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The Fabric of Myth

21 June – 7 September 2008



Gallery 1

Introduction

The Fabric of Myth begins by exploring the significance of textiles in classical mythology. These myths shed light on the power of fabric to communicate universal themes across time, from 400BC to the present day.

Ariadne's thread unlocked the mystery of the labyrinth; Penelope's loyalty to her husband Odysseus was tied to her loom as she wove and unwove by day and night; the Three Fates controlled the lifespan of both men and gods by spinning yarn, drawing out thread and cutting it. These narratives have stood the test of time.

From these classical beginnings *The Fabric of Myth* will trace the symbolic power of such characters and the themes they represent. The figure of the mortal Arachne, transformed into a spider for challenging the goddess Athena to a weaving contest, can be seen to represent

an early embodiment of the artist. She in turn has gone on to inspire artists such as Louise Bourgeois and Elaine Reichek.

The imprisoned Philomela from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* turns to weaving to communicate her plight. This theme resonates through the embroidery of Mary Queen of Scots during her incarceration, and more recently in the work of Arthur Bispo Do Rosário, Ray Materson and Delaine Le Bas.

The fabric of myth continues to weave a symbolic path, and like the myths themselves, finds new relevance today.

Ariadne's thread

*'tis said the Labyrinth held a path woven...
with a thousand ways*

Virgil, Aeneid

By giving the guiding thread to Theseus, Ariadne empowers him in his dangerous journey into the labyrinth to slay the minotaur and return to safety. The thread maps out a journey of protection and liberation.

For Louise Bourgeois needle and thread become part of a symbolic language. From her early background working in tapestry restoration in France to her later career as an artist, the thread goes beyond everyday functionality and begins a journey of transformation.

Ariadne

5th century AD
Woollen tapestry
Kunsthistorisches Museum
Wien, Antikensammlung

Ariadne is depicted after the drama of the Cretan labyrinth and her subsequent abandonment by Theseus. She has become the consort of the god Dionysos and wears his golden diadem.

Only fragments and traces of textile remain from Classical Greece. In contrast, the dry Egyptian sands have conserved many significant examples such as this Coptic tapestry. The depiction of Ariadne provides us with a link to the Classical Age. Its function is uncertain: it may have been incorporated into a large tapestry hanging or attached to a garment for ceremonial use.

Ariadne and Theseus at the entrance to the Labyrinth

1563
Image reproduced from
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*
(ed. J. Spreng)
Illustrated by Virgil Solis,
Frankfurt am Main
Woodcut, based on
an earlier woodcut by
Bernard Salomon
The Bodleian Library,
University of Oxford,
Douce O 36, fol. 94r

Needle (Fuseau)

1992
Steel, flax, thread
and wire
Galerie Karsten Greve,
Cologne

Louise Bourgeois

Louise Bourgeois' family worked in the Aubusson tapestry industry in France. From a young age Bourgeois herself carried out the repairs and redesign of antique tapestries in the family's workshop. This formative experience shaped her artistic career. The needle and thread from her past have been used to create a large body of fabric sculptures and the themes of sewing, spinning and weaving can be seen to be carried through much of her work's conceptual ideology.

Needle (Fuseau) symbolically links Bourgeois' past with her own creativity. The needle's dramatic

armature and flax ready to be drawn out into thread suggest future possibilities and the potential to restore and remake. This process forms a direct link to mythological weavers such as Penelope whose weaving and unweaving became a powerful creative and symbolic act.

Chaucer's 'Legend of Good Women' – Ariadne and Lucretia

1864

Sepia wash, over pencil on brown washed paper
Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery

Edward Burne-Jones

Burne-Jones was part of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, and was particularly interested in the representation of myths. Ruskin is said to have remarked that he had developed a command over 'the entire range of Northern and Greek mythology'. Like many of the other Pre-Raphaelites, Burne-Jones was also interested in depicting romantic evocations of legends. He would go on to work with William Morris' workshop on a series of tapestries depicting *The Holy Grail* (Birmingham Museums and

Art Gallery), and also produced a large-scale series of paintings based on the story of Sleeping Beauty, known as *The Legend of the Briar Rose* (Buscot Park).

