

Press Release – Long Version

Hanky HiStories - Solace & Tears in a Square Exhibition at the Museum Herxheim – April-July 2021

Handkerchiefs – Solace & Tears in a Square

is the title of the exhibition from 25 April to 11 July at the Museum Herxheim in the southern part of the Rhineland-Palatinate. Curators Monika Brückner (BA Embroidery, University Middlesex und MA Fine Art, OCA University Barnsley), master costume designer Kristina Baumert, and Rosa Tritschler dedicate their show to a tiny everyday accessory. Five exhibition rooms present it in many facets: hankies as an art format, as a form of political resistance and as a lifetime companion, hankies in political and social histories, in literature and poetry.

Ubiquitous – the Handkerchief

“‘Got your hanky?’ Mother asked me every day at the gate before I left. And as I did not have one I went back to my room to get one. I did not have one at any day, as I was waiting for her question. The handkerchief was proof that my mother protected me in the mornings. The question ‘Got your hanky?’ was allusive tenderness.”

With these words begins one of the most impressive texts on a small square piece of tissue: Herta Müller gave this touching speech when she received the Nobel Price for Literature in 2009.

Artistic Artisanry

The Herxheim show puts an emphasis on the extensive collection of handkerchiefs Liesel Becker has created. In the 1960s the former handicraft teacher began her collection. She compiled almost 1000 specimen made of silk, cambric, linen, and cotton.

The collection comprises ladies‘, gentlemen‘s and children‘s handkerchiefs in many varieties. Kerchiefs for brides, for funerals and for first communions remind of their owners‘ central biographical stages. They are family heirlooms. Among the eye-catchers in Becker‘s collection are cloths with hand-made margins. They tell the story of the ardent assiduity and the breath-taking skills of their makers: crocheted and bobbin lace-making, cut-out and hemstitching, Assisi-Richelieu eyelet and linen embroidery, shadow, silk, and miniature embroidery.

When asked about her motivation, Liesel Becker says: “I did not collect. Each of these handkerchiefs came to me to be saved.” She continues: “To me it seems to be a secret network of women from various generations, knotted and confirmed

over and over again by the gift of a handkerchief. The cloth was worked by the mother or grandmother or aunt. Until a few decades ago girls on their days of honour – first communion, confirmation, wedding – received self-made handkerchiefs from one of the elder women in the family.“ This old custom has gone, Liesel Becker regrets. And the technical skills needed to create this frail and complicated needlework are no longer conveyed. “There are no mothers, aunts, grannies anymore who could still hem-stitch such a cloth.“ she resumes. That is certainly true. Hand-made handkerchiefs are a thing of the past. Yet during their research the curators came across highly topical aspects of the hanky.

The Hanky in the Times of Corona.

Artist Beatriz Schaaf-Giesser with her project „global texture – the Handkerchief Project“ turned the square piece of cloth into a contemporary medium of artistic and communicative meanings.

In 2009 Schaaf-Giesser won the 1st award of the 5th Bienal Internacional de Arte Textil in Buenos Aires for her work “Preserving“. In 2017 she was invited to the VII. Bienal Internacional in Montevideo, Uruguay.

In March 2020 the artist presented a workshop in Uruguay. Due to the Corona lockdown she returned to Germany.

There she thought about ways to support the female artists in South America who are severely hit by the pandemic. She started an online initiative to participate in a “Handkerchief Project,“ and suggested using a hanky like a canvas. In the difficult times of isolation, of insecurity and incertitude it is important to find a feeling of community: “When the hands are working, the head is free. Let your hands speak to transform feelings, thoughts, and wishes into tiny textile stories.“

The echo was overwhelming. Almost 100 female artists from South America and Europe joined in. Often they used handkerchiefs that had been kept in wardrobes for decades, heirloom pieces from mothers and grandmothers.

Liesel Becker’s “secret network“ of women appears to be revived in the times of Corona in Beatriz Schaaf-Giesser’s artistic initiative. The Herxheim exhibition will display at least 25 originals from this project.

