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## Nuns, Textiles, and Reform in the Late Middle Ages

by K. Bevin Butler

**1000 Worte Forschung:** *PhD thesis (Art History, Theory, and Criticism), submitted under the title “Crafting Agency in Needle and Thread: Reform and Textile Production in Late Medieval Monasteries” at Arizona State University*

Critical scholars of late medieval German women’s monasticism have documented that nuns exercised agency within the strictures of their enclosure.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the fifteenth century, nuns formed strong networks by borrowing manuscripts from, exchanging letters with, and traveling to neighboring communities to help introduce reform practices.<sup>2</sup> Reformers sought more stringent enclosure and observance of monastic vows, but strict claustration often spurred nuns to establish networks beyond their own monastery and shape their environment through embroidery and weaving.<sup>3</sup> Medieval nuns’ subversive stitching typifies an ongoing history of women’s empowerment utilizing textile arts, such as enslaved women’s quilts, suffragette banners and sashes, and pussy hats and embroidered signs for the 2017 Women’s March (Fig. 1–4).

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<sup>1</sup> Gertrud Jaron Lewis, *By Women, For Women, About Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth-Century Germany* (Studies and texts 125), Toronto 1996; Judith Oliver, *Singing with Angels: Liturgy, Music, and Art in the Gradual of Gisela von Kerssenbrock*, Turnhout 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing About Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages*, University Park 2005; Corine Schleif and Volker Schier, *Katerina’s Windows: Donation and Devotion, Art and Music, As Heard and Seen Through the Writings of a Birgittine Nun*, University Park 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Carroll, *Subversive Obedience: Images of Spiritual Reform by and for Fifteenth-Century Nuns*, in: *Reassessing the Roles of Women as ‘Makers’ of Medieval Art and Architecture*, hrsg. von Therese Martin (*Visualising the Middle Ages* 7), London 2012, pp. 703–737.

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Fig. 1: “Bible Quilt” by Harriet Powers, 1886. Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Accession No. 283472. Licence: none (Public Domain).



Fig. 2: 1917 Photo by Harris & Ewing of Unidentified Suffragette. Library of Congress, Control Number 2016868451.

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Fig. 3: Pussy Hat. Photo by Francis Mariani. Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/designwallah/32313753042/in/photolist-ResqZ9>.

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Fig. 4: Shannon Downey posted this photo to Twitter on Jan 18, 2017 with the caption “And @womensmarchchi embroidered protest sign is hooped and ready! @womensmarch #notmypresident”. <https://twitter.com/shannondowney/status/821926038687154176?lang=en>.

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This project employs critical theory and feminist methodology to consider nuns’ agency in the late medieval textiles made in Kloster Lüne, St Walburga in Eichstätt, and Vadstena Abbey and explores hierarchies of gender and media in modern culture and scholarship. The first part of

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the project deconstructs and theorizes the historic association between women and textile work, using the distaff as a motif. Spinning with a distaff instilled patience and obedience in the spinner, as with Eve and Mary (Fig. 5). However, the weaponized distaff created chaos and subverted the “natural order” of male dominance (Fig. 6). The ambiguity of the distaff, capable of signifying women’s obedience and disobedience, or submission and dominance, illustrates the complex web connecting womanhood with textiles.



Fig. 5: Labors of Adam and Eve, *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, Westphalia or Cologne, ca 1360. Darmstadt, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek, Hs 2505, fol. 5r. Source: <http://tudigit.ulb.tu-darmstadt.de/show/Hs-2505/0009>.

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Fig. 6: Battle of the Breeches (The Angry Wife) by Israhel van Meckenem, Engraving, ca. 1495–1503. British Museum, Number 1848, 1125.141. Source: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=1402670&partId=1&searchText=meckenem,+wife&page=1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1402670&partId=1&searchText=meckenem,+wife&page=1).

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The association between women and the textile arts has served to devalue both women and textiles in the history of art; and textiles made by nuns, specifically, have been negatively affected by scholarship that derides nun-made artworks as ugly or untrained. The problematic term “Nonnenarbeit” (nuns’ work) has stigmatized the artistic endeavors of medieval nuns in art historical scholarship since the early twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> This scholarship on nuns’

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (California studies in the history of art 37), Berkeley 1997.

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manuscript illuminations reveals biases that reserve intellectual arts such as manuscript painting for male artists while relegating women to “feminine” crafts like textiles.