Burne-Jones' stylised pencil drawing is one of a series of seven studies, six of which were used for the bay window of the Combination Room at Peterhouse College, Cambridge. Seen here with Lucretia, Ariadne has been depicted with the ball of thread that saves Theseus – an archetypal benevolent heroine.

Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis is a consistent theme throughout classical mythology. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* both gods and mortals are part of an unstable world which is constantly undergoing transformation. Arachne, challenging the goddess Athena to a weaving contest, is humbled and transformed into a spider. Significantly the goddess and sorceress, Circe, weaves at her loom at the same time as weaving plots to ensnare and transform men.

The mythic and magical power of thread also undergoes metamorphosis: from Greek vase painting and illustrated manuscripts, to embroidery and tapestry. In William Morris' tapestry, *The Woodpecker*, both text and image have been united in fabric form.

William Morris

The Woodpecker
1885
Tapestry designed by
William Morris and woven
by Morris & Company
William Morris Gallery,
London

Morris' design for this tapestry takes Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as its inspiration. Circe again weaves her magic in Ovid's account of King Picus, turned by the sorceress into a woodpecker for not returning her amorous advances. Morris' own verse is woven into the tapestry scroll,

*I once a King and chief
Now am the tree-bark's thief,
Ever 'twixt trunk and leaf
Chasing the prey*

William Morris, *Poems by the Way*, 1891

This tapestry is one of few to have been designed solely by Morris himself (apart from the birds which were designed by Philip Webb). It

was woven by William Knight and William Sleath at Morris' Merton Abbey workshop.

Morris was not interested in mimicking the subtleties of paint in tapestry form (as seen in the Flemish tapestry opposite) and reacted against the industrial revolution and designs woven on industrial looms. In his lecture on *The Lesser Arts of Life* he vehemently referred to the Gobelins tapestry workshop in Paris as reducing weaving from fine art to an 'upholsterer's toy'. He looked instead to medieval examples for inspiration, and valued the authenticity of the weaver's hand itself.

Odysseus and Circe
4th century BC
Boeotian (Cabirion)
black figure skyphos
(drinking vessel)
Ashmolean Museum,
Oxford

Most of our representations of weaving in the ancient world come from the black and red figure vases of Classical Greece. On this drinking vessel associated with the cult of the Cabeiri at Thebes in Boeotia, eastern Greece, the sorceress Circe is weaving a robe and also a plot to ensnare Odysseus. She has already turned

his companions into swine and is about to offer him a cup of drugged wine. Circe's upright loom is of a type that had been in existence since the late Bronze Age (1500BC). In the context of Homer's *The Odyssey* it exists both as a familiar household object and a metaphor implying that Circe is also a weaver of magic.

Elizabeth Hardwick, Countess of Shrewsbury

Europa and the Bull

c.1580

Embroidered panel
Hardwick Hall, the
Devonshire Collection
(acquired through the
National Land Fund
and transferred to The
National Trust in 1959)

This panel depicts the story of Europa and the Bull from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Having fallen in love with Europa, the god Zeus changed shape into a benevolent bull as part of her father's herd of cattle. Unsuspecting, Europa fell in love with the tame bull and is seen here being carried off to sea. This subject was one of the narratives illustrated by Arachne during her weaving contest with Athena (patron of the arts and goddess of weaving) to highlight the misdemeanours carried out by the gods on mortals.

This panel which has Bess of Hardwick's ES monogram clearly embroidered into the design, was most probably completed during Mary Queen of Scots' incarceration within Bess' household. For a period of some fourteen years Mary was under the charge of both Bess and her husband George Talbot, sixth Earl of Shrewsbury. At first the two women were on good terms and spent a large part of their time together devising and completing needlework designs. Mary was more widely read than Bess, and may well have

suggested this design, based as it was on a woodcut after Bernard Salomon and published in Virgil Solis' Latin version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, also exhibited here.

The embroidered panel would have been used as a cushion cover. To reflect Bess' household, Europa and her attendants have been updated to wear the then contemporary style of dress, in contrast to the more diaphanous classical draperies depicted in the manuscript illustration.

