concentration at a conference into an active engagement with materials crafted by hand.⁸

June: I think it was interesting that the exhibition and Lise's workshop took place in the foyer of the HC.⁹ It wasn't an easy conjunction, although there was a natural linkage as well. So it was encouraging that by the end of the exhibition, we'd developed a really positive relationship with the director of the HC. A large part of that was their response to the work, and us seeing the potential for linking contemporary practitioners with the material they had at the HC. As Claire was saying, it came from the work; it wasn't anything that we'd consciously done.

Rebecca: Yes, HC is certainly interesting as a repository of Kindertransport, refugee and Holocaust survivors' accounts and objects for just how many links with textiles it contains, not least how textile objects were crucial to emotional and even physical survival.¹⁰

Claire: We may have appeared quite antagonistic, although that obviously was not our intention. There is always an anxious moment when installing any exhibition and perhaps the rawness of plywood plinths being constructed on-site into the HC foyer area created an uneasy tension and sense of temporariness, contrasting with expectations for a more formal viewing of work in a museum. But in the end, even if some of our approaches may have come across as cumbersome and insensitive it was the work that shone through and that provided the exhibition with its unique character. Just noticing how the expressions of the volunteers who were invigilating at the museum changed and became softer was an important moment for us to recognise.

June: We weren't deliberately provocative. We were naively provocative, I would say. We hadn't factored in how people might feel about the disruption the setting up involved, and how that might be heightened by the proximity to the HC. You can understand people thinking that this might be disrespectful, but we were just focused on the process, 'oh we're setting up an exhibition.' Given all that, it was heartening then to see people open up to the opportunities that can be created by engaging with contemporary practice.

Claire: There was a mixture of uncomfortable feelings and uneasiness in the space – we had bubbling natural dye pots in a place which would

normally have PowerPoint screens or digitally reproduced photographs on exhibition presentation panels. As exhibition curators, we launched into our installation with great enthusiasm – but in the process, there were initial misunderstandings from HC members who questioned the value of the display we were creating, which may have appeared intrusive and unpredictable. We even misread items from the *Ni En More* collection itself. We had a go at presenting some naturally dyed samples brought to us in Lise's large suitcase and when she later inspected our attempt, without a moment of hesitation, she dismantled the display. Subsequently, when installing lengths of naturally dyed silks and cotton onto a large vertical wall to Lise's requirements, the textiles started to slip and slide in the summer heat as the white tack to fix them proceeded to melt. And so, there was this discomforting quality to the experience of seeing the textiles presented – many not created for this type of public viewing space. We were slightly on edge and felt as though we were not quite pitching or handling things right.¹¹

Rebecca: It was really interesting to watch the care Lise took with the curation of these objects; which stand in contrast to historical items which were not generally intended for gallery spaces but which also do not appear in archives. So siting them in this exhibition was also challenging their original value as craft. It was also interesting to note the discomfort of some of the historians to getting involved in the making workshops, not least the criticism of one participant that this was a historical 're-enactment' as a performance of naivety that undercut the critical reading of the historical case studies presented elsewhere at the conference.

Helen: I think I was unaware of those tensions because for me the sewing and making at the workshop really gave me a feeling of sociability. It felt like a sanctuary sitting there with the sun coming through the windows, sewing. That's my memory of that afternoon and being there, happily oblivious to those tensions. Our experiences were different, and maybe for some it was a retreat from the conventional conference and changed the nature of the history conference experience – tactility is not usually associated with the discipline of history and so this engagement refreshed our usual approaches and allowed us to enter another dimension of bodily deportment, sociability, conversation and interpersonal experience – not usually a focus of this research. Working in practice with contemporary practitioners allows us to raise questions about the sensory experience of historical humanitarian handicraft schemes, especially as a gendered area of labour and craft practice that is perhaps beyond text-based knowledge. How do we interact with textiles and objects? This raises new perspectives and was maybe a provocation for the historians, and unsettled the convention in a productive way.

Claire: In this example though, there was a slight rub between the different bodies coming together. But actually, some of this hidden tension is

pertinent to highlight as it often exposes you to your weaknesses as well as your strengths. I often feel out of depth with the histories I encounter and so to have open and meaningful discussions in a safe space to share your vulnerabilities is an important part of the process of working across disciplines.

CHURCH BELLS

June: I wonder if there's something about trust in this, especially if you're working with vulnerable communities or people who are exposed in one way or another. Having that trust in how people are working, and their motives for wanting to work with you, seems quite a key thing. You don't want to be exploited. That can be a common experience for people on the margins, also being consistently let down. I think maybe that was a pathway we went through with the exhibition, as well as that sense of people beginning to build up trust around what we were doing. In terms of the artists represented, there's a huge amount of integrity in their work. Many of them have spent years working with particular groups or communities, and that takes a relationship. You're not just doing a project with somebody; you effectively become part of the community.¹²

Rebecca: But that's very unusual for historians. We tend to be in an academic setting. And I did feel some anxieties about that, of wanting to be respectful and of if there is any kind of shared expectation. I think if I was doing the event again, I would have had a much longer run-in, so we actually got to talk to some of the people involved a bit more and thought more about how we could have brought their voices out.

Catherine: Are you talking about the voice of the people that make the objects or the voice of the artists that are facilitating the making of the objects?

Rebecca: Do you mean as participants in the conference? They were invited but no, no one came, and I just wondered what they made of the whole event. I mean, were they primarily there to sell objects and presumably create visibility for their different projects? And then I wondered if some of the historians felt a bit guilty. And maybe that's why they were buying some of the objects.

