



VOICES OF TEXTILES

DIGITAL EXHIBITION

HOSTED BY THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH COLLECTIONS
UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH



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Introduction

Voices of Textiles (VofT) is an exhibition hosted by the University of Edinburgh's Centre for Research Collections (CRC). The digital exhibition is grounded in five items held by the CRC. It explores the fascinating and multifaceted ways that women have harnessed the art of textile production as a means of expressing their voices since the beginning of the twentieth century. Completed in conjunction with the Women Make Cities research network, the *VofT* exhibition augments the document-based approach to the historical role of women in textiles. As well as physical construction and production, their acts of making and reshaping also affect their communities. The exhibition narrative emphasizes community and the shared core values at the heart of textile making. Despite their differences, the items are united through their purpose of sharing women's personal and political voices.

A core concern that the *VofT* team discussed early in the exhibition design process was the idea of textiles as "women's work" and what it means to identify as a woman in the city. We considered how work with textiles—such as mending and darning—often falls under the countless hours of silent unpaid labour women frequently perform in service of their families and households. We consulted experts, such as the weavers and curators of

Dovecot Studios. They highlighted the institutionalisation of textiles and discussed how textile *art* was traditionally a man's field, whilst work within the private sphere of the home—the women's domain—was merely a *craft*.

It is very important to us that *VofT* is an inclusive and welcoming space. Despite focusing on women's textile production, we are choosing to use a very inclusive definition of identity that is grounded in self-determination. We wish for anyone who identifies with our discussion and content to feel comfortable engaging. We hope to achieve this by pointedly not defining the terms women and female.

The exhibition is entirely digital and can be viewed on the University of Edinburgh's Online Exhibitions platform, along with the #craftyourvoice social media campaign. In addition, on Friday 4th March 2022, we held an online roundtable event for academics, artists, and enthusiasts to come together and discuss their personal experiences with textiles. The *VofT* online exhibition seeks to combine these elements, with downloadable interactive content and a resource page for further interest and exploration.

THE FASHIONABLE PROTEST

The Suffragette Belt

Unknown, 1908-1909. Textile materials with enamel coating.
CRC, University of Edinburgh.

Beautiful and intricately made, the Suffragette Belt is a gorgeous artefact from the University's Collections. The belt is something many people today would still love to wear for its elegance and craftsmanship. It's a historical item that not only looked lovely when worn but also shared a powerful political message.

The Women's Suffrage Movement gained momentum at the turn of twentieth century, pushing for women's rights, particularly their right to vote. Suffragettes risked their health, safety, freedom, and lives to fight for this cause. Their tactics of civil disobedience caused disruption, resulting in many being imprisoned and hunger striking. This did, however, draw a lot of attention to the cause. Those involved in the movement would often wear little textile tokens to show their allegiance and solidarity. This ranged from smaller ribbons and pins to more involved pieces like the Suffragette belt. It was not until 1928 that the First Representation of the People Act was passed in parliament, granting women over the age of twenty-one, regardless of property ownership and social class, the vote in the United Kingdom.

Today the Suffragette movement is still a source of inspiration, referenced by social movements around the world. Suffragettes were complex, strong, beautiful, determined, and intelligent individuals who stood up for their beliefs. Their strength is a beacon lighting the way for future generations. The Suffragette Belt embodies the spirit of their movement, with both its elegance and compelling political power.

Banners of the Banned

Elle McKee, 2017. Silk textiles.
CRC, University of Edinburgh.

Whilst she was still a student at Edinburgh College of Art, Elle McKee created the Banners of the Banned in a powerful statement against Donald Trump's "travel ban". Originally submitted alongside a visually and numerically enlightening newspaper, the delicate silk scarves decry Executive Order 13769 in their own subversive manner.

McKee chose to print her bold designs onto silk scarves, a medium that lends further support to her political message. The key trade route of the ancient period, the Silk Road, linked China with much of Asia, East Africa, and Europe; it was a network of connections, commerce, and opportunity. Whilst domestic industries did emerge in Europe and later in North America, silk still retained a reputation as an object of import, maintaining an air of luxury and rarity. Meanwhile, scarves have long been a signifier of community identity – from head coverings for religious or personal reasons, to knitted scarves for collegiate affiliations. Banners of the Banned unites these two messages, causing the very fabric of the work to become a means of opposing Trump's ban. The printed artwork atop such a powerful basis creates a truly emphatic message of unity and defiance.



THE POWER OF A MARCH

Processions Banner

*Lindy Richardson et. al, 2018.
Mixed media textiles.*

CRC, University of Edinburgh.

The Processions Banner is a mixed media textile, created in three panels and designed to be erected upon poles as a working political message. The central panel features the statement “EVERY ONE IS EQUAL”, whilst rosettes and patches adorn the outer panels celebrating liberal, feminist, and progressive political emblems. Lindy Richardson coordinated the small army of collaborators who contributed to this project and marched with the banner at the lead of the 2018 Procession in Edinburgh.