Europa and the Bull

1563

From Ovid,
Metamorphoses
(ed. J. Spreng)
Illustrated by Virgil Solis,
Frankfurt am Main
Woodcut, based on
an earlier woodcut by
Bernard Salomon
The Bodleian Library,
University of Oxford,
Douce O 36, fol. 36r

Odysseus and Circe on the island of Aeaëa

c.1550–1600

Flemish Narrative Tapestry

Jack & Linda Keenan,
Intaglio Antiques,
San Antonio, Texas

This tapestry depicts two scenes from Homer's *The Odyssey*. The first scene, in the foreground, illustrates the arrival of Odysseus and his men on the island of Aeaëa, inhabited by the goddess Circe. The second scene, in the background, depicts their departure by ship and subsequent encounter with the sirens, who bewitched men by the sound of their voices.

Odysseus is here seen gesturing and drawing his sword towards Circe, who is about to work her magic. A number of Odysseus' men have been turned into swine at the hands of the goddess. Another version of this

tapestry suggests the composition would have extended beyond the reclining Circe to show her preparing a potion for Odysseus with a maidservant.

Mythological, historical and allegorical scenes were popular themes for tapestries made for secular use. This narrative tapestry was produced in Flanders, one of the great tapestry-weaving centres in the West. Later, in the early 17th century, the painter Rubens settled in Antwerp and became a prominent figure in the tapestry trade – under his influence many classical and religious narratives were commissioned as tapestries.

Metamorphosis

2003

Embroidery

Private Collection

Alice Kettle

Metamorphosis forms part of a series of works by Alice Kettle entitled *The Odyssey*. These works are directly inspired by the characters and scenes within Homer's epic. The work of Alice Kettle, formerly a painter, uses stitching in a free, painterly manner. Largely machine made, but with some hand stitching, the artist often works and reworks

elements of the designs, building up tension within the fabric. This method produces pieces that defy the usual flat nature of fabric, and take on a sculptural dimension. *Metamorphosis* hovers between states of being and becoming, and can be seen to represent both the artist's method of working and the shifting states of Homer's narrative and characters.

**Arachne and Athena
weaving contest**

1497

From The Collected

Works of Ovid

Illuminated manuscript

Viscount Coke and the

Trustees of the Holkham

Estate

This manuscript depicts Ovid's cautionary tale of hubris involving Arachne and the goddess Athena (or Pallas as she is referred to here). As Ovid recounts, Arachne, the girl from Lydia, boasts of her talent for weaving. She claims her skill rivals that of Athena (patron of the arts and goddess of weaving) and challenges the goddess to a contest.

Seen in the first panels of the illustration, Athena disguises herself as an old woman and advises Arachne to reconsider her claim. When she still refuses, Athena reveals her true identity to the girl, and they begin the competition.

In Ovid's description Athena weaves scenes showing the

authority of the gods, and in the four corners of the tapestry, the outcome of mortals who have challenged them. Arachne conversely depicts the misdemeanours of the gods including the stories of Europa and the Bull and Leda and the Swan.

Angered by her skill and the scenes she chooses to depict, Athena strikes her with her shuttle.

In shame, Ovid tells us, Arachne attempts to hang herself but is spared by Athena who instead transforms her into a spider. Here we see the body of the spider emerging from the withering dress of Arachne who is ultimately caught in her own web, confined to endless weaving.

Ananse Textile

c.1970

Batik textile

The Whitworth Art Gallery,
University of Manchester

Traditions converge in this batik textile, produced in Manchester for the West African textile market. Unlike Arachne, punished for her hubris, Ananse (Ananu in Oji culture) the spider, trickster, spinner of tales, sits within the centre of stars and moon, objects of his creation.

In Ashanti belief, Ananse is the king of stories, controlling literally, a world-wide web of tales.

Elaine Reichek

Sampler (Ovid's Weavers)
1996
Embroidery on linen
Collection of Melva
Bucksbaum and Raymond
Learsy

Working in a variety of forms – installation, photography, embroidery and knitting – Reichek's work often explores the labours traditionally associated with women and explores how different cultures operate within modes of expression.

By choosing an embroidered sampler to reference two of Ovid's most savage tales involving women, Reichek contrasts clichéd female handiwork with a defiant female voice. *Ovid's Weavers* references the tales of Arachne

and Philomela in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Philomela's defiant and resourceful expression of grief is particularly apposite as a symbol of female authorship in the face of adversity.