Catherine: Guilty in what way?

Rebecca: That we were wanting to know about these objects, and maybe the lives of some of the individuals involved, for our own academic projects. And I think, on a personal level, we were respectful. But was it, was it exploitative or not? I just had a slightly uneasy feeling sometimes.

Helen: Do you mean that it replicates the problematic dynamics of humanitarian handicraft production itself?

Catherine: Because there is always something slightly uncomfortable about it anyway, isn't there? That's because it's often got such a particular aesthetic. And you stand in Oxfam, say, and it's that idea you're doing

something, you're not just donating to a charity, but you're owning something that shows that you are signalling perhaps your ethical values by wearing something.

Helen: As a performance?

Catherine: Yes.

Rebecca: So I felt for an exhibition it functioned in different ways, maybe the makers felt this was an exhibition where they were exhibiting their work in an artistic context, which they were. And there's people who were just setting up businesses and are also craft-artists, but they were thinking through the merchandising and the labelling of the bags with us when we were talking to them. There were many different things going on that maybe we didn't grasp in the moment. At the same time, there was a kind of meta-discussion going on about the history of humanitarian handicrafts, which were also on display, and especially some of the colonial histories that we saw embedded in the DNA of some of the large NGOs ...

June: Just to contextualise, of the makers of the bags, one is a friend who settled in Bradford from Nepal a number of years ago. Her sister and brother-in-law live in Katmandu where they have set up a small social enterprise. They were over at the time of the conference, partly for holiday, and partly seeking outlets and getting feedback on products.¹³ So the opportunity was there to share what they were doing. Their work sat slightly outside some of the other material within the exhibition. I suppose you might say more artisan based with localised social benefit. They were keen to be involved in the exhibition and be present to talk about their work but, as you say, didn't come into the conference sessions.

Rebecca: Why would they bother to sit through an academic conference on humanitarian handicraft?

June: Yes. They did appreciate being involved though – they valued the socialising and feedback, and seeing the other material.

Catherine: But there are different motivations and types of engagement. Exhibiting your work as an artist is about making visible what you do or the projects you're working on. That's quite different to being an academic, presenting papers and discussions. And there is I think possibly a point at which you can come together in that, where conversational things happen. Why would an artist want to come to an academic conference? There's probably an alternative there that's oppositional to that. You've got your own way of thinking and researching and producing material. And one's very much about aesthetics and materials, and tactile, and the other is about writing and thinking – but you need those things together. As an artist, I think you need to have a sense of your history, within your field, and in order to make sense of it, you need to think about what the legacies of what you're doing are and how you're communicating that to a wider audience. I think they

are complementary, but they are separate. And the bit where it's interesting is where they collide. It's not an overlap, really, but it's just where they meet. And that can be really rich.

Claire: I have only, in the last few years, started to see echoes from the past coming through into contemporary textile practice. I was first aware of this when I was at the Imperial War Museum, observing an embroidered sheet created in secret at Stanley Internment Camp in Hong Kong during the Second World War. The embroidery contained camp diaries in coded words stitched onto the sheet. Aesthetically the work was challenging, with honest scrawling language sewn into the edges of the sheet. It seems important to observe the possibilities of making and collective expression in a variety of different circumstances that may help to better prepare ourselves as socially engaged artists.

Catherine: But I think from a perspective of visual arts, it's only more recently that socially engaged practice has become recognised and validated through museums and galleries in the market, but it's always been a little bit down the pecking order of the hierarchy of practice. So you've got the painters, sculptors, and then you've got people who did community work. And it's not valued because it doesn't feed into the traditional art market. But it's quite interesting seeing how that's really changing. I think, perhaps, younger artists don't just want to work in isolation, shunning the traditional idea of the market a little bit. And some institutions are thinking about how and what they can do to benefit their community. And that's quite interesting. I wonder how that will play out in the future. They've grown up through ten years of austerity, and they're seeing the impacts of that playing out and so they're perhaps more socially conscious, rather than looking to trying to get shows in commercial spaces.

Claire: And that high art market, reaching towards a particular sort of venue, isn't the only way of surviving as an artist anymore.

Catherine: No.

Claire: My students seem as happy to have an exhibition on Instagram as in a white cube space, when there's a possibility for making really interesting work and reaching a lot of people. Carving out a career and reaching galleries or art institutions has traditionally been problematic for artists working with textiles. But a younger generation of artists won't have lived through that and therefore will not come with that background to their practice.

Catherine: There has been a resurgence of interest in ceramics and textiles. You had the Anni Albers show recently at the Tate,¹⁴ textiles work which has suddenly been made visible within a big art institution and is therefore becoming validated. That's given permission to people to make it and it's also making people who are curating exhibitions look at that kind of work. I teach at Newcastle University where so many students are working

with ceramics, and ten years ago, you probably wouldn't have had anyone doing so. Those kinds of traditional materials have had a real resurgence. With textiles, it's always obviously had a very domestic female history. And that's also another reason why it's lower down the pecking order in how it's been perceived from a contemporary art perspective. It's not been deemed as important as, say, painting, which has been taught from this very patriarchal perspective.

Claire: Exactly. All kinds of artists and practitioners, from many different backgrounds, and with many different experiences and intentions for working with textiles, were represented at the *Humanitarian Handicrafts* exhibition. In many cases the makers were self-taught.¹⁵ The textile objects in the exhibition were presented with equal status on a plinth or in a display cabinet, so it is an important distinction that some of the pieces discussed in this book would never have been presented or preserved in this way, with the exception of lace which had its own history of being exhibited.

