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### **Textiles of War: Women's Commentaries on Conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan**

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Shortly after the events of September 11, 2001, patriotic imagery in the form of American flags began appearing in traditionally patterned rugs woven by Navajo women and in beadwork sold in trading posts on the Reservation. In the case of this corn maiden rug seen in figure 1, weaver Alice Begay inserted the flag in the place of a cornstalk to show her support of American troops fighting in Iraq. While the maker of the woven beaded jewelry seen in figure 2 is unknown, it is likely that the substitution of flag imagery for traditional colors and patterns was also meant to signal support for America, as well as to appeal to the pocketbook of the patriots who purchased them.



***Figure 1: Corn Maiden Rug, 2002. Churro wool. 21 ½" X 31"***  
***Photograph by Deborah Deacon.***

This was not the first time women's textiles provided a political commentary on warfare associated with Iraq and Afghanistan. During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, rugs featuring Soviet weaponry and vehicles appeared in the markets of Peshawar and were ultimately exported to America and Europe. Created by nomadic Baluch and Turkmen women who experienced the impact of war first hand, the war rugs helped the women cope with the violence surrounding their everyday lives and served as a source of income for families devastated by warfare. These women were subjected to long-term bombardment, mine fields and rocket attacks resulting in injuries, fatigue, loss of their homes, family members, livelihood and independence, and often in post-traumatic stress disorder. Thousands fled to nearby Pakistan, where they settled into refugee camps. Many of the women, who had a reputation for producing high quality knotted rugs that were valued for their use of color and elaborate

designs, continued to weave in the refugee camps, creating rugs that featured traditional designs as well as ones with images of the weapons of war.<sup>1</sup> War rugs were created in a number of different formats, ranging from traditional prayer rug size that initially included subtly placed war imagery and whose surfaces later were filled with rows of helicopters, bombers, tanks and ordnance (figure 3) or with cityscapes featuring military vehicles to smaller commercial rugs featuring maps of the country or a large AK 47 assault rifle, grenades, aircraft or military vehicles, typically on a red or white background.<sup>2</sup> Many of these rugs were made for a new consumer group – Soviet officers seeking a souvenir of their time in the region and various western military advisors and diplomats. Rugs began to be made in earnest to suit western tastes when the weavers found them to be a way to supplement their income.



***Figure 2. Beaded necklace, 2002. Seed beads on cotton thread.  
Photograph by Deborah Deacon.***

Rug weaving is a feminine craft and rugs are seen as objects of sensual pleasure. The motifs of modern warfare bring them into the male sphere, undermining the intimacy and domesticity of women's work. The representation of instruments of war gave a universal meaning to the rugs and provided the weaver with a sense of control over her chaotic world. Through this process of representation, the horror is tamed, possessed and owned. The weaver's ability to walk on her rug helped her to recognize that, while evil is a fact of life; she possessed a vitality that allowed her to survive.<sup>3</sup> The rugs reflected the essence of the Afghan world – the clash between the technology and violence of war and the reassurance brought through the creation of a domestic object like a rug. They allow the weavers to record events occurring around them, providing a sense of control and optimism for the future.

While women stopped producing war rugs at the end of the Soviet occupation in 1989, rugs with war related themes reappeared in the markets of Peshawar in 2002. Some of these small commercial rugs show support for America following the events of 9/11, depicting airliners flying into the World Trade Towers in the top portion of the rug and an aircraft carrier at the bottom, separated by the American and

<sup>1</sup> Joyce C. Ware, "The Afghan War Rugs," *FiberArts* 17(Summer 1990), p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Lee, "Threads of War," *Raw Vision* 35 (Summer 2001), p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> Ewa Kuryluk, "The Afghan War Rugs," *Arts Magazine* 63(February 1989), pp. 73-74.

Afghan flags which are united by a dove, as seen in Figure 4. Others depict new weaponry – American planes, guns and tanks. These newer rugs are often of poorer quality than the original rugs in terms of materials and colors used and the sophistication of the imagery, and are often produced by young children of both sexes.