After exploring the complexities of women and the textile arts and the attitudes of twentieth-century scholars regarding nuns’ artistic agency, the project turns to the textiles themselves. The production of textiles was often allowed in women’s monasteries after reform under the Benedictine practice of *ora et labora* (pray and work). However, the embroideries and tapestries often occupied a tenuous liminal space between utilitarian and decorative, work and pleasure, and devotion and distraction.

Reform reached Kloster Lüne in 1481 when nuns from Kloster Ebstorf moved to Lüne to implement reform practices. After this reform, nuns at Lüne made textiles using an embroidery technique called “Klosterstich” (Fig. 7).<sup>5</sup> The formal characteristics of the Lüne embroideries echo the aesthetics of nuns’ manuscript illuminations shared among monasteries during reform (Fig. 8). While the textiles’ inscriptions celebrate the success of reform, the stylized figures and bright colors bespeak a connection to the manuscripts shared within nuns’ networks during reform, and therefore participate in a visual tradition the Lüne nuns associated with other claustrated sisters beyond their own enclosure.

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<sup>5</sup> Tanja Kohwagner-Nikolai, „Per Manus Sororum ...“: Niedersächsische Bildstickereien im Klosterstich (1300–1583), München 2006.

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<p>Fig. 7: Provost Choir Stall Hanging, Kloster Lüne, 1508. Museum für Sakrale Textilkunst, Kloster Lüne. Photo by K. Bevin Butler. Licence: CC BY 4.0, <a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0</a>.</p>		<p>Fig. 8: Coronation of the Virgin, illuminated by Sybilla von Bondorf, 1490–1492. Ms. Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek: Klarenbuch – Thennenbach 4, fol. 105v. Licence: CC BY-SA 3.0 DE, <a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/de</a>.</p>

St Walburga in Eichstätt was reformed in 1456 with the help of nuns from Marienberg near Boppard. To commemorate the reform, Johannes von Eych († 1464) commissioned a tapestry of the Life of St Walburga and donated it to the nuns (Fig. 9). In the tapestry, von Eych is portrayed as the reformer and champion of the monastery. By 1519, the nuns at St Walburga had established a tapestry workshop and wove their own version of the Life of St Walburga tapestry, replacing von Eych with the abbess, nuns, and lay sisters (Fig. 10). The Eichstätt nuns wove themselves into the literal fabric of their communal history, leaving no doubt about the active roles that the nuns played in that history.

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Fig. 9: Life of Walburga Tapestry, woven at St Katherine's in Nuremberg, 1456. Images courtesy of Domschatz- und Diözesanmuseum Eichstätt.

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Fig. 10: Life of Walburga Tapestry, woven at St Walburga in Eichstätt, 1519. Images courtesy of Domschatz- und Diözesanmuseum Eichstätt.

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Saint Birgitta of Sweden (1303–1373) envisioned her new Order as a reform Order. Birgitta inverted the gender hierarchy of monastic life and is often depicted with her nuns at her right-hand side (Fig. 11). In her Rule, Birgitta specifies that the nuns must not touch precious materials, such as gold or silk, except in the practice of embroidering liturgical objects, labor specifically required of Birgittine nuns. Birgitta's own visions are laden with textile metaphors and symbolism, demonstrating that the labor of embroidery was held in the highest esteem, as evident in four embroidered reliquaries made around 1500 by nuns at Vadstena Abbey (Fig. 12). That the reliquaries were embroidered and adorned by nuns, and even carried by the women

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during processions through the cloister, demonstrates Birgitta's vision of reforming and revolutionizing monasticism, placing women's work on the altar and in the cloister.



Fig. 11: Hand-Painted Woodcut of St Birgitta of Sweden, German (printed in Augsburg), ca 1480–1500. British Museum, Accession Number 1934,0609.2-4. Source: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=1347733&partId=1&searchText=birgitta&page=1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1347733&partId=1&searchText=birgitta&page=1).

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Fig. 12: Embroidered Reliquaries, Vadstena Abbey, ca 1500. Historiska Museet, Stockholm; Domkykomuseum, Linköping. Photos by K. Bevin Butler.

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The project questions scholarly biases about nuns, agency, and the textile arts by engaging critical theory. The project highlights textiles from Lüneburg, Eichstätt, and Vadstena to investigate the crossroads of claustration, nuns' networks, and textiles to dispel myths that fashion women as passive and obedient, and instead consider how medieval nuns negotiated autonomy through the fiber arts.

All URLs have been verified on November 30, 2018.