June: I've been thinking about the history of quilting in the north of England, and the work of the Rural Industries Bureau who encouraged and supported it. Also similar work in Wales during the 1920s and 1930s to support people during the Depression. For instance, Muriel Rose featured their work at the Little Gallery in London.¹⁶ It's interesting because even then you had images of some of the makers, or their names and details of what work they specialised in.¹⁷ They were trying to preserve a craft at that point and share some of the traditional quilting that was taking place.

Rebecca: And also thinking about the fact that they are textiles, I think it's important to how we interact with the objects that there is this tactility. We know they're made by hand, and that someone else's hands have been on the object whom we're trying to help – there is felt to be a meaningful connection. By purchasing this [holding handstitched elephant] and knowing the source of its production, I could resubmit a meaning that we understand from the story of the label. And then we do care about the object differently. I think that we are conditioned to respond to a deliberately handmade aesthetic where the stitches are made to speak.

Claire: This stitch exposes someone's character as handwriting does, doesn't it?

Catherine: And drawing.

Claire: Yes. So perhaps there's a kind of intentional crudeness in the stitches we see in some of these pieces? They could have been finished differently. But the maker has chosen to highlight the particularities of each of the stitches, emphasised further by the contrasting colour of thread against the ground material. It happened that I was in London the other weekend leading a textile workshop that my mum attended.¹⁸ Many of the participants were freely creating extended, heavy and expressive stitches. This was a

challenge for my mum because she has come to stitch from a particular kind of tradition, and taught sewing in her home economics classes which were controlled by stringent rules. And it was lovely, actually, because when my mum was saying 'I'm just not artistic', one of the children taking part was encouraging, saying 'Look, everyone has their own way of being creative.' I notice how it goes against the grain for my mum to extend her stitches beyond a certain scale, naturally because of her background and the way that she was taught stitchery at school. But she's open [laughs] at the same time to attempt to break that down. This is just an example of how stitchery is so exposing of personality and that may be why embroidery features so much in humanitarian handicrafts because you really connect to the maker through the individuality of each stitched mark.

Helen: But it was invented, wasn't it?

Claire: So, do you think there might have been a transition historically when a self-aware consciousness in extending a stitch, so that it communicated the maker's character in a particular way, took place? Would that have been part of a marketing tool?

Catherine: It feels quite problematic in some ways, doesn't it? Because it's limiting skill, isn't it? It's about saying, the women-makers – because I'm assuming they were women – have the desire to make these perfectly, but they've been stopped from doing that, they've been stopped from proving their own skills and their own desire to make something very well because it needs to look like it's from somewhere 'other'. There's something really stereotyping, and deliberately naive, about this.

Helen: It's producing authenticity, but it's a fake authenticity?

Catherine: I'm guessing that they might have had that aspiration to make something really beautiful and exquisite, but they were being trapped into this, 'no no no, you need to leave it a bit rough around the edges.'

Rebecca: I think there's this other tradition within humanitarian handicraft, which is about trying to reclaim and preserve handicrafts which celebrated the technique, and I was thinking of the exhibition, June, you curated at Two Temple Place.¹⁹ Edith Durham and Pesel collected the most exquisite objects that they worried were going to be lost. And that by bringing these fabrics from the Balkans to a Western audience, and collecting them and displaying them, they hoped to preserve the traditions of a people that were in peril. And I think this is a different tradition, around cultural preservation and national identity, that is very present in the history but which is still observable.

June: Yes, it is. I was thinking about both of those women and how they collected from the same area, but for slightly different reasons. I find it really interesting looking at them now when we're more conscious around issues of imperialism. One of the women who featured in the *Unbound* exhibition,

Edith Durham, in particular, seems to sit within these traditions of internationalist intervention in that she became a fervent advocate of Albania. She would buy material, but a lot was given to her because she was such an advocate for the country and its people and became a folk hero. This is where it's really helpful to have historians to interrogate some of the nuances of the context in which things were collected and people's understandings of them. Louisa Pesel loved the exquisiteness of people's making. She created an embroidery school in Greece to try and preserve traditional skills and also inspire new designs. We might see that differently now, probably contest it a little more. But my reading of her, and this is a personal thing, is that she sits within that place of loving technique and valuing pattern design, and wanting to share that knowledge and admiration more widely, which might also include amending it to create new – 'modern' – designs, which itself seems part of that history of how pattern and design shifts and changes within this context.

Rebecca: The role of history in these projects is really fascinating, for many of the case studies we have looked at in this book show the importance of tradition and cultural preservation but also the fabrication of the authentic. In humanitarian projects, which for all their modernity had a certain pre-modern aesthetic, we see a certain valuation of the artisanal as a form of contemporary social or political critique. I think we still see this ideological function for the handcrafted or artisanal in humanitarian and development projects. There are also direct legacies in the role of tied labour and workshop conditions in the way that these projects are funded and marketed. One of the questions that comes out of the history is what this kind of practice meant for the maker, and what histories they brought to bear. It is often hard to tell as their voice can be lost in the archives. This can be potentially very different from that intended by the donor or humanitarian practitioner, even potentially subversive. I feel this conversation has impressed upon me the need to not make assumptions about the meeting of values and traditions at work in these schemes, and this feels an important question to ask of the history and of contemporary projects.