The handkerchief installation of artist Sophie Bloess – developed before Corona – already alludes to these. 16 gentlemen’s handkerchiefs are the actual canvas imprinted with microscopic images of viruses and garden-designs.

“Souvenir Tears“ by Jane Grier

Another gem on display at Herxheim is Jane Grier’s handkerchief of 1892, embroidered over and over with yarns and yarn-bundles: it is a textile icon from the historical *Sammlung Prinzhorn* at the Heidelberg University Museum. The handkerchief is one of the first works the art-historian and medical doctor Hans

Prinzhorn (1887–1933) incorporated into his „Lehrsammlung“ (*teaching collection*). Jane Grier was a patient at the mental hospital of Pirna-Sonnenstein when she embroidered a handkerchief with her messages. As governess she was certainly skilled in the various stitching techniques. As a patient she could resort to this feminine dexterity, and with her exuberant embroidered handkerchief created a work that remains enigmatic to this day. Jane Grier’s handkerchief is unparalleled, made in a personal “lockdown situation“ in a mental institution. Yet, disregarding the medical and historical background, it might definitely pass as a contemporary artistic contribution to Schaaaf-Giesser’s “global-texture-project.“

Suffragette Stitches

Im Holloway Prison in London in 1912 a famous handkerchief was made. 66 women were imprisoned for insurgent actions in support of female suffrage. They stitched their names onto a white handkerchief and thus created a matchless manifesto of their fight for the right to vote. This handkerchief, too, emerged from a lockdown – the “lock-in“ situation of Holloway Prison. The hankies of the *Tiny Prick Project* are to be understood as present-day political statements. Hundreds of American women have been stitching Donald Trump’s tweets onto handkerchiefs.

The hanky in its apparently harmless and ubiquitous materiality serves as a medium of meanings, of messages, in situations of human crisis.

The Handkerchiefs of Ravensbrück

This is demonstrated in four handkerchiefs from the all-female concentration-camp Ravensbrück that are exhibited in Herxheim. The depot of the Memorial Site at Ravensbrück holds a number of handkerchiefs embroidered by captives. The women made them as a sign of interconnectedness and solidarity – probably as a means of mutual reassurance. The hankies are a touching testimony of self-ascertainment of human beings in a situation of extreme violence and coercion. Today they are deeply moving mementoes.

Solace Squared

In her Nobel Prize speech Herta Müller discusses life in the tyranny of the Ceausescu dictatorship. The hanky in its pure materiality and neutrality represents her glimpse of hope in humiliating moments when all she has is a hanky in her pocket. When a superior throws her out of her office one day and she is about to lose her job, the few square centimetres keep her grounded. “I went up and down the stairs a few times – suddenly I was my Mother’s child again, because I HAD A HANDKERCHIEF. I put it on the step, smoothed it so it is orderly, and sat on it. My bulky dictionaries I put on my knee and translated the description of hydraulic machines. I was a staircase joke, and my office a handkerchief.“

Messages from the Air

Hankies went soaring during the Berlin Blockade in 1948-49. While the Allies provided West-Berlin with food and goods, the “Candy Bombers“ carried a special freight for the children of Berlin.

When pilot Gail Halvorsen saw a group of kids on his approach to the tarmac he decided to throw them some sweets. He bundled together some chocolate bars and chewing-gum and fixed them to handkerchiefs that fell from the sky like parachutes. The news spread fast, and soon hundreds of children waited daily for thousands of hanky-parachutes. The handkerchief thus contributed to the American-German friendship. In the exhibition children will find such hanky-parachutes – and build some themselves if they wish.

The Herxheim Museum has developed a framework programme to the exhibition. For more information see www.museum-herxheim.de.

Info

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Exhibition at the Museum Herxheim – April-July 2021

Museum Herxheim, Untere Hauptstraße 153
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www.museum-herxheim.de

Opening Times Thur and Fri 2-7 pm Uhr
Sat and Sun 11 am – 6 pm