***Figure 3. Afghan War Rug, circa 1985. Wool knotted on goat hair warp. 4' X 6'***  
***Photograph by Deborah Deacon.***

The war rugs and Navajo weavings are not the only textiles created by women as commentary on war. Traditionally warfare has been seen as a gendered activity, affecting the men who fought but allowing women to escape unscathed. For generations, men have left their homes and families to fight and die for their country and its principles while their wives, mother, and daughters have remained safely at home, seemingly unaffected by war. Men experienced war, wrote about war, photographed and painted war. Artistic depictions of warfare, done by male artists like Leonardo da Vinci, Matthew Brady and Pablo Picasso lionize the winners, trivialize the losers and largely ignore the women involved on both sides of the conflict. While scholars have analyzed such works by male artists, they have largely ignored works about war created by women artists. It was assumed that women were not interested in such depictions, an incorrect assumption. Feminist scholarship has proven otherwise. Theresa Kaminski has noted, “War can be seen as a gendering activity: as boundaries between war zones and the home front blur, war involves and changes women as much as it does men.”<sup>4</sup> Women in fact were directly impacted by war and in many instances they expressed this impact through art, including traditional women’s “crafts” such as weaving and quilting.

This paper presents a representative sampling of the way in which American women textile artists have reacted to the latest conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq by making war imagery the subject matter for their textiles. While Afghan war rugs tell the story of the impact of war on women, American women’s

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<sup>4</sup> Theresa Kaminski, *Prisoners in Paradise: American Women in the Wartime South Pacific* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), p. 243.



works tell the story of women's reactions to a war being fought on foreign soil as well as their reactions to that war. American women have a long history of using traditional textile arts to show their support for or opposition to warfare, beginning in colonial times. During the American Revolution, women knitted socks and caps, and sewed shirts for the troops. Many showed their support for the rebellion by creating quilts and coverlets with patriotic names like Whig Rose and Washington's Victory. Patricia Mainardi noted that there was more than one man of Tory political persuasion who unknowingly slept under his wife's Whig Rose quilt.<sup>5</sup> And of course we all know the story of Betsy Ross, who along with other women like Mary Pickersgill and Anne King showed their support of the new country by sewing the earliest American flags. This tradition of using textiles to support the American cause during war continued through World War I and II, but diminished during the Vietnam War.



**Figure 4. 9/11 War Rug, 2002. Wool knotted on cotton warp. 24 1/4" X 35 3/4"**  
**Photograph by Deborah Deacon.**

The use of textiles to show support for America's involvement in war was revived with the beginning of the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the months following 9/11, school groups, quilting clubs and individuals from across the country created quilts to show their respect for the lives lost, appreciation for the efforts of rescue workers and emergency services personnel, and support for the survivors. Within a year, more than 60 quilts were sent to the Pentagon and are now part of the Pentagon quilt collection; a number were exhibited at the Women In Military Service for America (WIMSA) Museum from March 2003 to April 2004.

Similar exhibitions held around the country included textiles created by women who supported the war effort. For example, Arizonan Evelyn Link, who served as an Air Force officer during the Vietnam War, created her wall quilt, *Patriotic Strength From a Tattered Flag*, in the days following the terrorist

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Mainardi, *Quilts: The Great American Art* (San Pedro, CA: Miles and Weir, 1978), pp. 331-334.

attacks. The tattered flag is a recycled priority mail envelope made of Tyvek and she used tulle for the now-destroyed towers, framing the piece in fabric featuring a cityscape in somber tones of black, grey and white.

In 2003, the hospital ship USS COMFORT (T-AH 20) was deployed to the Persian Gulf to provide medical support during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Among its crew of 1200 doctors, nurses, civilian mariners, corpsmen and sailors was physical therapist LT Paula Godes, an avid quilter who decided to make a quilt to document the ship's activities. She partnered with LCDR Patricia McKay, an orthopedic surgeon and quilter who had brought her sewing machine along on the deployment.<sup>6</sup> The resulting quilt, which measures 12 feet by 11 feet 6 inches, took a total of 2000 hours to complete. It is composed of 34 blocks - among them are 4 flags that provide medical statistics from the deployment, 14 friendship stars and a photograph of the ship at the center. The quilt was assembled onboard Comfort but the finishing was done by quilters from the Falls Church Quilt Unlimited Guild of Virginia. The quilt shows that the use of this traditional women's art form has come full circle, as military women who were officially participating directly in warfare for the first time, quilted in support of their own war.

Native born Americans were not the only women who quilted in support of the war effort. In 2003, Melanie Gadner gathered a number of Afghan widows living in California to propose a joint quilting project between them and war widows still living in Afghanistan. The women in Afghanistan would create a quilt square from materials that were available to them. The squares would be assembled into one large quilt in California.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately 150 quilt pieces were collected, along with numerous photographs, letters and the names of the women who created them. These quilt pieces were not traditional blocks – some women sent small pieces of clothing, baby burkas, knitted booties and even pieces of rugs to be included in the project. The pieces represent the women's resilience as well as their ideas about human rights, empowerment, equality, peace, hardship and freedom. The quilt was completed in April 2006 and has toured the country, part of the program of the Foundation for Self-Reliance that raises money for these war widows, who are among the most poverty-stricken in the world.

