

Mending Gold: mending cultural divides through craft

by Brooks Harris Stevens, Eastern Michigan University

Abstract

The histories that are embedded in craft vary from culture to culture and have added to the richness and authenticity of communities throughout civilization. Our personal histories with craft, and more specifically through the making of textiles, endure and retain traditions, quality and cultural uniqueness in spite of industrial modernity and globalization (Figure 01). Textiles not only carry cultural histories through pattern, color and purpose, they carry personal histories that reflect each individual's subtle actions and embedded tacit knowledge. The common and worldwide act of mending is one of repair with the intention to reuse or fix. Mending is not only a useful and sustainable act that extends a craft object's usefulness it can also be an act of mending between cultures connecting meaningful translations that span across philosophies, personal identity and political circumstance. In a post-industrial and globalized economy the values and appreciation of traditional craft have been supplanted by mass production and outsourcing resulting in a devaluation of technique, materials and the necessity meaning. The differences and commonalities we experience in our contemporary lives seem to offer extremes that either broaden the divide or bring humanity closer. Many of these shared experiences transfer to objects that we use where individuality and more importantly cultural rituals and ceremonies are overshadowed by the homogeneity of a mass-produced society. Homogenous fashions, home goods, automobiles and the like are similar if not the same shared experiences people have on the Internet with viral videos and memes on opposite sides of the globe. These circumstances have left the artist and the crafts person in a paradoxical position that calls for a re-positioning of what craft and culture can become as we seek new sustainable economies. This paper will discuss methodologies in my creative practice where I use the act of mending in situ during residencies in the United States, the Balkans and India. Each mending derives from a cultural connection to textiles and manifests as a work of art that pays reverence to the material culture in the specific geographical location. From communist monuments (Figure 02) to palaces in the Himalayas of India (Figure 03) the work addresses the conflicted and torn landscape through mending the built environment. The act of physically mending on site serves as a metaphor by highlighting the worn and contemplating the broken to find diversity and common threads of cultures. Sensitive to the importance of cultural traditions, I ask questions and create a dialog as opposed to a colonized acquisition of craft. With this reverence, the paper does not proclaim absolutes or conclusions but rather frames a discussion on one possible way to reclaim local material culture in a globalized context.

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The understanding and love of cloth is one that continually drives my curiosity and artistic interpretation of our world in my studio practice. I find value in not always taking the traditional route regarding my artwork, as it is important to discover new ways of creating and to push boundaries in textiles. Stitching by hand connects me to the rich history of textiles and an understanding of what a simple needle and thread can achieve. These simple materials lead me to find answers, determining new questions and ways of interpreting our lives in a rapidly changing world. *Mending Gold* is a series of work that not only addresses the life of worn cloth but also expands into worn paths in the landscape as well as the built environment.

My personal history with textiles is embedded in everyday experiences, and I am in a privileged position to recognize these experiences daily. On the train to Plymouth, I saw the hedged divisions in farmland as raised seams that not only divide space or property but also double as reinforced areas that hold community and tradition together. These reinforced traditions are equally paralleled to the hand velvet weavers of the Lisio Foundation on the outskirts of Florence, Italy. As each weaver weaves, row by row a raised silk weft is skillfully cut to create the luscious pile on the fabric, elegantly mimicking the sowed farmland found from the surrounding areas and the Tuscan region of Italy, to the Balkans or North Carolina, USA. These connections influence my personal work and are a foundation in my artistic practice, which is highly influenced by travel, material, and the traditional and contemporary practices in craft.

After spending the last four summers learning about the rich history, traditions and material culture in the Balkans, I had the opportunity to mend a now deteriorating building dedicated to the communist dictator Enver Hoxha, better known as the Pyramid in Tirana, Albania. The Enver Hoxha Pyramid was one of the last communist monuments built in Tirana, Albania, leaving citizens uncertain whether to keep the building as a reminder of the past or abandon the structure to build something new. Paying reverence to Albania and its citizens, I was inspired to mend a part of the building on a scorching hot and sunny day in July 2015. Working with Kristi Janku, a student in Art and Design at Polis University in Tirana, we carefully approached the pyramid and decided to work on a particular area of the building. Originally covered in pristine marble, the building is currently stripped to the cement base standing graffitied and condemned while locals and tourists, despite its steep incline, climb it daily to view the city. In *Mending Gold: Enver Hoxha Pyramid, Tirana, Albania, 2015*, I was inspired by the traditional gold embroideries that adorn many Balkan textiles. As I applied each row of gold yarn, I focused the various marks that covered the building just as I would observe the worn marks on textiles before mending. These chosen areas of the surface show the crumbling and worn areas of the building that were mended with gold yarn. Each row of yarn highlights the history of the building, which adds value and support through the act of mending. Mending as metaphor and meaning shown through dedication to an admired culture similar to the time, dedication and skill of handworkers from past centuries.

