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Rose Red Glow: Crossing Borders with Textiles

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Abstract

Can textiles, like music, painting, sculpture, and architecture, serve as a universal cultural expression that transcends language, nationality, and borders? Examining northern Finnish textile traditions, particularly in a city of Tornio, by the border to Sweden in Finnish Lapland, and Pechenga (Petsamo in Finnish), a historically significant Arctic region on the coast of the Arctic Ocean, reveal the rich entanglement of trade, migration, and international influences.

Inspired by Nils Schillmark's *Strawberry Girl* (c. 1782) and Hannu Väisänen's *Schillmark Variations* (2021), this study considers how woven textiles, like paintings, capture layers of time and unveil transnational textiles. By viewing woven textiles as material entanglements rather than mere objects, items or representations, we gain a deeper understanding of their role in shaping textile design histories. Woven textiles actively convey and shape knowledge, and cultural memory.

Keywords: Textile history, woven textiles, materiality, layering in textiles, transnational textiles, arts-based research.

Layering Materials and Textiles

The painting *Strawberry Girl* served as the foundation for Pietarinen's current textile research, *Northernness and International Influences in 18th-Century Finnish Textiles (Swedish Era, 1721–1809)*. In *Strawberry Girl* (c. 1782), the girl carrying a strawberry basket is dressed in a fashionable outfit styled for a portrait, resembling the attire of a wealthy peasant girl. This oil painting was painted by Swedish-born artist Nils Schillmark, with Ulrika Charlotta Armfelt (1771–1835), an 11-year-old noble girl at the time, as the model, (Valjakka 2021, 328). The paintings invite the viewer to explore how artistic expression can connect, intertwine, and evolve, crossing cultural and geographical boundaries, from two-dimensional paintings to tactile.

Schillmark's painting and visual artist and writer Hannu Väisänen's *Schillmark Variations* (2021), based on *Strawberry Girl*, exist in different historical dimensions. They offer insights into the layered nature of woven textiles and illustrate their diverse material possibilities in a historical northern and international 18th century context. They intertwine in unexpected ways, as the elements and details discovered in the paintings seem to take on a life of their own on the textile surface (canvas), suggesting new perspectives and interpretations to the viewer, (Valjakka 2021, 138-141). Paintings act as doorways into the narrative essence of cultures and international influences, while the artist-researcher's curiosity also extends to the historical creative potential of woven textiles (Pietarinen & Timonen 2019, 198-199, 209).

Without knowledge of regional history or material narratives, you might feel lost. However, exploring the cultural and material context unveils a deeper narrative and design experience, revealing a broader, richer world. Can textiles, like music, painting, sculpture,

and architecture, serve as a vehicle and a cultural thread that transcends language, nationality, and borders? The concept of transnational textiles highlights how weaving techniques, materials, and patterns cross borders and cultures through trade and migration. Pietarinen as an artist-researcher work at the intersection of cultures and use textiles as her vehicle, See Fukuoka Asian Art Museum 25th Anniversary Best Collection II: Echoes of Resilience 2025, 9-15).

Pietarinen explores paintings through the lens of entanglement, uncovering what often goes unnoticed and examining how layers of time shape our understanding of history and culture. We might encounter motifs that makes us wonder and sparks curiosity: What is this? Like a winter forest, paintings and woven textiles reflect multiple temporal scales: capturing fleeting moments, seasonal cycles, and centuries of transformation. A birch grove whipped by rain reveals the last five hours, snow-covered trees mark the past five days, hibernation nests trace a year's passage, while moss growth and pine bark hues unfold across centuries, (Reyer et al. 2015, 5-15). Just like the details of the woven clothing fabrics are captured in the thickness of the fabrics (drape and translucency), the patterns (striped or monochrome), the technique (woven or lace-making), the colours (the cool grey tones of the Gustavian period), and the fabric layers (seen on the head, neckline, and cuffs). They highlight the richness of the visual narrative, (Valjakka 2021, p. 138-141). (Figure 1.)



Figure 1. A mythological half-female half-bird creature of a Russian legend Bird of Sirin, Swedish three crowns and Arctic raw material sparks curiosity. Heidi Pietarinen, 2025, a block printed linen with reindeer blood, 20 x 20 cm. Photo Heidi Pietarinen 2024.

Although the northern regions of the world, including specific countries, regions, or towns, are often seen as remote peripheries, the rich textile traditions reveal a history of cultural diversity and influence. This is especially evident in northern Finland, particularly in Tornio (established in 1602) and Pechenga, in a historically significant Arctic region, (Kuusela 2024 6-11, Stén 2021, 8, 241, 411; Hederyd 1993).

By the late 18th century, Tornio had become a gateway to the exotic north as exploration, global trade, and colonialism expanded the world's horizons. The town attracted numerous visitors and explorers, especially in the 1790s, and its inhabitants began to be written about abroad, (Kuusela 2024, 6-11, Stén 2021, 8, 241, 411; Hederyd 1993). Meanwhile, Pechenga was known for its diverse cultural influences and monastery textiles. The 18th-century textiles preserved in the Pechenga Monastery stand out for their vibrant colours and intricate patterns, make these textiles exceptionally distinctive. The woven structures include silk voile,

velvet, jacquards, silver- and gold-brocade and printed linen fabrics. Patterns feature botanical motifs, geometric lines, checks, stripes and ikat. The dominant colours are black and white, including a full spectrum of shades from light to medium tones, ranging from orange to blue and rose red glow, (Stén 2021, 8, 241, 411; Hederyd 1993; Arhangelskie eparhialnie vedomosti (1896), no. 23, pp. 667–672; no. 22, pp. 630–637). By understanding the specific context of textiles, it is possible to interweave tacit knowledge with three-dimensional woven structures, despite drawing inspiration from two-dimensional paintings or fragments of textile archives.

Interweaving and Intertwining

What kinds of images and thoughts did the paintings evoke? Each painting is more than just a single image. The attention is not drawn to the painting (artwork) as an object, because there is no object, but the construction of the transnational textiles in arts-based research context. This can unfold into many layers, creating encounters with intertwining elements, (Valkeapää 2010, 19).

While textiles are often analysed through symbolic or decorative meanings, their materiality and physical transformations over time, space, trade route or migration have remained for less attention or overlooked. We can question why textiles are frequently reduced to narratives rather than acknowledged for their traditions, designs, and techniques that transcend national borders in context of transnational textiles, (Hemming & Hemmings 2015, 9 - 15).

An American feminist theorist and physicist Karen Barad's critique of the privileging of language over matter provides a valuable framework for reconsidering textiles beyond their conventional cultural interpretations. Barad proposes that reality is shaped

through intra-actions: relationships that bring entities into being rather than interactions between pre-existing things. Intra-action highlights how boundaries emerge through relational entanglements, with nothing existing independently beforehand, (Harris 2021, 2; Barad 2007).

By recognising textiles as active participants in history, cultural exchange, international trade and migration, we uncover their role in shaping knowledge and facilitating transnational connections. A perspective of how materiality of textiles is deeply intertwined, shift the focus from textiles as passive carriers of tradition to dynamic agents in cultural and historical processes.

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