Around the country, women banded together to create quilts to honor those who died in battle as well as those who suffered serious physical and emotional injuries as the result of their service. Groups like American Hero Quilts and Home of the Brave have delivered thousands of quilts to patients in VA hospitals around the country and to the families of fallen military personnel, ranging from full size quilts to lap quilts suitable for use with a wheelchair.<sup>8</sup> The quilts give comfort to those who have fought, helping them feel that their service has been appreciated.

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<sup>6</sup> Women in Military Service to America (WIMSA) files and [www.womensmemorial.org/H&C/Exhibits/comfortquilt.html](http://www.womensmemorial.org/H&C/Exhibits/comfortquilt.html) (accessed March 1, 2010). The *USS Comfort* is San Clemente class supertanker outfitted as the seventh largest hospital in the world, the size of three football fields. It houses 1,000 treatment beds, a 50 bed emergency room, and 12 operating rooms. Commissioned December 1, 1987, it is the third ship named *Comfort*; the previous two served during World War I and World War II. During the Persian Gulf conflict, medical personnel treated 8,000 outpatients and 700 inpatients, conducted 337 surgeries, filled 7,000 prescriptions, conducted 17,000 laboratory tests, processed 1,340 radiographic studies and performed 1,619 dental procedures.

<sup>7</sup> Melanie Gadner, "Afghan Freedom Quilt: Silenced Voices of the Afghan Diaspora," *Woven Witness* (San Jose: San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles, 2007), pp. 22-23.

<sup>8</sup> "Teams and Projects for Angel Volunteers," Soldier's Angels, <http://oldiersangels.org/teams-programs.html> (accessed July 11, 2010). The Soldier's Angels also sponsor the Salute to Heroes and Angels Museum in San Antonio that documents the experiences of military members engaged in the War on Terror and the home front.

Quilters were not the only women who expressed their support for the victims of the terrorist attacks or the military personnel fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. Navajo weavers created American flag rugs in a number of different sizes, allowing both the weavers and those who purchased the rugs to show their patriotism. Women knitters again rallied to provide aid and comfort to the troops. The non-profit organization "Soldier's Angels" has provided hundreds of "lapghans," hats, scarves and slippers to wounded veterans in VA facilities across the country. In 2008, Marlys Anderson founded "Caps for Soldiers," a group which has knitted thousands of wool stocking caps for troops serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. The caps, which are worn underneath a helmet, provide warmth in winter and can be wet in summer for cooling.<sup>9</sup> While the caps are not regulation, they are so popular with the troops that the National Museum of the Marine Corps provides free patterns for knitted caps to its visitors.<sup>10</sup>

Not all of the textiles created during the war in Iraq and Afghanistan are created in support of the war effort. A number of exhibitions in the early years of the war contained pieces that protested U.S. involvement in the region. In 2002, the Dahl Arts Center in Rapid City featured the exhibition "Heart to Heart: Women in Conversation about War," which included textile works like weaver Linda Lewis' self-portrait *War*, a beaded homage to Edvard Munch's *The Scream*, which revealed her negative feelings about the war.<sup>11</sup> Photographer Masumi Hayashi chose Marian Lea McKinney's entry *Social Stamina* as her Juror's Choice. The camouflage-patterned strapless evening gown with its hot pink net slip symbolized the evolution of a modern woman's role from observer of war to direct participant in war, a soldier who is also a woman, wife and mother.

The 2003 exhibition *Stitches of War* at Arizona State University featured a number of textiles that protested U.S. involvement in the war.<sup>12</sup> Among them was print maker Karen Fiorito's *Casualty of War*, which features silkscreened images of green plastic toy soldiers on handmade camouflage fabric. An anti-war activist, Fiorito's work is a commentary on the commercialization of war and popularization of camouflage in contemporary fashion.

Quilter Nelly Richard-Lopes, who was a small child in France during World War II, created *War is Evil* after watching the opening days of the war on her television. In speaking of her quilt, she commented:

War is evil and terrifying for those involved. War has been on all our minds. War has actually taken place again and it brought back terrible memories of World War II, when I was still a child – a child old enough to remember. I had to sort of exorcise it.<sup>13</sup>

When first encountering the quilt, it takes a few minutes to recognize what is occurring within the brightly colored wall hanging, which features black Stealth bombers releasing their bombs over a lush valley. The bombs explode in vivid blasts of orange, red, and yellow, creating craters in the brightly colored ground. In the foreground are images of death and destruction.

