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Darning: A Visible Thread

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This paper documents the transformation of cloth through the repair process by examining the impact of darning on the cloth's surface. It traces historical definitions of darning and museum examples of darning, documenting the translation of a darn into a decorative embellishment. This darned embellishment becomes a resource for imagery for my practice of contemporary Jacquard woven textiles. A traditional practice transformed, a tradition not well documented but rich in interpretation, like the darn itself - invisible and/or visible.

My interest in darning arose from it being part of the weave process, correcting errors made when weaving, an interest in the manipulated surface and a desire to produce works that asked - What memories are evoked by looking at aspects of the life of cloth? What experiences are recorded in the surface of the fabric, embedded in its structure?

Textiles are an essential and often assumed part of everyday life; we are wrapped in them, lie in them, walk, sleep and sit on textiles. Inevitably they wear out, are worn, ripped, torn and are damaged. How general wear and tear effects cloth, how does it disintegrate, fray and deteriorate and what changes occur throughout its existence became an interest in my practice. Paralleling this change and marking through disintegration, is the way cloth is restored, repaired, patched, darned and re-used - the repair process.

Darning is used to prolong the life of a garment out of necessity, social, economic, sentimental reasons, thrift, on principle or belief. Darning implies that the original fabric is replaced, recreated, replicated or rewoven. Darning aims to make new, re-new, re instate and restore by the insertion of additional threads into the warp and weft of a cloth to repair holes, tears, rips and cuts. An assumed aim is invisibility but the very act of darning transforms the character of the cloth as the darning threads, often a different character, colour or material, are inter woven into the fabric; they impact on, distort and shape the surface with the darn becoming visible, an embellishment or decoration on the surface, transforming the original.

Jennifer Isaacs in her 1987 book *The Gentle Arts – 200 years of Australian Women's Domestic and Decorative Arts* writes

In many Australian families darning has assumed the legendary status of an art through the tales told of grandmother's skill at mending socks, shirts, jumper elbows and the like. Darning itself became a necessary art based on the motto of

*'waste not want not'. If most of the jumper was still good, then a fine stitch in time and a neat mend, so that 'you'd hardly know it', was the order of the day.*¹

Although noting darning as an art, Jennifer Isaacs devoted only two paragraphs to explaining it. No record of the hours spent darning or the results; the time spent darning to clothe a family, to extend the life of garments so that they can be worn again, passed on to younger siblings or given to others in need; or the satisfaction of the darner when the pile of darning is finally finished. My interest has elicited many a story and comment from people about their mother's or grandmothers darning, significantly, very few with their own experience of darning. Darning as memory.

This paper documents research undertaken to support studio based practice and is limited to personal response to objects in several museum collections, responses to technical considerations rather than cultural, social or a comprehensive study. Selected examples that are representative of darning and in many cases secondary sources have been used for images as ideal conditions for taking photographs have not been available for examples studied in museums.

This paper looks in detail at definitions and explanations of darning followed by examples of general household darning, explanations of 17th and 18th century darning samplers, 20th century school needlework sample books and WWII darning brochures. While general household general darning transforms the garment, samplers show how darning was learnt with the makers transforming the basic darn into a decorative element. 1970s hippie clothing and recent street fashion use darning, patching and mending as decoration and embellished while commanding inflated prices. Embellishment is integrated in my recent Jacquard woven textiles, many of which draw on my mother's repairs.

The expectation is that the repair of clothing begun with early construction. As repair is linked to scarcity or value, makers of clothing would have been repairers. Was a distinction made? When were clothes first repaired? Have archaeologists/anthropologists /historians distinguished differences between the construction of clothes and their repair? Is repair discussed with early examples of textiles?

Elizabeth Wayland Barber in *Prehistoric Textiles* (1991) uses the word darning to describe early developments in weaving –

*Another major problem confronting the weaver, besides tension for the warp, is how to introduce the weft into the warp to form the cloth. The crudest, conceptually simplest way of putting in weft is to 'darn' it in by running the leader end under the first thread, over the second, under the third and so forth, one thread at a time, back and forth across the warp, a process tedious in the extreme.*²

Barber is identifying a key development in loom construction, a shedding device to assist with inserting the weft –

¹ Jennifer Isaacs (1987) 'The Gentle Arts – 200 years of Australian Women's Domestic and Decorative Arts', 114.