During a one-week trip to Bucharest, Romania, I had the opportunity to mend a portion of the Industria Bumbacului building, a former cotton-spinning mill located in the industrial section of the city. The revitalization of this former cotton-spinning mill is crucial to the development of new industry and younger forward-thinking generations in the city. Growing up in the southern portion of the United States, I have an appreciation and understanding of the good and bad implications of the textile industry. The skilled labor that each worker performs adds to the richness within the community and once that job is lost so is the sense of connection and knowledge. Visiting this building I was able to meet artists and entrepreneurs who are developing various businesses to revitalize the building and area. Inspired by the history of the textile building and my connection to textiles, their enthusiasm led me to select a portion of the rooftop to mend. Responding to the varying typography of the painted brick building, I was able to highlight and mend missing areas of the rooftop section. Selecting each area I would consider what it meant to lose the knowledge, skill and dedication of each worker employed by the Industria Bumbacului, not to mention how it affected the families and region. *Mending Gold: Industria Bumbacului, Bucharest, Romania, 2015* was mended to recognize the vacancies that the textile industry has left behind, not only in Bucharest but also in all of the abandoned mills in cities around the world.

Connections between the cotton spinning mill in Bucharest and my southern roots in North Carolina in the United States solidified the personal importance of the textile industry, and of seeking out local connections where I have lived and worked over the last decade. Ypsilanti, Michigan was the home of the Ypsilanti Underwear Company from 1880's until 1924 and manufactured Union Suits for women constructed of wool and cotton or silk and cotton. This local industry was placed along an industrial portion of the Huron River and employed over 300 women who occupied positions from garment makers to managers. Currently, one of the last remaining buildings along this historic portion of the Huron River is the former power generator of the Ypsilanti Paper Company. This power generator not only supplied the Peninsular Paper Company with power, it helped to supply power to many industrial buildings along the Huron River. These businesses were employers to various industries that helped to support individuals and communities in the area. Along with many other cities in the Rust Belt, Michigan has felt the ghost of industry's past leave an empty void, not only in the knowledge of skilled labor or economy, but also within the landscape. Although this is no longer a functional building, it proves to be a glimpse of historical times, serving as a city park within Ypsilanti. Over the course of 2 days in August 2016, I, along with several wonderful participants, performed a landscape mending at Peninsular Park. Finding worn areas within the landscape from decades of use, to weeds from a more recent time of abandonment added inspiration, as these areas highlight much of the history of the land. Not only is this landscape mending central to the Peninsular Paper Co., it is connected to the union suits made by the Ypsilanti Underwear Company, connecting parts of the history of textiles to Michigan, USA.

A huge thank you to all of the wonderful ladies who helped mend: Suzanne Boissy, Molly Doak, Julia Windom, Jordan Wilshaw, Lauren Mleczo, Ilana Houten, Elize Jekabson, Julia Lubas, Jessica Tenbusch, and Riva Jewell-Vitale, your help was invaluable!

Adding more depth and personal connection to this body of work, I mended a worn 1940's union suit of the exact type that was made at the Ypsilanti Underwear Company. The well-worn union suit had many places of wear that demanded repair, so with needle and gold thread in hand, I began to darn and reinforce the worn areas to call attention to the life of the textile and the person who wore it, but also to appreciate its function within daily life. This mended union suit is now placed next to the images of the landscape mending from the Peninsular Paper Company in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

Most recently, I had the privilege of mending a military bunker along a mountain ridge just outside of Tirana, Albania. With the help of four ambitious and spirited Art and Design students from Polis University in Tirana, we hiked for two days to mend a bunker. Bunkers are a ubiquitous sight and are scattered about the entire country of Albania, all built during the forty-five-year communist leadership. At the fall of communism there were a total of seven hundred thousand bunkers, enough to shelter approximately four Albanian citizens if the country were attacked. Working with the students was important in this mending, as they were able to take ownership of their past even though they were born after the communist era. Each student has their own unique associations and experiences with the bunkers of their home country. As an outsider and admirer of Albania and its citizens, I find that it is crucial to talk with them to listen and see in what ways they need mend the past and to retain what history has taught us. Living in the United States and being an American citizen provides many privileges, and it is important to remember that the past can repeat itself. Collectively, we must educate others and ourselves about truth and how to move progressively forward. Considering the turmoil of the 2016 presidential election, this is a time during which the U.S. does not need to fall into hate and fear – history has shown us that it does not do any good.

Located in a disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir, Leh Ladakh, India is precariously positioned next to the bordering countries of Tibet, Xinjiang, China, and Pakistan—all added to the complexity of the once preserved Ladakhian culture. Leh is filled with a dynamic landscape, from snow-covered mountaintops to sundrenched stone-filled alleyways with homes, businesses, Buddhist monasteries, and mosques harmoniously blending into the terrain. The architecture that preserved so much of the culture is threatened due to climate change over the past 50 years. Once preserved and sheltered from the monsoon by the high altitude of the Himalaya Mountains, this desert region has become threatened by increased rainfall. I worked with a group of American, Canadian, and French architects researching and documenting aspects of the traditional stone and mortar construction of local buildings, which cannot withstand the deterioration brought on by changing climate conditions. Inspired by the landscape, textiles, and community, I thought about what it would mean to mend one of the thousands of walls in need of repair. For *Mending Gold: Leh Palace, Leh, Ladakh, India (2016)*, I mended a portion of stonewall just below the nine-story Leh Palace. I intuitively stitched the crumbling lines of mortar between stones with gold thread, admiring the drastic contrasts within the landscape. Just as the architects seek to find a solution to preserve the distinct architectural style of Ladakh, I also seek to mend and help preserve a culture at risk from outside forces.

The Mending Gold series is a way to conceptually connect, not only with cloth, but also with various ways of applying a universal, simple and positive act of mending. These newly discovered findings help to understand the complexities of history, politics, industry, body and protection as I move forward in my studio practice.