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<sup>9</sup> Marlys Anderson, Caps for Soldiers, [www.capsforsoldiers.com](http://www.capsforsoldiers.com) (accessed July 2, 2010) and interview by Deborah Deacon, February 9, 2010. Appropriate colors for caps are black, shades of brown, navy and dark green.

<sup>10</sup> Bonnie Long from Knit Wits in Springfield, IL designed the "Knitting for Marines Helmet Liners" pattern. The pattern is available at [www.usmcmuseum.org/supportmarines.asp](http://www.usmcmuseum.org/supportmarines.asp).

<sup>11</sup> The Dahl Center for the Arts, *Heart to Heart: Women in Conversation About War*. The exhibition was held in conjunction with the production of "A Piece of My Heart," Shirley Lauro's powerful play about five women who served in Vietnam. The play, a production of the Black Hills Community Theater, ran from February 8-24, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Deborah Deacon, *Stitches of War* Gallery Guide, ASU Anthropology Museum, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

In addition to her piece *War*, Linda Lewis also exhibited her work *Women Up in Arms*. Lewis silk screened images of knives, guns, Arabic women wearing burkas and American flags onto brightly colored hand towels commercially printed with kitchen motifs to show her disapproval of war in general and of recent American events in Iraq.

A number of contemporary American knitters have become polarized by the war and many have expressed their protests against the war in two and three dimensions. Lisa Ann Auerbach is an artist, social activist and self-described radical knitter whose Little Red Blog of Revolutionary Knitting is a treasure trove of social-conscious knitting.<sup>14</sup> Her website Steal This Sweater features numerous sweaters sporting anti-war slogans including “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition” and “My favorite thing about the war on terror is the language of the war.” Her best known work, however, is *Body Count Mittens*, which she began making in 2005. The patterned mittens feature the day, month and year, the number of dead, and an automatic weapon on the mitten’s top. The numbers on a pair of mittens differ, the result of the additional deaths that occurred as she knitted the pair.

In 2007, the San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles sponsored a series of exhibits that highlighted women textile artists’ reactions to war. Among the quilts, tapestries, clothing and flags exhibited was Dixie Brown’s *Family Portrait*, a collection of hand-knit three dimensional bombs done in stocking knit stitch in shades of brown, grey and black.<sup>15</sup> Arranged both in flight and after landing, the soft sculptures reflect the contrast between the destruction brought by warfare and the domestic sphere, which can bear the brunt of the destruction that results from warfare. While knitting is typically seen as two-dimensional, Brown finds that creating in three dimensions allows her to visualize another viewpoint on a topic.

Another textile exhibited at that same time was the *9/11 Memorial Tapestry*, which honors those affected by the events of September 11, 2001 while it decries the results of war and champions peace.<sup>16</sup> The large-scale piece was an assemblage of one hundred smaller tapestries made by artists from twenty countries. Included among the individual tapestries were images of a weeping Statue of Liberty by Diana Wolf, several depictions of the World Trade Center towers in flames, and doves and blocks featuring the word “peace.”

The activities of contemporary textile artists bring women’s commentary on war through art full circle, uniting women across the ages with their colonial sister artists, showing the impact of war on women and their reactions to it. Some of this art was created to show support for American efforts during time of war or to oppose American war efforts. It also documented the war effort, showing those on the home front who kept society viable during times of war or the experiences of those directly supporting the war effort. These textiles also tell the story of historical events surrounding American warfare, serving as a touchstone of cultural patriotism and pride. They most definitely show that war is a subject of interest for American women textile artists.

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<sup>14</sup> Ellen Warren, “Making Trouble,” *Chicago Tribune* (March 31, 2007), [http://featuresblog.chicagotribune.com/shopping\\_ellen\\_warren/2007/03\\_making\\_trouble.html](http://featuresblog.chicagotribune.com/shopping_ellen_warren/2007/03_making_trouble.html) (accessed July 11, 2010). The mitten pattern is available on Auerbach’s website at [www.lisaannauerbach.com/projects/sweater/sweaters.html](http://www.lisaannauerbach.com/projects/sweater/sweaters.html) (accessed July 11, 2010.)

<sup>15</sup> Dixie Brown, Fiber Dimensions, [www.fiberdimensions.com/brown.htm](http://www.fiberdimensions.com/brown.htm) (accessed September 18, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> San Jose Museum of Quilts and Textiles brochure, July 17-September 23 2007. The three exhibitions that explored themes of war, patriotism, and politics were: *Weavings of War*; *Woven Witness: Afghan War Rugs*; and *Patriotic Art*.



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