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‘Darning : invisible or not’ - paper

This paper aims to show that although invisibility is implied in the notion of darning, the very act of darning makes the darn visible. The urge to transform a darn into a decorative element or pattern is evident in 18th century darning samplers through to 1970’s hippie clothing and recent street fashion. Darned garments are generally invisible in terms of surviving examples and collections. This paper will examine examples of darning found in collections of women’s domestic work and historical textiles and the transformation of this traditional technique into contemporary practice.

Darning is a repair process for cloth, used to prolong the life of a garment out of necessity, sentimental reasons or on principle. Darning aims to make new, re-new and restore by the insertion of additional threads into the warp and weft of a cloth to repair holes and tears. It aims to be invisible. But the very act of darning changes the character of the cloth as the darning threads are inter woven into the fabric; they distort and shape the surface becoming visible, like an embellishment or form of decoration on the garment.

In the 18th century, following the successfully completion of embroidery samplers, young girls began a darning sampler. 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 (Frost, P. 2000). During the WW2, Mrs Sew and Sew, a cartoon character in a brochure published by the UK Board of Trade reminded women that ‘neat darns, done in good time, can make things last’.

In museum collections generally, apart specific domestic collections, darns are rarely catalogued, many being removed in the conservation process. Today garments are disposed of or recycled rather than darned. Street and cat walk fashions show ripped, torn and worn effects alongside patched and repaired garments. Darning made visible.

By tracing darning in historical references and collections it becomes apparent that darning is both visible and invisible.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 documented but rich in interpretation, like the darn itself.
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