² Barber, Elizabeth Wayland (1991) 'Prehistoric Textiles' 84.

In fact, it seems to have taken several millennia of darning the weft in at a snail's pace before some genius figured out the principle of the heddle – apparently in the Neolithic (about 6000BC?), somewhere in Northern Iraq or Turkey.³

Clearly her references to darning are for the creation of cloth, not the repair. When this distinction was actually made is an area for further research.

Current definitions of 'a darn' are straightforward, for example, the *Collins English Dictionary* defines a darn as follows:

1. To mend a hole or a garment with a series of crossing or interwoven stitches.
2. A patch of darned work on a garment.
3. The process or act of darning.

Historical definitions and references are more complicated with detailed descriptions plus the addition of moral, satisfaction and well being associations.

Caulfield and Saward's 1882 publication⁴ defines a darn as follows:

A term generally used to signify the method employed for the reparation of any textiles, whether by loom or hand manufacture, by substituting a web by means of a needle.

The definition continues,

This reparation is effected in various ways viz., by common web darning, corner-tear darn, by fine drawing, cashmere twill, damask darning, grafting, ladder filling, and Swiss darning,

giving detailed explanations of each type of darning. Fine drawing is a method of darning cloth, stuff or material of a thick substance. The descriptions are very detailed, intricate and repetitive demanding attention of the reader and repairer. For a damask darn 'for the first row take 3, leave 5, take 1 four times successively, leave 5, take 3.'⁵ This type of detailed written instruction continues for 20 rows requiring exacting patience and precision to follow and execute.

Definitions and diagrams continue with Darned Crochet (forms a inlay design in crochet); Darned embroidery (essentially needlework patterns – running stitch forming background around motifs); Darned Laces (denotes embroidery on netted ground) and Darned Muslin (for patterning fine cotton muslin) and Darned Net (embroidery on netted fabric). These descriptions are for embroidery and inlay techniques or darning is an embellishment not for the reparation of cloth.

Similarly, Hamer (1968) the Country Women's Association (CWA) book on Handicrafts cites '*darning on fabric*'⁶ clearly describing it as an embellishment and embroidery technique. The CWA is well known in Australia – a women's organization, largely rural. For my mother who moved from the city to a farm in central, rural Victoria (Australia) at the beginning of WWII, the CWA provided invaluable information on

³ Barber, Elizabeth Wayland (1994) 'Women's Work' p.41.

⁴ Caulfield and Saward's (1882) 'The Dictionary of Needlework, an Encyclopaedia of Artistic, Plain and Fancy Needlework' p142.

⁵ Caulfield and Saward's (1882) p143.

⁶ Hamer (1968) Country Women's Association Handicrafts, p200.

household domestic tasks, making, repairing, ‘making do’ with war and rural shortages of the time.

Darning and mending definitions are embellished with comments on patience and the virtue of these tasks as shown in Theresa de Dillmont ‘Encyclopedia of Needlework’ chapter on Mending.

The mending of clothes, underwear and house linen, though wearisome, is nevertheless very necessary and no women should be ignorant of the best methods of doing it. There is as much merit in knowing how to repair the damage caused by wear and tear or by accident, as in the perfect making of new articles.⁷

Similar sentiments were expressed in a small book titled ‘Sewing’ by Meriel Tilling (1975) that my mother had. The chapter on ‘Mending’ begins,

There comes a time when all clothes, particularly children’s clothes need mending and household articles too eventually reach a stage when only careful maintenance can prolong their useful life. Tiresome though this is, as much or nearly as much pride can be taken in a neatly mended article as in a newly produced one, and certainly the pleasure of a good conscience is an extra reward for the trouble taken.⁸

My mother’s sewing book also states the need for cleanliness and patience to give a perfect result.⁹ The moral stance is clearly linked with the repair process. Darning clearly benefits the heart and sole and patience is absolutely necessary.

General Household Darning

General household darning or women’s domestic darning work is largely not recorded within historical collections¹⁰. A level of invisibility. Darned garments are generally invisible in terms of surviving examples and in collections, they are not collected or if collected the darn is removed in the conservation process.

Tumberumba Women’s Hut Museum is one museum that has collected every day darned garments. Tumberumba, a small town in the south of the state of New South Wales, Australia has a museum established to preserve objects made by rural women; domestic objects made to enrich a families life with readily available materials; objects made in the ‘making do’ tradition. In 1997 the Museums storage room contained two boxes labelled ‘darning’ full patched, repaired and darned garments – a mans shirt, socks, stockings, underwear, table linen and bedding.

