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Joseph McBrinn, London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021.

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Book Review

***Queering the Subversive Stitch: Men & the Culture of Needlework*, Joseph McBrinn, London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2021**

Crafting Queer Masculinity through Needlework

Subversive means “disruptive” and is defined as “seeking to challenge the established systems or institutions.” The “established institutions” in relation to needlework comes from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries where women were associated with sewing and connected with the domestic sphere. Yet, before this, from the medieval times men took pride in their sewing skills and threaded their own needles to embroider or mend their own clothes. Joseph McBrinn queers the subversive stitch by drawing on examples of men’s needlecraft from the nineteenth century to the present day. He draws on case studies that reflect on “transitional moments” for gender history where some of these “masculinity crisis w[ere] played out” (160) in the first book of its kind.

Queering the Subversive Stitch offers an alternative exploration of needlework to the traditional understanding of sewing being a feminine past time. The book responds to Roszika Parker’s revolutionary 1984 book *The Subversive Stitch* by investigating the history of needlework from a masculine perspective. “Queering” in the book’s title is used as a synonym for “alternative” with McBrinn exploring how men have used needlework, as much as women have, as a way for relaxation and convalescing. McBrinn uses Parker’s book almost as a canvas for his own study and weaves together the history of masculinity and queer history that we have otherwise forgotten when it comes to discussing needlework. Using the same definition of “needlework” as Parker did, McBrinn investigates a variety of needlecrafts including embroidery, lacemaking, rag-rug making,

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Billie-Gina Thomason completed her PhD in Liverpool John Moores University in 2020 and her research explores historic gender nonconformity in nineteenth century Britain. More specifically her research investigates the lives of individuals assigned female at birth but lived and presented as men throughout their lives. Using a microhistory approach, she created microbiographies using primary material available including newspapers, pamphlets, street ballads, portraits, and official documentation to produce narratives about these individuals.

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cross-stitch and petit-point to discuss how men have used them as a form of art, as symbols of love, as political messages and to face difficulties in their lives.

From the introduction we see that *Queering the Subversive Stitch* is about men lifting their needle in solidarity with women at times and this idea runs on into chapter three with the culling of the “Angel in the House” (49–86). Yet, we also see that needle and thread, when in the hands of men, was used to break through the traditional views that only women could sew. The book explores the social construction of masculinity through needlework “as something that only really exists in relation to femininity” (xvii). Housed between an introduction and conclusion are four chapters with chapter two “Needlework and the Creation of Masculinities: ‘The Prick’ of Patriarchy” acting as an elongated introduction that speaks directly to Parker’s book *The Subversive Stitch*. Chapters three, four and five offer a chronological focus on the history of masculinity and needlework spanning from the nineteenth century to the “‘boys that sew club’ of the new millennium” (119). The pages are peppered with seventy-one images of men at work on their needlecrafts. McBrinn also includes sixteen plates showcasing work from William Morris (Plate 3), Grayson Perry (Plate 9) and Chan-Hyo Bae (Plate 14). Each chapter’s subtitle highlights specific themes whether that is sewing during “the birth of the homosexual” (26–39), which remains a continuous thread throughout, or “sewing against the silence” (125–131) when thinking about the role of needlework in

response to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.


The consistent argument is that historically men and needlework equate to effeminacy or homosexuality, with McBrinn arguing “embroidery is the brazen badge of queer self-identification” (64). However, as we see in chapter three with the 1870 Elementary Education Act working-class boys and orphans were taught needlework to calm them down. Similarly, sailors created gifts for loved ones as evidenced with the example of ‘Jack’s Christmas Present’ taken from *The British Workman* in 1867. Indeed, being a sailor was a masculine job during the nineteenth century and McBrinn argues that “hypermasculinity, then, could actively negate the feminizing actions of needlework” as evidenced in the image (5). As someone who explores gender nonconformity in nineteenth century Britain, it is these hypermasculine examples of men engaging in needlework that demonstrate how men challenged the traditional “sewing equals effeminacy” argument that I would have liked to know more about.

The correlation between sewing and sickness has been evident throughout history most notably after the First World War when sewing was used as a tool for recovery. For instance, Ernest Thesiger’s *Disabled Soldier’s Embroidery Industry* was set up to support disabled veterans when they returned from the war. Whilst Thesiger was recovering from shrapnel wounds in Charing Cross Hospital he taught fellow men how to cross-stitch intricate designs from his own collection so they could produce something they were proud of and develop their motor skills. This coming togetherness

shows “sewing as a therapeutic activity” (89). Yet, despite this comradeship there were underlying arguments of “effeminophobia” according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick where there was a fear of the effeminate boy and needlework contributed to this fear (85). The connection between sickness and sewing was rekindled in the 1980s with the AIDS crisis and with the political impact that we see in chapter five “Masculinity and ‘the Politics of the Cloth’”. The act of sewing for some during this period was not only an act of defiance, but it was also an act of legacy in leaving something behind. This legacy is evident in the example of the 1985 HIV Quilt. The Quilt was seen as a paradox as it represented safety, homeliness, and comfort for those living with HIV as opposed to the connotation of HIV being associated with homosexual activity which was in the media at the time.

In the preface McBrinn states, “This is the first book ever published about men’s needlework and I do hope readers will find it not only amusing but also interesting” (xvii). Indeed, whether you are exploring the intricacies of Victorian sailors and their sweetheart samplers, reminiscing about old Will and Grace episodes, or exploring the impact of needlework in bringing men together during the AIDS epidemic this book pricks your creative imagination. It will enable you to unpick and weave the history of men’s needlework and it will encourage you to pay a little more attention to those queer and subversive stitches.

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