In the *Metamorphoses*, Procne (sister to Philomela) marries Tereus. After leaving her family to begin her new life, Procne longs to be with her sister again, and asks her husband to bring her home. On the journey back Tereus rapes Philomela, and, in order to stop her telling anyone of his crime,

cuts out her tongue and imprisons her in a hideaway. As Reichek's sampler pronounces, 'desperation can invent' and weaving on a primitive loom, Philomela spells out the letters that 'denounce the savage crime'. Ultimately the gods cast judgement over all three characters. After Philomela and Procne feed Tereus his own son, they are all turned into birds – hence Reichek's use of the bird as embroidered symbol.

Edward Burne-Jones

**Chaucer's 'Legend
of Good Women' –
Thisbe and Philomela**
1864
Pencil on toned paper
Birmingham Museums &
Art Gallery

Louise Bourgeois

Spider Woman

2004

Drypoint on cloth

Collection of the Artist,
courtesy Harlan & Weaver,
New York

Just as Bourgeois has spoken of the needle as a symbol of repair, her language in relation to the spider also describes a repairer.

I came from a family of repairers. The spider is a repairer. If you bash into the web of a spider, she doesn't go mad. She weaves and repairs it.

Louise Bourgeois

In this way the spider takes on

the role of maternal protector, who, like Arachne and Penelope, compulsively weaves and reweaves. Bourgeois' spider sculptures are often titled 'maman' and can be seen nurturing future offspring. Spiders do act as predators, however, overshadowing architectural cells containing the tapestry fragments which, like *Needle (Fuseau)*, lead back to the artist's past.

William Holman Hunt

The Lady of Shalott

1857

Relief print on paper,
engraved by J. Thompson
Tate, presented by Harold
Hartley, 1925

Hunt was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. As well as painting religious subjects and naturalistic scenes he also based a number of works on poems such as Keats' *The Eve of St Agnes* and Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*. This etching was based on a painting which was one of the artist's last major works.

Tennyson's poem describes the Lady of Shalott weaving a web from within a castle on a hill. She weaves the view of Camelot which is shown to her through a mirror. If she looks directly out of the

window, a curse will fall upon her. The scene depicted here shows the curse being unleashed after she is tempted to look out of the window at the knight, Sir Lancelot, whom she has heard singing below.

Caught in her own web, the Lady of Shalott can be seen to take on the characteristics of Arachne – punished for her actions and irrevocably trapped in the weaving of her own plot. In this way, both characters form a direct link to the Three Fates of Ancient Greece, whose actions are linked to destiny.

*...but there in the future
he shall endure all that his destiny and the heavy Spinners
spun for him with the thread at his birth...*

Homer, *The Odyssey*

Gallery 4

Three Fates

1983–84

Tapestry woven by
Pat Taylor and Fiona
Abercrombie

Cotton warp, linen and
wool weft

The Henry Moore
Foundation, acquired 1984

Henry Moore

The *Three Fates* or Moirai exercised supreme control over the lives of both mortals and gods in Greek mythology. They were Klotho the maiden who spins the thread of life, Lachesis the matron who allots its length, and Atropos the crone who cuts the life-thread. In Homer's *The Odyssey*, Odysseus' fate is bound by the Three Fates who have spun his destiny at his birth.

The *Three Fates* was one of an initial series of eight tapestries

which were based on drawings by Moore and commissioned by the artist and his family. The drawings were interpreted by weavers at the West Dean Tapestry Studio in West Sussex. The drawing on which the tapestry was based is an example of Moore's 'sectional line' technique which used line, rather than light and shade, to delineate form. The *Three Fates* tapestry was woven by Pat Taylor and Fiona Abercrombie, and took eighteen months to complete.

Clothbound

In Classical Greece women conducted their domestic lives in the *gynaikonitides* (women's quarters). For Penelope, this realm became a place of strategy where she found expression at her loom. Likewise Philomela, imprisoned by Tereus, weaves her plight on a loom under lock and key. *The Fabric of Myth* examines the idea of confinement as a catalyst for creativity in fabric form.

Often those who create in institutionalised circumstances do not perceive themselves as artists and utilise materials from unconventional sources. Ray Materson, serving a long prison term in the USA, constructed his embroidered life story from the lowliest of materials, recycled socks. Bispo Do Rosário, interned in a psychiatric hospital, transformed his surroundings into a studio, sourcing his materials from the objects around him and the threads of hospital uniforms. The imprisoned Mary Queen of Scots, found expression in embroidering images of her life and the possibility of freedom.