Most of the objects had accession cards noting the donator’s name, date donated and a brief description. Tumberumba Women’s Hut is largely volunteer and with limited resources; so detailed documentation is an enormous task. But descriptions were indicative of the way darning is recorded. The description card for a small circular cotton d’oyley made no reference to a large darned patched in the centre.

⁷ Theresa de Dillmont (1900) *Encyclopaedia of Needlework*, p.3.

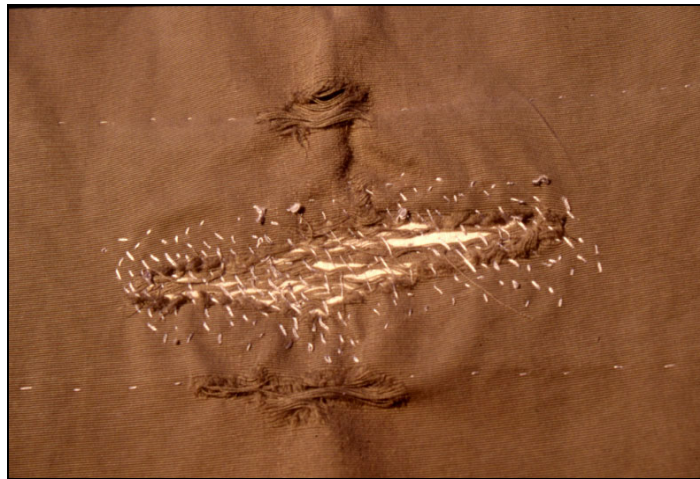
⁸ Tilling, Meriel, (1975) ‘Sewing,’ pp. 57-58.

⁹ Tilling, Meriel, (1975) pp. 57-58.

¹⁰ A list of collections examined appears at the end of this paper.

Il Rattoppo, an exhibition at the Italian Museo del Lino (1996) showed wonderful examples of repaired clothes, objects made from readily available materials and provides a good examples of the every day nature of these objects.¹¹

Sources of imagery for my own work have come from garments my mother darning. As a farmers wife she darned, patched and repaired all her life - from Hessian wheat bags, canvas irrigation hoses, woollen blankets, socks, trousers, jumpers (sweaters) to fine silk underwear, handkerchiefs and silk stockings. These examples are universal; clothing repaired as people had no choice through social conditions, poverty, circumstance or like my mother, because it was the most appropriate thing to do. She did it on principle, not necessity. Refer to images showing darned trouser knee, a woollen jumper and a patterned handkerchief.



An example of household darning from my mother's hand.

Darning Samplers

Interest and an awareness of darning samplers began with a close study of two small samplers viewed in 1996 during a tour of the Powerhouse Museum Collection in Sydney. The two samplers were made by Mrs Finn, wife of Colonel Finn who lived at Victoria Barracks, Sydney and donated to the Powerhouse Museum. Made between 1900 and 1925 using a cream coloured wool flannel, one is patched, the other darned with the centre square cut out, patched and darned in bright red thread, making the repair visible and decorative. Both are trimmed in red blanket stitch. Like many samplers, because of the colour, the expectation is that these were done to learn the process as the result lies contrary to an aim of the process. When I borrowed these samplers for an exhibition¹² in 1996 the acquisition sheet written in 1985 gave the value to all three samplers of \$8 and noted moth damage to the woollen samplers.

There is evidence of samplers existing since the 13th century as a way of making prototypes¹³ and as a way of recording stitches and patterns. From the 17th the execution of samplers was an important part of a girl's education. Girls progressed from

¹¹ *Il Rattoppo*, an exhibition at the Italian Museo del Lino, 1996.

¹² 'Second Look' Prospect Textile Biennial, Prospect, South Australia curated by Sue Rosenthal, 1996.