Claire: Certainly I think it is variable, as within some of these projects inherited skills have been lost. So skills are brought to communities: upskilling communities, but not with the skills which their parents or grandparents would have learned. So the possibility of empowering those communities is partly about giving them particular skills that can be useful to them. And I think that the label, in a sense, is part of that narrative. But I'm not sure what the maker would think because the maker might prefer the work to be judged in its own right, without the label, you know, can it stand up to other market forces? Does it have a desirable quality or aesthetic? Or is it on trend so that people are going to want to engage with it despite the narrative?²⁰

June: I would look upon this conversation as a starting point, the fact that we've had this conversation. We've got these historians who have some contextual understanding of humanitarian handicraft. Then we've got contemporary practitioners who might be engaging now with communities in socially engaged practice – thinking further about the legacies of some of these earlier histories and the meaning of 'tradition' and skill in these contexts. It was a sort of shaking of hands wasn't it, with the opportunity to see where that might lead? And picking up on what Claire was saying, and you were saying, Catherine, about textiles, one of the things I'm very keen on as a curator is getting different perspectives, including external ones. Having those different perspectives can be very enriching and open up new understandings and different ways of appreciating textiles.

Notes

- 1 This exhibition, held at Holocaust Centre North, featured historical examples of humanitarian handicraft, including materials from Elizabeth Wilson's collection of Hudfam items created by Chinese refugees in Hong Kong in the 1950s and handcrafted textiles by contemporary practitioners, some of which were for sale. The exhibition also included textile workshops for the conference delegates and visiting artists to participate in.
- 2 Huddersfield Famine Relief Committee (Hudfam) was founded at the Friends' Meeting House in Paddock, Huddersfield, during the Second World War to protest the effects of the British blockade on civilian populations in Greece, many of whom were facing famine. It was one of several such committees, including Oxfam, the more well-known Oxford branch. Elizabeth Wilson was a founder member of Hudfam and pioneered the sale of handcrafted items made by populations in distress in what became a precursor of the Fair Trade movement in Huddersfield. See Bertrand Taithe and Adam Millar, 'Living Humanitarian Dreams: The Oneiric and Spiritual Life and Activism of Elizabeth Wilson (1909–2000)', *Journal of Cultural and Social History*, 20:3: (2023), 429–445.
- 3 Catherine Bertola and Rachel Rich (eds), 'Practising History, Art, Archives and Footnotes', in *Contemporary Art in Heritage Spaces* (London: Routledge 2020), pp. 149–165.
- 4 See the installation created by Bertola at Temple Newsam House in 2020 entitled *Below the Salt*. This can be seen on video at <https://museumsandgalleries.leeds.gov.uk/virtual-visit/below-the-salt> (accessed 17 February 2023).
- 5 Ni En More was founded by Lise Bjørne Linnert (Oslo, Norway) and Jane Terrazas (Juárez, Mexico), along with human rights activist Veronica Corchado (Juárez, Mexico), and is based in Juárez, a town known for the systematic murders of women living there. The Ni En More brand provides a safe sewing workshop in an attempt to create economic independence for women.

- 6 Claire Wellesley Smith's project called *Worn Stories* was presented in the *Humanitarian Handicrafts* exhibition. Her work, alongside other initiatives and enterprises involving textiles, was subsequently published in a book titled *Women's Empowerment through Craft* (London: Herbert Press, 2021). This is one example of the prevalence of the term craft, rather than handicraft, to contextualise initiatives that work with textiles to improve people's lives.
- 7 Working with Lise Bjørne Linnert's socially engaged practice is not new for us: the students in the Textiles department at the University of Huddersfield have contributed to her artwork *Desconocida Unknown* for a number of years. This invites participants to use hand-stitch as a vehicle to retaliate against the continuing murder of women in Juárez. Through communication with Lise a kit arrives from her studio in Norway containing printed names of disappeared women from Ciudad Juárez, along with white cotton tape onto which we are instructed to embroider each name in red thread. At the end of the workshop the hand-sewn tags are posted back to Lise, who adds them to a constantly expanding collection of names. This artwork has been written about at length in Lise Millar (ed.), *Desconocida: Unknown* (Surrey: University for the Creative Arts, n.d.).
- 8 Some of our reflections have been collated into an article: Claire Barber, Rebecca Gill and Bertrand Taithe, 'Humanitarian Handicrafts: Testing the Relationship between Archival History and Hands-on Craft Making', *Formakademisk*, 14:2 (2021), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10/7577/formakademic.4181>
- 9 During the presentation of the exhibition the location was known as the Holocaust Education and Learning Centre; however, in 2022 it was renamed Holocaust Centre North (HC). For further information on the centre, visit <https://holocaustcentrenorth.org.uk>
- 10 HC has appointed Laura Fisher as an artist-in-residence whose creative responses to textile objects in their collections include embroidery art as part of the Memorial Gestures commission. <https://holocaustcentrenorth.org.uk/blog/memorial-gestures-laura-fisher/> (accessed 7 April 2025).
- 11 For more discussion on the impact of display decisions when presenting textiles in gallery and museum settings, see Jessica Hemmings, 'Floppy Cloth: Textile Exhibition Strategies Inside the White Cube', *TEXTILE*, 17:4 (2019), 412–434.
- 12 For a useful study on tactile experiences shared with communities through a process of social engagement, see June Hill, 'Sense and Sensibility', in Jessica Hemmings (ed.), *The Textile Reader* (London and New York: Berg, 2012), pp. 37–43.
- 13 The enterprise referred to is A.N. Crafts and is a small grassroots organisation that has developed out of relief work undertaken during the 2015 earthquake in Nepal which left many villages and towns devastated. A.N. Crafts works to support the local community in Nepal through the production of handmade bags. The design and production process has been developed in-house using knowledge acquired from YouTube videos. Materials are sourced locally to support the local economy. A.N. Crafts currently employs five people (three making bags and two ancillary staff). All are paid a fair wage so they are able

to support their families. Ninety-eight per cent of the profit generated from sales goes directly to the workers to fund this, with the remaining 2 per cent supporting a local orphanage in their work.