In the wrapped objects and cocoons of Judith Scott we see work produced after thirty-six years of institutionalisation. Despite being offered alternatives, Judith chose her materials from studio detritus. From discarded objects she transformed her life.

All the work on display in this gallery aspires to reach beyond the confined space of its production. In Bispo Do Rosário's *Presentation Cape* we see the cloak in which he would present himself to his creator on Judgement Day. All of Bispo's work is addressed to the eternal, reaching upwards, offering the salvaged objects of this world to the next.

Leonid Tishkov's *Divers from Heaven*, on the other hand, reaches down to us. With their helmets and breathing tubes constructed from scraps of old material found after his mother's death, the air the divers breathe is different from that of our material world.

Mary Queen of Scots

Confined to a life under constant scrutiny in the Hardwick household and severely restricted in her letter writing, Mary devoted herself to embroidery. Needlework was a primary means of communicating her predicament as well as providing intellectual stimulation.

Mary sourced many of her images from books of engravings such as Gesner's *Icones Animalium* (1560) and adapted them to suit her needs. The dandelion motif,

signifying the passing of time and initialled by Bess of Hardwick, may have been created by Mary and was probably conceived under her guidance. Initials often signified ownership rather than authorship. The portrait of her pet dog, Jupiter, brings us close to the tragic queen. At her execution, a small dog ran out from under her skirts and placed itself between her severed head and torso.

The Oxburgh Hangings, Monkey Motif

c.1570

Linen canvas embroidered with silk, edged with gold tissue and mounted on velvet
Victoria and Albert Museum, presented by the Art Fund

The Oxburgh Hangings, Dog Motif

c.1570

Linen canvas embroidered with silk, edged with gold tissue
Victoria and Albert Museum, presented by the Art Fund

Elizabeth Shrewsbury (Bess of Hardwick)

The Oxburgh Hangings, Dandelion Motif

c.1570

Linen canvas embroidered with silk, edged with gold tissue and mounted on velvet
Victoria and Albert Museum, presented by the Art Fund

Ray Materson

These miniature embroideries were created from the recycled thread of old socks.

Serving a lengthy prison term for drug-related crime, Ray Materson had few materials at his disposal. He traded a pack of cigarettes for a pair of old socks, converted the plastic lid of

a coffee container into a sewing hoop, procured a needle from a co-operative guard and began to create the story of his life in thread.

His story recounts his struggles with the law, drug abuse, imprisonment and his subsequent redemption and transformation.

The House on York Road
1994
Embroidery
Collection of William
Louis-Dreyfus

**Once a Young Man
(Dad in Central Park)**
1996
Embroidery
Collection of William
Louis-Dreyfus

First Cigarette
1992
Embroidery
Collection of
Sandi Blanda

School Daze
1992
Embroidery
Collection of William
Louis-Dreyfus

Don't Get Pulled In
1992
Embroidery
Collection of Peter
S. Brams, New York

**Tiny: Life x 6, The Noon
Watch J2**
1997
Embroidery
Collection of William
Louis-Dreyfus

The Trailer Visit
1994
Embroidery
Collection of William
Louis-Dreyfus

Metamorphosis III
2007
Embroidery
Private collection

Judith Scott

Untitled

1990

Cane, bent wood,
cotton rug yarn
Collection Irish Museum
of Modern Art, on loan
from the Musgrave Kinley
Outsider Art Collection

Untitled

1990

Yarn
Collection Irish Museum
of Modern Art, on loan
from the Musgrave Kinley
Outsider Art Collection

The meaning of these objects can only be imagined. Judith Scott was born with Down's syndrome and was separated abruptly from her family and twin sister at the age of seven. She spent the next thirty-six years of her life in a series of bleak institutional settings.

In 1986, her sister regained custody of her sibling and Judith was offered the possibility to use the studio at Creative Growth in Oakland, California. After so many years without creative stimuli Judith remained indifferent to all the visual media presented to her

until, by chance, she came upon a mound of discarded yarn. From that moment, until her death in 2006, Judith became engaged in a concentrated, compulsive and ceaseless creative activity uniquely her own. This took the form of binding and enclosing various found objects, which ranged from small things (like car keys) to items her own size. Once each cocoon-like form was complete Judith moved on to the next and showed no interest in the fate of its predecessor. The creative process was all-important.