¹³ Parmal (2000) MFA, Boston, p. 7.

embroidered examples to more complicated lace, darning, white work and knitting samplers while map and almanac samplers introduced even more variety.¹⁴

Through the 18th and 19th century, following the successfully completion of embroidery samplers, young girls began a darning sampler, demonstrating her darning skills. Each sampler requiring a considerable level of skill and dexterity and showed a number of different darning techniques and methods. Utility followed decoration in the pursuit of skills for life. Many young girls combined both, as the urge to embellish transformed the darns into a decorate pattern, copying designs from pattern books, the first published in Germany 1524. Many popular motifs can be traced to patterns books. Darns were worked by counted thread and with holes cut out which were then filled with damask patterns where the two arms met.¹⁵ The darned damask patterns replicated weave structures used for household linen, requiring a knowledge of weave structures to replicate then so precisely. Many of these examples were made when the Jacquard loom was becoming the norm (patented in 1805 and very quickly was adapted by industry.)

Darning samplers examined and representative of this period are –

1. 1739 Darning Sampler, Dutch or German¹⁶ from the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge University, UK. This linen sampler is embroidered with linen and polychrome silks with ten coloured damask darns of cruciform shape surround the inscribed panel with smaller examples of monochrome linen darns including a corner darn worked in the lower half. Each stitched darn replicates a weave structure or type of repair needed for household linen.

2. 1763 Darning Sampler, Dutch from the Victorian and Albert Museum, London, UK.¹⁷ Beautifully executed darning samplers with numerous stitched warp and weft crossing replicating damask weave structures, named and dated and embellished with small embroidered flowers. Typical of darning samplers worked in the Netherlands and Low Counties as these were usually signed and dated.

The patterns looked deceptively simple, but considerable skill was required to produce such painstakingly accurate work. Such skills were invaluable when undertaking or overseeing the repair of personnel and household linen and all types of garments and hosiery. Fine work became increasingly important when lighter cotton and muslin gowns dominated fashion in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹⁸

Darning samplers were exercises in how to repair holes and worn areas in woven cloth. Fabric cut precisely in most; in others there was no hole and the darning was worked entirely on to the fabric – embellishment. They were executed to learn how to extend the life of the fabric. In doing this, it was important to reproduce the woven structures as closely as possible, avoiding unequal tension. Despite the beauty of these darned patterns, which could be used to form patterns in other embroideries, they were

¹⁴ Parmel (2000), p. 7.

¹⁵ Clabburn (1994) Shire Publication, p. 16.

¹⁶ Humfrey, Carol (1997) 'Samplers' FitzWilliam Museum Handbook p86-87. Details – size 51 x 49.5cm. #T. 86-1938.

¹⁷ Browne and Weardon (1999), plate #67, p. 93.

¹⁸ Frost, Patricia, (2000) Millar's Collecting Textiles, p. 37.

primarily utilitarian and never intended for to be seen or for public display. Coloured silks have been used to clearly show how the repair should be worked but if suitable threads and colours have been selected to match the ground fabric, the darned area would have been invisible, strong and serviceable. Examples examined clearly show that the makers interest in embellishment transformed the basic examples into decorative motifs.

School Book Samplers

In Rozsika Parker, the Subversive Stitch the only reference to darning is in relation to samplers and it clearly links the functionary or darning samplers' social position and learning within the school system.

Samplers produced in institutions, orphanages or village schools were far less colourful than those of middle or upper class girls. Some do include improving verses and border patterns but most were simply numbers and alphabets. The symbols of privilege – the basket of flowers, the mansions, lily pots and peacocks – had no place in working class samplers. 1821 government regulations that ensured that functional stitchery – darning samplers – dominated the working class child's education: The child to preform the work in two colours, yellow and blue, on linen that it may appear more distinctly.¹⁹

Many school books of needlework exercises have survived from the nineteenth century, each including a variety of small samplers demonstrating plain sewing and embroidery techniques. There are also diminutive items of clothing showing dressmaking skills and occasionally examples of knitting. The stitched leaves bound by board covers provided protection for work that may only have been kept as a memento of schooldays but was frequently used as a reference or instructional manual for a girl's future employment.

These manuals for needlework were used in UK National Schools system until 1884, well after the sewing machine was introduced in 1860s. Detailed instructions were given for plain sewing samplers, gathering, aprons, tucking and trimming, alphabet, plain darn, mending stockings, stocking web darn, patching.

National schools third division, children learnt darning – plain darn, twill darn, wave darn, single diamond, bird eye darn, double diamond - all weave patterns and instructions were detailed eg pass the needle under two threads, over two, under two, over two, under two, over three, again under two as at the commencement and proceed in the same manner to the end of the row. Examples examined at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Northern Ireland clearly show the diversity of weave structures learnt. Many show the students interest with each page in the sampler book decorated with additional samples of a favourite technique.