The march on 10th June 2018, marked the centenary of the Second Representation of the People's Act, which was the first piece of parliamentary legislation to allow a small number of women the right to vote. Participants were colour-coordinated so that the entire column was a purple, green and white suffragette banner. Thousands of girls and women attended, with the organisers' hoping to form a “living portrait” of twenty-first-century womanhood, non-binary individuals and transwomen included. Our examination of the Processions Banner seeks to uncover the collaborative making process as a site of community building. Made by the diverse community who contributed, it also features significant female figures and their political ideologies, thereby drawing them into the conversation surrounding women's suffrage and equality.

Workers! Banner

Petra Bauer, Fiona Iardine, Scot-Pep, 2017. Mixed media textiles.

CRC, University of Edinburgh.

Commissioned and created in 2017, the Workers! Banners debuted at the Glasgow May Day march in 2018. They are pieces of art as well as works of political protest, created with active use in mind.

May Day marches and rallies have been a staple of the Scottish Workers' Rights movement since the 1890s. The Glasgow march has historically been an international and intersectional affair. Women workers rallied in support of the 8-hour working day in the 1880s and gave speeches during the 1915 rent strikes. Colours have always been important in political activism. In addition to the purple, green, and white of the suffragettes, red is also prominently featured in clothing and banners. It showed support of the political left at various points of industrial action over the last century. The banners' red umbrellas are the recognisable symbol of the sex worker rights movement. They were first used in the 2001 demonstration at the 49th Venice Biennale of Art when sex workers protested inhumane work conditions and human rights violations by holding umbrellas. Since then, several charities, including Scot-Pep and New York's Red Umbrella Project, have adopted the iconography. A shared goal of all sex worker rights charities and campaigners is for sex work's recognition as work. They aim to have one unified community striving for workers' rights, rather than disassociating them from the wider movement.



THE COMMUNITY OF WOMEN

Women Singing at the Table

Keith Henderson, 1930. Oil on Canvas.
CRC, University of Edinburgh.

Henderson's *Women Singing at the Table* features a group of women waulking the cloth to prepare it for use. This historic practice is rarely used nowadays, having long since become the work of mills and machinery rather than a task that requires lengthy physical labour. Nevertheless, when done by hand, it is a true community builder. There are traditions, histories, and superstitions involved – such as it being unlucky to move the cloth anticlockwise as the group works.

The practice of waulking and the singing of waulking songs does continue in some Scottish communities such as the Hebrides and the mainland extremities. It is no longer commercially viable or necessary—instead, it has become a means of celebrating culture and remembering tradition.

We were initially conflicted over including this painting within our exhibition. It is the only item that is not a piece of textile art, and Henderson as a professional male artist is a very different kind of creator. However, after much discussion, we decided that his depiction of the waulking women celebrates an alternative kind of female making and unity. He includes the working woman and side-lines the male, highlighting the roles and rights within history that were once divided by strict gender binaries. Women took these often oppressive restrictions and used them to create something wonderful. Within their private spaces, they created systems and societies of their own, a fact which is beautifully embodied by the call and communal response of a waulking song's verse and chorus.



The Curatorial Team

Leia Caldwell

Leia is the *VofT* Outreach and Engagement Coordinator. She is from Edinburgh and has a background in community engagement strategy and 19th/20th Century social history.

Elin Crotty

Elin is the *VofT* Interpretation and Content Manager, with an academic background in English Literature. Originally from Cardiff, Wales, she is currently researching Celtic folk tales.

Benedicte Dansie

Benedicte is the *VofT* Executive Administrator and Copy Editor. Originating from the United States, she studies British history as well as Holocaust exhibition, museology, and education.

Sofiya Romashchenko

Sofiya is the *VofT* Social Media Coordinator. She comes from Toronto, Canada, and has an academic interest in Victorian Material Culture and Historic House curation.

Lauren Schleich

Lauren, the Exhibition Technician for *VofT*, is from the state of Nebraska. Her research interests lie in Scottish Renaissance painted ceilings and object preservation.

Greer Brook Singh

Greer is the Copyright and EDI Coordinator for *VofT*. Originally from Southampton, UK, she has a background in Classics and a keen interest in audience interaction within GLAM institutions.

#craftyourvoice

At the beginning of this exhibition journey, we launched a project called #craftyourvoice. Textile making is a facilitator of women's community building, and we wanted to create that type of connection for our exhibition. We gave a call for submissions in December 2021 on social media and set our discussion theme as textiles as a medium of personal and political expression. We asked them to submit images and stories, and the response was heart-warming, personal, and remarkable. By March 2022, we had received submissions from people of all ages, spanning countries and continents. From the bustling streets of New York to a small village in the Welsh Valleys, participants were sharing their voices through textiles. Submissions included scarves knitted for loved ones during the Covid-19 pandemic, quilts compiled from sewn patches donated by strangers, crocheted poppies for Remembrance Day, period costumes, examples of traditional cultural dress, and many more. The campaign shows that textiles still share powerful messages, continuing to strengthen community bonds as they did historically.





A Network of Support

The *VofT* team wish to express their sincere gratitude to the following people, whose assistance has been invaluable during the exhibition creation process.

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