Arthur Bispo Do Rosário

Manto da Apresentação (Presentation Cape)

Date Unknown

Fabric, thread, paper
and metal

Collection Museu

Bispo Do Rosário Arte
Contemporânea,
prefeitura da cidade do
Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

Bispo Do Rosário envisioned the imminent apocalypse of mankind. His role was to gather the things of human experience and present them before God on Judgement Day.

Confined to a psychiatric hospital in Rio de Janeiro for fifty years, Bispo collected the detritus of everyday life. Old hospital uniforms were unravelled to provide the blue thread that would become his writing and drawing material. Sheets and blankets were transformed into banners

embroidered with memories of his life as a sailor, boxer and handyman.

His ultimate creation, taking decades to complete, is his *Presentation Cape*. This robe was adorned with the names of all the people he knew in his life, images of places seen and imagined, embroidered versions of objects he created. Bispo's intention was to literally wrap the world around himself in his role as a witness for mankind when he stood before God.

**Uma Obra Tão Importante
Que Levou Anos Para Ser
Escrita...**

**(A Work So Important It
Took Years to Write...)**

1986

Wood, fabric, metal,
thread and plastic

Collection Museu

Bispo Do Rosário Arte

Contemporânea,

prefeitura da cidade do

Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

**Cama de Romeu e Julieta
(The Bed of Romeo and
Juliet)**

Date Unknown

Wood, fabric, metal,
thread and foam

Collection Museu

Bispo Do Rosário Arte

Contemporânea,

prefeitura da cidade do

Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

**Navios de Guerra
(Battleships)**

Date Unknown

Wood, cloth, metal,
thread and plastic

Collection Museu

Bispo Do Rosário Arte

Contemporânea,

prefeitura da cidade do

Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

Gallery 4

Divers from Heaven

2005–2006

Textile and photographs

Courtesy of the Artist

Leonid Tishkov

Utilising old photographs and scraps of fabric found after his mother's death, Tishkov's *Divers From Heaven* refers to the future of man in cosmic creation, as expressed in the writing of the radical spiritual thinker, Nikolai Fyodorov (1829–1903). Fyodorov speaks of a time when '...the earth will begin to give back those whom it has swallowed up and will people the heavenly starry worlds with them'. (Nikolai Feodorov: *What was man created for?* Lausanne 1990)

Weaving Memory

*We saw, as unperceived we took our stand,
The backward labours of her faithless hand*

Homer, *The Odyssey*

The character of Penelope in Homer's *The Odyssey* has remained a constant source of fascination for both artists and scholars.

While her husband Odysseus was away fighting in the Trojan War, Penelope was beset by suitors who tried to convince her of his death and her consequent need to remarry. In order to ward off these advances, Penelope devised a strategy to weave and unweave a shroud for her father-in-law Laertes, telling the suitors she would remarry once the garment was complete.

All day she remained in the women's quarters weaving, while at night she unpicked the threads at her loom. The

suitors were alerted to her plot by one of her handmaids and she was forced to finish her work. One of the suitors, Amphimedon, described the final woven shroud as gleaming 'like the sun or moon' – a description which mirrors the method of the shroud's production.

This capacity for fabric to take on the circumstances of its creation and communicate across time goes beyond the printed page. Contemporary artists can be seen to appropriate ancient textile traditions to new effect. Leonid Tishkov creates a mythical being from both his family's textile history and the traditions of his homeland in the Urals.

Delaine Le Bas' installation *Gynaikonitides* (Women's Quarters) references Penelope's private domain as the place where she was forced to defend herself against her suitors and devise her strategy of weaving and unweaving. As a territory of female captivity, defence and creativity,

Gynaikontides also evokes the narratives of Arachne and Philomela at the same time as finding relevance in society today.

Just as Penelope symbolically weaves her own plot, she also retains the memory of Odysseus by doing so. Similarly, artists have used fabric as a powerful retainer of both personal and cultural memory and as a means of highlighting their absence.

