At Fuller Craft Museum, ‘The Red Dress’ speaks intimately to the experiences of women

Over 14 years, nearly 400 needleworkers from around the world stitched their stories into a single garment

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent, Updated March 1, 2024, 6:00 a.m.

Sharmin Faeq Sadiq from Kurdistan, Iraq, and Tugba Gula of Turkey contribute to "The Red Dress" in 2022. Created by textile artist Kirstie Macleod, "The Red Dress" was crafted by hundreds of embroiderers around the world. It’s on view at Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton. MARK PICKTHALL/KIRSTIE MACLEOD

BROCKTON — “The Red Dress,” British textile artist Kirstie Macleod’s epic, 14-year-long project on view at the Fuller Craft Museum, uses French knots, herringbone stitches, and couching to
stitch together something much grander than a dress. It showcases the handicraft of artisans around the world, many of them struggling to survive.

Splendid gowns — and indeed, T-shirts bought for cheap at Target — don’t usually tell the stories of their makers. Animated with the creative, personal work of hundreds of hands, “The Red Dress” is both regal and democratic.

"The Red Dress," British textile artist Kirstie Macleod’s epic, 14-year-long project, is on view at the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Macleod learned embroidery when she was 9 from “a warm-hearted Indian lady” in Lagos, Nigeria, according to the project’s catalog. Maybe that planted the seed for this peripatetic project. From 2009 to 2023, she solicited 380 embroiderers internationally to contribute to a single garment. It has become a magnificent silk gown with a fitted top and a voluminous pleated skirt. Macleod circulated nearly 90 individual panels of burgundy silk to 51 countries. Each panel now has 10,000 to 50,000 stitches in it.
The needleworkers include 367 women or girls, 11 men or boys, and two nonbinary artists. Refugees from Palestine, Syria, and Ukraine, war survivors from Kosovo and Rwanda, impoverished women in South Africa and Mexico, and professional artisans and students are all represented.

The dress is a humbling sight standing on a plinth in an otherwise quiet gallery. It would fit at a state dinner or a Victorian ball. At the same time, it’s a ruddy patchwork, and a nexus of pride for its makers. On the bodice’s back, Macleod has embroidered a spider web to represent the global network of connection the dress has become.
The artist invited the embroiderers to use their needles and thread to communicate aspects of their identity and culture. Each used their own thread, color palette, and stitch type.

Engaging the community, “The Red Dress” is classic social practice art. With all its stitchery, it recalls the AIDS Memorial Quilt. But as a dress, it speaks intimately to the experiences of women. It holds in its deep pleats historic class differences between often invisible needleworkers and their wealthy customers.

The breadth of designs and patterns feels almost endless. Saudi Arabian needleworker Maysaa Qassim Alireza, a physician-turned-work-at-home-mother, used pure gold and silver threads in an ornate floral pattern that Saudi Bedouin brides wear the night before a wedding. Kosovo artists Feride and Fatime Hallili stitched white birds of peace, with poems inside inspired by recovering from war.

Working with a Cape Town textile label, Missibaba, Ayo Amon Demi embroidered scenes from her life in Kayamandi township in the Western Cape province of South Africa: a farmer and a bison pulling a plow; women pounding yams.
Embroidery provides skills and income to artisans — principally women — working alone and in collectives around the world. Reaching out through charities and other initiatives supporting women in poverty, Macleod commissioned many of her needleworkers. In Sinai, that income allowed embroiderers to send their children to school, according to the exhibition’s video.

At KISANY, a nonprofit with ateliers in DR Congo and Rwanda that provide crafts training, education, and micro-financing to textile artisans, 10 Congolese women stitched words with personal meaning to them. One of them, Louise, had been abandoned by her husband and was raising four children, according to wall text, when she joined forces with other women needleworkers. She ultimately paid off her debts and bought a house.

Louise embroidered “SOLIDARITY” into the silk. It’s a perfect word here — along with “Sesterstvi,” Slovenian for “sisterhood,” stitched by Czech Republic artist Blanka Berta Kolkova into the left sleeve. Such words represent the community and sustenance found in circles of
After the embroiderers stitched their panels, they shipped them to Macleod in England, where she worked with dressmaker Gail Falconer and seamstress Sylvia De Gregorio first to design the dress, then to accommodate its burgeoning volume of silk as the project went on.

Occasionally, women wear the dress. Early on, Macleod wore it in a performance art piece in which she sat inside a vitrine, embroidering. In 2020, she journeyed to the mountains of Chiapas, Mexico, to meet Zenaida Aguilar and Hilaria Lopez Patishtan, Indigenous needleworkers who contributed triangular panels to the front of the dress, which cause the skirt to flare. They work for Kitzen, an organization that helps Mexican artists who make traditional textiles. Zenaida used French knots to portray her local flora. Hilaria opted for a geometric design.
An embroidery circle in Aguacatenango, Chiapas, Mexico. The dress is worn by Vanessa Aguilar Juarez. KIRSTIE MACLEOD

The exhibition video follows Macleod on this journey. Zenaida teaches needlework, and several of her students spontaneously gathered around the dress and added to the hem. Hilaria, who was 17 when she stitched her panel in 2018, tried the dress on.

She doesn’t speak in the video. She doesn’t have to. Her face glows with pride.

**THE RED DRESS**

At Fuller Craft Museum, 455 Oak St., Brockton, through May 19. 508-588-6000, www.fullercraft.org/exhibitions/the-red-dress/

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