- 14 The *Anni Albers* exhibition was presented at the Tate Modern from 11 October 2018 to 27 January 2019, www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/anni-albers (accessed 7 April 2025).
- 15 For example, the practitioners developing Shika Fashion Label and A.N. Crafts acquired the skills to make their product range through the use of YouTube demonstrations.
- 16 Photographs from the Muriel Rose Archive including The Little Gallery that Rose managed in the 1930s can be accessed at the Crafts Study Centre www.csc.uca.ac.uk/csc-blog/8/4/2020/muriel-rose-craft-visionary (accessed 7 April 2025).
- 17 An exhibition titled *Unbound: Visionary Women Collecting Textiles*, curated by June Hill and Lotte Crawford, focused on the achievements of pioneering women including Muriel Rose. The supporting exhibition catalogue includes images of handwritten labels created for each of the garments. See June Hill and Lotte Crawford *Unbound* [exhibition catalogue] (Two Temple Place, 2020).
- 18 The workshop was part of a series of events presented at London Wetland Centre in the summer of 2021 as part of a curated art project called *Unravelled Wetlands*. See <https://unravelled.org.uk/projects/wetlands/> (accessed 7 April 2025).
- 19 *Unbound: Visionary Women Collecting Textiles*, 25 January 2020 to 19 April 2020, Two Temple Place, London. <https://twotempleplace.org/exhibitions/unbound/> (accessed 7 April 2025).
- 20 For example, in a piece written for the forecast issue of *Textile View* (Autumn 2022 – Winter 2023) Jessica Hemmings reminds us that social ethical craft may not always be viable due to design. Hemmings states: ‘There are a lot of very well-meaning, ethical, upstanding craft projects. They’ve got all the green agenda, and all the right materials. But I have noticed in all sorts of economic development initiatives a fundamental misunderstanding of how important a skill is at the end of it ... For organisations motivated by sustainability or social goals first and foremost, that’s where the value resides. But if a product is lacking the aesthetic or the design consumers are ultimately drawn to, it might just as well end up in landfill.’ See Jessica Hemmings, ‘The Power of Craft’, *Textile View: The Forecast Issue* (Autumn–Winter 2021), 22–23.

Afterword

Jessica Hemmings

Zimbabwean author and filmmaker Tsitsi Dangarembga's second novel, *The Book of Not* (2006), opens with the scene of a severed leg tossed high in the sky: 'Up, up, up, the leg spun. A piece of a person up there in the sky.'¹ The limb belongs to Netsai, the younger sister of the novel's narrator, Tambu, whose injury is the result of a landmine explosion. After falling in love with a comrade, Netsai joined Rhodesia's protracted guerrilla war that eventually led to the country's independence from Britain and renaming as Zimbabwe in 1980. Meanwhile, Tambu is one of a few black students at the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart, a white school. After the parents of fellow students, the Swanepoels twins, are brutally murdered,² the Sisters invite students to 'join the women knitting comforters and gloves for the troops'.³ What Tambu fails to realise is that her knitting signals political loyalty in direct conflict with her sister's participation in a civil war drawn along racial lines.

Tambu's knitting could not be further from the humanitarian ethics of neutrality and impartiality. Instead, she learns to her great expense that handicraft can be acutely political.⁴ In fact, handicraft is often political. Even when, as the editors of this volume suggest, we turn our attention to handicraft's associations with 'the quotidian ethics of daily working practice, conditions and consumer choice',⁵ the textile as political remains inescapable. As Julia Bryan-Wilson writes in her extensive survey of the blurring of boundaries between amateur and professional textile making in examples from North and South America from the 1970s to the 1990s, 'textile politics are frequently double-edged, as disruptive causes can be promulgated by actions or methods that serve a regulatory function to cement normative gender roles as well as nationalist agendas'.⁶

In this writing, I tack between centuries and geographies in search of comparisons between the predominantly historical context of this book and contemporary textile practice today. A striking theme throughout the historical

research presented is the presence of counter-narratives that question the presumed place of the textile maker as a subjugated position.⁷ Instead, historical, as well as contemporary, examples offer evidence that humanitarian textile production is more individually empowered than is often credited. While I acknowledge my own strategy to be far from conventional in its disregard for chronological or geographical focus, I have instead kept my eye trained on the textile – as an artefact, a form of labour and a storyteller.