**Penelope Surprised
by the Suitors**

1805

From Homer's,
The Odyssey
Engraved from
the compositions
of John Flaxman
Illustrated manuscript
Fellows of Brasenose
College, Oxford

Penelope is caught unravelling King Laertes' shroud. While Odysseus was away fighting the Trojan War she was beset by suitors, and, in order to fend them off, promised she would choose a new husband once she had completed her father-in-law's funeral shroud. By day she would weave, but by night she would unravel her loom. We see her here confronted by the suitors and the handmaiden who has betrayed her.

Flaxman began his illustrations of Homer while on a pilgrimage

to Rome in the early 1790s. *The Iliad and The Odyssey* were read as sources of cultural ideals to be imitated. Flaxman believed the artist's role was 'to convert the beauty and grace of ancient poetry to the service of the morals and establishments of our own time and country'.

His aesthetic was one of purity and clean lines. In fact, the private chamber of a queen would have been rich in colour and the shroud woven by Penelope, intricately patterned.

Penelope

Date unknown

Embroidered picture
of silk and thread
Marx Lambert Collection,
Compton Verney

Leonid Tishkov

**The Vyazanik
(The Knitling)**
2002
Textile, photograph, film
Courtesy of the Artist

Inspired by his ancestral history, Tishkov asked his mother to unravel and then re-work the garments of his family's past into one, all-encompassing, crocheted swaddling suit. Each band of fabric conveys a personal narrative written alongside it (see accompanying gallery leaflet for translation).

The suit encompasses the tradition in the Urals, Tishkov's

hometown, for knitting rugs out of hand-me-downs to preserve the memory of the deceased and protect their kinsfolk. *The Knitling* acts as a cocoon of memory, which when worn, transports the artist into a timeless world of family ties and cultural traditions. The suit has been transformed by its method of production into what the artist refers to as 'a new mythical creature'.

Shane Waltener

Destiny
2008
Wool, playing cards,
chairs
Courtesy of the Artist

Threads which spell out the word of the title span a space between two chairs, the now empty seats of the protagonists needed for the creation of this work. While referencing the woven destiny of Penelope and the Three Fates who allot the lifespan of both mortals and gods by apportioning lengths of thread, the work draws us into the imagined actions of its makers, and the echoes of their destiny which they are now living out.

Destiny also carries with it the echoes of the ancient method of tablet weaving. By attaching yarn to a set of cards or flat tablets, a loom is made, and when

these cards are rotated a woven band is formed. This method of weaving stretches back over two thousand years through North Africa, Europe and Asia. Practised by people including nomadic tribes in Turkey, Burmese monks and medieval ladies at Court, this lineage weaves its own path through religious vestments, national costumes and inscribed love tokens. The simplicity of the technique is often lost in the density and intricacies of the finished piece, as if the final message or intent has overtaken its production.

Gallery 6

Delaine le Bas

Gynaikonitides

2008

Mixed Media

Courtesy Sonia Rosso and
Galerie Git Nourbakhsch

*And what should Philomela do?
A guard prevents her flight; stout
walls of solid stone fence her in
the hut; speechless lips can give
no token of her wrongs. But grief
has sharp wits, and in trouble
cunning comes. She hangs a
Thracian web on her loom, and
skilfully weaving purple signs on
a white background, she thus tells
the story of her wrongs.*

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

Gallery 7

Annie Whiles

The Moment Ago

2004

Embroidery silks, canvas,
velvet, felt and hair
Courtesy Danielle Arnaud
Contemporary Art

Hover Boys

2002

Embroidery silks, satin,
felt and canvas
Courtesy Danielle Arnaud
Contemporary Art

Annie Whiles' embroidery captures the shifting states of characters as they undergo change or metamorphosis. Expressions which are often fleeting are held frozen in time and commemorated through an emblematic language and form. Although Whiles' designs reference everyday contemporary culture – travel badges and insignias – their detailed and laborious method of production evokes the pastimes of another age.

Tilleke Schwarz

Losing our Memory

1998

Hand embroidery on linen

Courtesy of the Artist

Losing our Memory looks at ideas of contemporary communication and a loss of cultural memory as a result. The artist has spoken about the ‘myth of communication’ in a society where we feel we are somehow more connected – by phone, on the internet – but actually less in touch and more estranged.

Her embroidery picks up many webs of communication by casting out a net which catches extracts from our lives in a stream of consciousness. Images and text combine, as everyday phrases become significant epithets for the loss of cultural memory and the ‘hidden crisis of the digital information age’.