WWII Instruction Booklets

During WWII Mrs Sew and Sew encouraged women with 'Deft Darning' ideas as 'neat darns, done in good time, can make things last without making them look shabby.'²⁰

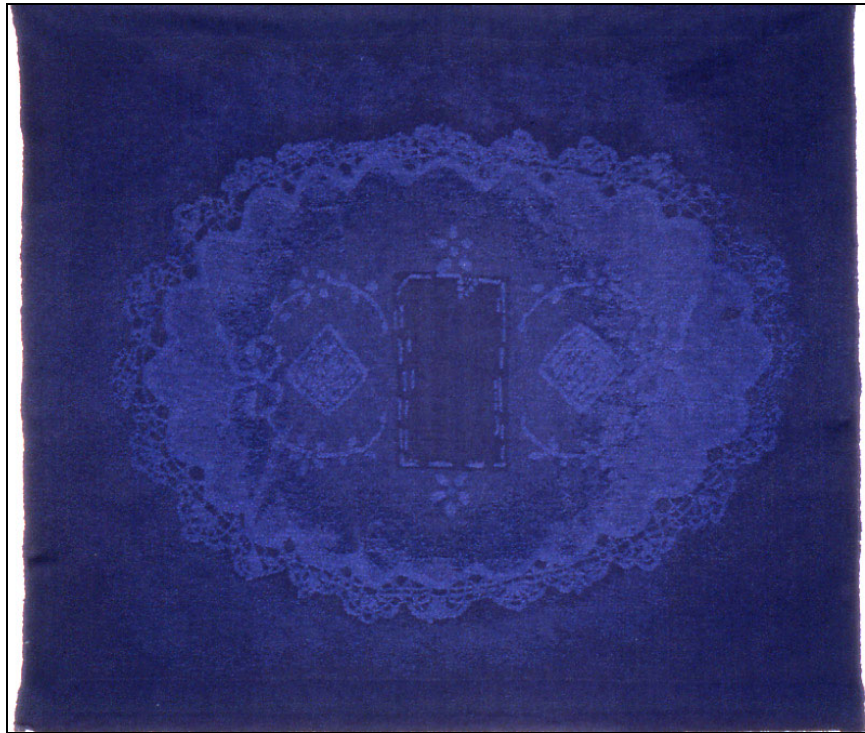
She had many ideas to extend the life of clothes, make repairs to transform fabrics and save money and war coupons.

¹⁹ Parker, Rozsika (1984) Subversive Stitch, p174.

²⁰ 'Deft Darns' brochure issued by the UK Board of Trade during WWII (not dated).

1970s Hippie Fashion and Recent Street Fashion

The Powerhouse Museum has collected a 1973 pair of patched and darned Levi Jeans representing the hippie desire to transform and embellish. Colourful embroidery and floral patches predominate the blue denim apparel proclaiming the passion and ideas of the times. Australian designers (e.g. Tsubi and Sass and Bide) have followed the more recent trend of darned and patched embellishment dominating street wear while commanding inflated prices for what previously was hidden. This contemporary embellishment plays with ideas of sustainability and recycling.



Liz Williamson, 'Dark D' oyley' Jacquard woven, 2004.

Developed from a patched and repaired d' oyley in the collection of the Tumbarumba Women's Hut.

My own work, predominately Jacquard woven textiles draws on many of the ideas embedded in this paper. Notions of visibility / invisibility of darning has arisen from this research and been developed in the woven imagery. The way darning transforms the structure and surface of cloth has been emphasised in shaped textiles for the body. Tracing and highlighting simple darns, re drawing the stitches lovingly made by my mother's hand, to transform the darn into imagery for these contemporary textiles, has proved to be a rich resource.

In conclusion, darning as embellishment and as a form of embroidery is evident from definitions and descriptions given in numerous documents and is contrary to the generally accepted idea of darning a part of the repair process. Early samplers show interest in decoration and creative new design motifs as shown by many of the examples examined in museum collections.

By tracing the notion of darning in historical references it becomes apparent that darning has rarely been invisible. Generally, the pieces preserved and collected by

museums are the results of a learning process, not the examples form life. By examining darning in historical references and collections it becomes apparent that darning is both visible and invisible. As a traditional practice its presents a concept to explore in contemporary practice, one not widely documented but rich in interpretation, like the darn itself.

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