Counter-narratives

The cementing of normative gender roles, as well as nationalist agendas, to which Bryan-Wilson refers, goes hand-in-hand with a popular understanding of textile making as work taken up by women operating under various forms of subjugation. But like many of the historical counter-narratives presented in this book, contemporary practices not only name but, at times, actively overturn this association. The African-American artist Faith Ringgold, for example, recounted her use of the textile to record her own life experiences after a publisher suggested that the memoir she had commissioned Ringgold to write fell short of expectations.⁸ Ringgold suggested that the publisher was disappointed that her life story did not recount more violence, intimating that her race and gender established certain ideas about her life readers would expect to see in her memoir. ‘I don’t know why she [the publisher] just looked at me and decided that my book was going to be one way,’ Ringgold offered, before explaining that her move to create story quilts was driven by a need to ‘tell my story’.⁹

Ringgold worked as an independent artist, but the need to assert control through cloth over the narrative of her own life is a drive also present in some examples of humanitarian handicraft. For example, Philippa Anne Hobbs’ extensive research of the Swedish period (1961–1976) of tapestry production at the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre at Rorke’s Drift in South Africa presents an alternative reading to the oppressed and downtrodden ‘saved’ by humanitarian endeavours. Echoing Bryan-Wilson’s acknowledgement that ‘textile politics are frequently double-edged’,¹⁰ Hobbs observes:

If the women themselves were not emancipated from the regimes that governed them, the loom could be. By imagining the proportions of greed, the magnitude of betrayal or even the demise of apartheid, a woman’s work could interrogate social orders, contest hegemonies, or inspire laughter.¹¹

Hobbs concludes that ‘the tapestry practice at Rorke’s Drift uncovers the role of the loom in the resilience and agencies of marginalised women’.¹²

The potential of handicraft to offer resilience or agency is not a familiar association. But handicraft can, at least at times, offer makers the opportunity to convey perspectives often at odds with the assumptions held by larger systems of power. What many of the historical chapters in this book reveal, as well as some of the contemporary examples I touch upon here, are overlooked capacities of handicraft.

Writing of the displaced communities of the San, Sarah Rhodes considers the longevity of the Art-i-San project, which focused on the development of linocut designs for printed textiles with a fee or royalties paid to the artist when the textiles sold.¹³ Rhodes notes a ‘visual affinity’ apparent across both time and geographical distance amongst San artists.¹⁴ Despite repeated displacement of their communities, the example can be understood as another counter-narrative passed through material culture: geographical displacement that did not erase visual and narrative continuity.¹⁵ Rhodes acknowledges that the San communities’ cultures and traditions continue to experience appropriation ‘particularly within graphic communication and advertising’¹⁶ while, ironically, also being described as the silenced other¹⁷ – stereotypes that manage to both disregard and take over the communication conveyed through image and narrative.

Hobbs sees some evidence of empowerment within aesthetic decisions found in the Rorke’s Drift tapestries but credits that: ‘It was in the sphere of women’s orality that weavers felt at liberty to be the most innovative.’¹⁸ For many of the examples in this book, time has removed the possibility to recover the spoken voice or embodied knowledge Hobbs recovered through her extensive interviews.¹⁹ Maria Småberg’s research, for example, draws predominantly from the Swedish humanitarian organisation *Individuell Människohjälp* (Swedish Development Partner) newsletters which contained annual reports and photographs, private letters and field reports.²⁰ Stéphanie Prévost, writing about Armenian needlework in the late 1890s, acknowledges the difficulty in recovering not only the makers’ perspective but also that of the textiles’ recipients. The result, Prévost warns, is that ‘the history of Armenian industrial relief tends to be written from the donors’ and humanitarian brokers’ viewpoint, which often results in overlooking the recipients’ agency’.²¹

Practical possibilities for the recovery of spoken or embodied knowledge of the past are, admittedly, limited. David Hopkin, writing about lace production in the period circa 1840 to 1914, explains that ‘given the absence of much documentary evidence of lacemaking prior to the nineteenth century, fiction supplied the missing narrative’.²² Hopkin notes that ‘the ethics of consumption were learnt through narrative’.²³ His poignant analysis of Sarah Grand’s unfinished trilogy speaks volumes. The narrative runs dry when lace itself faces an impossible predicament: the handicraft falls out

of relevance to fashion as well as commercial viability.²⁴ In some contexts contemporary craft has returned to fashion in recent years, but commercial viability remains a complex problem.²⁵

Contemporary, but also historical, textile work has not always subjugated women as entirely as popular assumptions tend to convey. Wendy Wiertz's 're-evaluation of humanitarian beneficiaries as participants with agency rather than simply as persons receiving aid' challenges the one-sided narrative of gratitude directed at American philanthropic work with Belgian lace during the First World War.²⁶ Wiertz recognises that morale was another crucial contribution of lace production.²⁷ Nicolette Makovicky's research also brings to the fore not the possibility of large-scale change but dissent expressed by women lacemakers in Poland during the communist era.²⁸ Perspectives such as those of Wiertz and Makovicky are not without contemporary parallels, seen today in craft's attention to community building.²⁹

Social practice

In their turn away from luxury and the elite, and towards the everyday, many examples of socially engaged or community-based art practices share aspirations with the historical antecedents discussed in this book. A recent example of this refocus appeared in the 2021 Turner Prize nominee list, which included no individual practising artists.³⁰ The eventual winners, eleven-strong Belfast-based Array Collective, often use textiles in their protest and performance work. The Prize nominee list was not without its critics. The *Guardian* newspaper's Jonathan Jones deemed the show 'the most virtuous Turner prize ever' and 'utterly amateurish' before judging the 'warm and fluffy protest artists' announced as the winners as offering 'only a thin smear of artistic meaning'.³¹ In return, Declan McGonagle referred to Jones' perspective as 'unconscious colonialism' before noting 'the shared practice of Array is a social as well as an aesthetic proposition'.³²

Array Collective work in an era when contemporary art has arguably become synonymous with social practice. Collective member Grace McMurray explains: 'As a collective we work best when we are creating action ... Sometimes the best actions are the slow actions. Other times the best actions are really fast.'³³ The assumption that time-consuming production contributes to the value of craft isn't a model Array Collective adhere to. Instead, their textile production is at times irreverent in humour and sloppy in aesthetic. While McGonagle sees this as an 'aesthetic proposition', difficult questions are raised about how much artefacts actually

‘speak’ for themselves as record keepers of the circumstances and hands responsible for their making. These debates haunt social practices today which, perhaps much like humanitarian handicraft, rely heavily on the viewer or recipient’s knowledge of the circumstances of their making to convey meaning.