Joseph Beuys

Felt Suit

1970

Felt sculpture

Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, purchased with assistance from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and The Art Fund 2002

For Beuys the material of felt carried with it associations of spiritual warmth and insulation. This work was modelled on one of the artist’s own suits, and can be seen as a material embodiment or self-portrait of the artist.

Felt Suit can also be seen to represent the legend or myth of the artist. Beuys reportedly came close to death while flying his Stuka after joining the Luftwaffe in 1944. After his plane fell out of the sky, he was miraculously saved

by Tartars who took his freezing, unconscious body into safety and treated him by rubbing his body with animal fat and wrapping him in their traditional felt blankets.

After he returned home he fell into a depression in which he worked out the principles of his art. From that moment he turned towards new materials, often working in felt or fat, which he introduced as ‘shamanistic initiatory features’.

Michele Walker

Memoriam

2002

Textile, plastic,

steel wire wool

Courtesy of the Artist

Memoriam references the artist's mother and her struggle with Alzheimer's disease. *Memoriam* is sewn with the imprint of the artist's own skin through layers of clear plastic and wire wool. The trace of the imprint appears in a metallic grey, the antithesis of skin in both colour and texture, and therefore suggestive of the fading of memory and a transition from

the known to the unknown. The use of unconventional materials to produce a quilt subverts the traditional, comforting functionality such an object would usually represent. The quilt that would normally be passed down through generations, retaining memory, has instead become a shrine to its loss.

Resource Room

Hăp'tik is an interactive interpretation of *The Fabric of Myth* exhibition. This resource space project is the result of a partnership between Compton Verney and Buckinghamshire New University. Exhibition Design students were invited to submit proposals that encapsulated the exhibition in a creative and dynamic manner. *Hăp'tik* was chosen as the winning proposal by final year student Emma Kopinska.

Hăp'tik refers to the Greek word for the science of touching.

This interactive cabinet relies on the sense of touch to encourage further understanding through the textures and materials inside.

Hăp'tik also spins the narratives found throughout the exhibition and traces the history, evolution and use of fabric; presenting objects which invite closer inspection and participation.

This project was made possible with support from Cotswold Woollen Mill, Filkins and West Dean Tapestry Studio, West Sussex.

Events

Lecture:

Louise Bourgeois 'Stitches in Time'

Sunday 6th July 1pm

Frances Morris, Head of Collections (International Art) at Tate Modern, examines the language of sewing and weaving which permeates the life and art of Louise Bourgeois

Tickets £12, concs £8.50 includes gallery admission. Members £5

Lecture:

Images of Myth in Ancient Rome

Sunday 13 July 1pm

Dr Zahra Newby, Senior Lecturer in Classics at Warwick University, explores the ways in which stories from Greek mythology were portrayed in the art of Ancient Rome. Focusing on the figures of Arachne, Ariadne and others, she will explore the ways in which the flexibility of

myth was used to offer cautionary tales or to present models of worthy behaviour, reflecting the essential truths of human life

Tickets £12, concs £8.50 includes gallery admission. Members £5

Knitflicks Film Weekend

Saturday 19 and Sunday 20 July
12 noon–4pm

7 Inch Cinema return to Compton Verney with another weekend of celluloid treats and hands-on wool action. All of the short films on show share a certain crocheted or hand-stitched quality: from the beguiling imaginary worlds of Michel Gondry to classic hand-knitted animation and the Cast Off collective's death-defying knitting cyclist. You can even get to work on some socks while you watch thanks to a kind donation of needles and wool by

Coats. Knitting novices needn't fear as expert tuition will be available throughout the weekend.

70-minute programme, screening continuously from midday until 4pm

Panel Discussion:

Text and Textile

Sunday 7th September 1pm

Join co-curators of *The Fabric of Myth* Antonia Harrison and James Young; anthropologist Chloe Colchester; Fashion Design tutor Heather Sproat; and Classics lecturer Sue Blundell as they discuss the relationships between textiles, myths and art.

Tickets £12, concs £8.50 includes gallery admission. Members £5

Fully illustrated catalogue on *The Fabric of Myth* available in the shop priced £14.99

Cover image **Shane Waltener** Destiny (detail)

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