It is fair to acknowledge that the meanings imparted by particular circumstances of making can vary enormously. Siân Roberts opens her chapter about the Quaker-led relief initiatives during and after the First World War with a quote from Florence M. Barrow who, in 1941 at the end of the Polish scheme she had led from 1920 to 1924, wrote: ‘It is hoped that something of the story of the venture will be remembered by possessors of the beautiful embroidery ... and that when they become heirlooms to future generations they will still carry the fragrance of loving service which made their creation possible.’³⁴ In stark contrast to the ‘fragrance of loving service’, Helen Dampier and Rebecca Gill, writing about the efforts of Emily Hobhouse to develop a lace school in South Africa, observe: ‘The thread bore witness to significant emotional distress and the misalignment of aspiration with emotional conflict and physical resistance.’³⁵

Employment

In her chapter on lace production in Russia, Elizaveta Berezina traces the state-run professionalisation of the craft, which resulted by the 1930s in ‘the emergence of new professions within the craft. Lacemakers, lace artists, instructors, quality inspectors and administrators had their own distinctive working roles, which were cultivated as part of the Soviet modernisation of craft.’³⁶ Berezina concludes that the ‘ideals of cooperation, which served as a fundamental principle for managing sustainable craft communities, were developed and adapted under different political regimes’.³⁷ Sustaining craft and the communities craft may support remains a fraught question today. In contemporary examples, one model appears which relies on the initiative of an individual artist who makes a personal commitment to generate stable employment for artisans by providing an outlet for handicraft skills incorporated in their own artistic work.

The Cape Town-based Zimbabwean artist Dan Halter, for example, embodies the social turn in contemporary art practice when he explains his deliberate decision to work with ubiquitous materials which provide a reason to employ others who possess craft skills.³⁸ These are decisions that differ from philanthropic motivations, as Janice Helland writes in her chapter for this book.³⁹ In Halter’s practice, his full-time studio assistant

is Bienco Boketsu Ikete, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, whom he has worked with since 2005. The seamstress Sibongile Tete; Kuda Kuimba, a bead and wire worker; and Faro Mutize, a Shona stone sculptor are among others he regularly plans work with. Halter's motivation is twofold: providing employment and sourcing fabrication for his practice.⁴⁰

In *Durban Diaries* (2012) the American artist Liza Lou, who relocated her California studio to Durban, South Africa in 2005 in an effort to provide employment for bead weavers who construct her large-scale artworks, asks if being able to eat a meal was more important than the artistic vision she held for her art.⁴¹ For an artist whose acclaim began in the 1990s when she single-handedly produced *Kitchen* (1991–1996), Lou's shift towards using her artistic practice to support social change may be materially surprising but follows a broader trend in the socially oriented production of art. Lou chose the KwaZulu-Natal province in part because of its long-established tradition of bead weaving. The artist is not without critics and some of the narrative potential the move provided faced difficult material practicalities. In early work, for example, Lou asked the women to glue rather than weave with the beads,⁴² arguably a disconnect from local knowledge.

Are practices such as Dan Halter's and Liza Lou's informal examples of humanitarian handicraft? Lou's decision to relocate was motivated by an interest in providing women with stable employment. But the tensions she recounts in how to control the material standards of her artistic practice, as well as a personal fear of proselytising,⁴³ share many of the ethical predicaments faced by humanitarian handicraft initiatives. Lou recounts:

She tells me resignedly that her hands are too large and the beads are too small. Her work is crooked, misshapen. And what about the strange discoloration, and the wonky strings with loose beads across the top? If I reject her work, her family won't eat, and as it is, she seems to be living on the margins of life and death. Yet if I accept the work, I don't have an artwork. Or do I. Not what I intended, but instead, what the work wants to become. I saw one thing in my mind and something else emerged.⁴⁴

Late in *Durban Diaries*, Lou acknowledges her surprise that the women who work for her do not have particular aesthetic opinions about what they are making. They are committed to executing the work as employees.⁴⁵ This reality is awkward but nonetheless important to acknowledge in the context of the counter-narratives of empowerment I have tended to focus on here. While the opportunity for some personal expression through making deserves far greater recognition within humanitarian handicraft, it would be

inaccurate to claim that this is a consistent attribute of either historical or contemporary examples.

Tourist art

Siún Carden's research into the tenacious myth-making of the Aran jumper and her humorous account of Scottish tartan offer a sage analysis of the function objects produced for tourism and the diaspora offer.⁴⁶ In Carden's research context, the place these made-up, mixed-up nostalgic hybrids occupy for 'diasporic narratives and transnational longings' allow the Irish diaspora to continue to identify with the country, albeit an imagined version.⁴⁷ Bertrand Taithe's observation in this book regarding missionary-led carpet production in North Africa that the 'skills were ancient but they were not indigenous or traditional' is equally applicable to Carden's reading of Aran sweaters.⁴⁸ But where Taithe acknowledges that by the 1930s 'commercially' the carpets' 'rationale was lost in translation',⁴⁹ Carden recognises that Aran sweaters allow their owner to invest in a story as much as, if not more than, the artefact itself. They too are a form of solidarity, in the case of Ireland through a large diaspora displaced by waves of economic migration.

Returning to the Zimbabwean author and filmmaker Tsitsi Dangarembga, her third novel *This Mournable Body* (2018) addresses the theme of contested tourist heritage in contemporary Zimbabwe. From Tambudzai's naive knitting in the *Book of Not* (2006), the post-independence setting of *This Mournable Body* depicts the sale of culture for foreign tourist interests. Tambu now works for the white Zimbabwean owner of the Green Jacaranda travel company. Dangarembga caricatures Zimbabwe's cultural tourists as voyeurs and the travel company owner as a person who sees heritage as a commercial harvest.⁵⁰ Imports of 'Java print skirts and wraps'⁵¹ and 'Zambia cloths'⁵² are worn by the women of Tambu's village for their eco-tourism performance – cloths with associations to cultures and traditions far beyond the context the tourists are sold. By the close of the novel, Tambu is complicit in the bare-breasted village performance agreed in desperation to please her boss, eventually losing both her job and credibility in one afternoon.⁵³

From Tambu's younger incarnation as a student naive about the implications of her participation in knitting, the weight of meaning material culture can carry remains a blind spot. I cannot help but also wonder if, at times, both in historical and contemporary practice, it is handicraft itself that is in need of saving? Writing of 'how historical processes become materialised in contemporary humanitarian craftwork', Claire Barber, Rebecca Gill

and Bertrand Taithe note how crucial labelling is because the textiles of humanitarian handicraft ‘must exist in dialogue with the narrative of [their] production’.⁵⁴ Parallels can be drawn to many examples of textiles deployed in social practice today where aesthetic appreciation alone does not convey the work’s meaning. Instead, hearing the story and engaging with the physical material bring us closer to a full appreciation of why these textiles have been, and will continue to be, made.

Notes

- 1 Tsitsi Dangarembga, *The Book of Not* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 3.
- 2 Dangarembga, *The Book of Not*, p. 129.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- 4 Tumbu is a character full of contradictions. Rosanne Kennedy recognises that Tambu ‘fantasizes about refusing to knit for the Rhodesian troops in revenge for her exclusion [at school], but she lacks the courage to take such a decisive step’. See Rosanne Kennedy, ‘Mortgaged Futures: Trauma, Subjectivity, and the Legacies of Colonialism in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *The Book of Not*’, *Studies in the Novel*, 40:1–2 (2008) p. 98.
- 5 ‘Introduction: The Meanings and Making of Humanitarian Handicraft’, this volume, p. 2.
- 6 Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago, IL and London, University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 7.
- 7 Klarissa Lueg and Marianne Wolff Lundholt, *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives* (London: Routledge, 2021).
- 8 Faith Ringgold in public dialogue with Serpentine Galleries Artistic Director Hans Ulrich Obrist to accompany her eponymous solo exhibition in London (6 June to 8 September, 2019), www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcUPrr9nNjg&t=6s (accessed 5 May 2022).
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Bryan-Wilson, *Fray*, p. 7.
- 11 Philippa Anne Hobbs, ‘Ideology, Imagery and Female Agency in Tapestry at the Evangelical Lutheran Church Art and Craft Centre, Rorke’s Drift, During the Swedish Period 1961–1976’ (PhD thesis, University of Johannesburg, 2019), p. 207.
- 12 Hobbs, ‘Ideology, Imagery and Female Agency’, p. i.
- 13 Sarah Rhodes, ‘Contemporary Textile Imagery in Southern Africa: A Question of Ownership’, In Jessica Hemmings (ed.), *Cultural Threads: Transnational Textiles Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 218.
- 14 Sarah Rhodes, ‘Contemporary Textile Imagery’, p. 216.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 218.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 19 Philippa Anne Hobbs 'Evolving a Tapestry Practice at Rorke's Drift: Women's Alliances, Agencies and Visual Syntaxes in the Loom', *TEXTILE*, 18:4: p. 391. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2020.1741173>
- 20 Maria Småberg, 'Humanitarian Handicrafts as (Dis)empowerment of Women 'Left Behind': A Swedish Help to Self-help Project in the Northern Greek Village of Vlasti, 1963–1988', this volume.
- 21 Stéphanie Prévost, 'Thinking Anglo-American Industrial Relief through Armenian Needlework in the Late 1890s: Humanitarian Marketing Ethics, Agency and Identity', this volume, p. 88.
- 22 David Hopkin, 'Literary Visions of Craft and Cooperation in the European Handmade Lace Revival, c. 1840–1914', this volume, p. XX.
- 23 I share Hopkin's interest in reading craft through literature. Elsewhere I have suggested that fiction not only supplies craft narratives but it also provides an antidote to some of the inflated claims of change that contemporary social practice can be accused of peddling. See Jessica Hemmings, 'Rereading & Revising: The (Sometimes) Smallness of Craft' *Journal of Craft Research* (2018), pp. 273–286.
- 24 Hopkin, 'Literary Visions of Craft and Cooperation in the European Handmade Lace Revival, c. 1840–1914', this volume, p. 48.
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- 26 Wendy Wiertz, 'Beyond Gratitude: Belgian Women, Humanitarian Organisations and Lace-aid Programmes in the First World War', this volume, p. 122.
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- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 24.
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