

The Voortrekker Tapestry: reconstituting identity and status

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The Voortrekker Tapestry was created in an atmosphere of Afrikaner nationalistic zeal in the 1950s, and this context has influenced subsequent interpretations of this artwork. The Tapestry is shown here as a synthesis of historical attitudes towards Afrikaner women, which are paralleled by the inferior status given to craft as a 'feminine' activity.

The generally accepted history of The Voortrekker Tapestry¹ begins in May 1952 at a meeting of the Germiston branch of the *Vrou- en Moederbeweging van die Afrikaanse Taal en Kultuurvereniging* (ATKV). At this meeting Nellie Kruger, one of the guest speakers, suggested that the (Afrikaans) women of South Africa give something of lasting value to the (Afrikaner) nation, inspiring future generations. It was decided that this would take the form of a series of tapestries.

Affiliated women's organizations and individuals collected R26 000 within a year. It was decided that the tapestries should pay 'homage to the heroic deeds of the Great Trek' (Kruger s.a.:4), and the artist W H Coetzer, who had studied 'Voortrekker history, the wagon, the clothing and the domestic articles of those days' (Kruger s.a.:4) was selected to design the tapestries, destined to be hung in the Voortrekker Monument.

Nine women² worked for eight years to execute the 3 353 600 stitches on fifteen panels³ in 130 colours of wool. On 14 December 1960 the embroidered panels were presented to the Voortrekker Monument to be displayed in the cellar room of the Monument, from where they were moved in 1966 to a special room in the newly built Museum of the Voortrekker Monument.

Behind this accepted history of the Voortrekker Tapestry, however, lurks another lesser known history: a history of the construction of a feminine ideology - and more specifically in this case, the construction of identities for Afrikaans women - which is paralleled by the history of the separation of 'art' from 'craft'⁴.

Parker has traced the development of embroidery as a signifier of sexual difference in *The Subversive Stitch*, and she demonstrates convincingly that the prejudices which accompanied the art of embroidery in history, are still present today. According to Parker (1984:5):

When women paint, their work is categorised as homogeneously feminine - but it is acknowledged to be art. When women embroider, it is seen not as art, but entirely as the expression of femininity. And, crucially, it is categorised as craft...There is an important connection between the hierarchy



of the arts and the sexual categories male/female. The development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft.

This article will deal with the construction of femininity in the context of tapestry, with specific reference to the Voortrekker Tapestry. I shall attempt to demonstrate that the uncertain position of tapestry as art, is duplicated in the ambivalent status of the Afrikaans woman, notably that of the *volksmoeder*.



Ambivalent status: Afrikaans woman as subject and object

The intent to present a tapestry to the Voortrekker Monument, and by implication to the Afrikaner nation, grew from a desire to present something which was not only expressive of '[their] love for [their] nation and its history', but more importantly something which was executed in a 'strikingly feminine manner' (Kruger 1988 sup. 3). The idea of the Tapestry was launched at a meeting which formed part of the *Moedersveldtog* (Mother's campaign): in 1952 the ATKV announced that the month of May would be a time of *moedershuldiging* or 'mother veneration'.

This emphasis on the Afrikaans mother forms part of an extensive project of mother veneration in the history of the Afrikaner people, and conjures up an array of visual and literary images which were created to idolise the Afrikaans mother as the mother of the nation. As far as visual images are concerned, the notion of the *volksmoeder* dates back to at least 1913 with the unveiling of the Women's Memorial outside Bloemfontein, where Van Wouw's sculpture of the woman with two children underscores the mother and child idea - albeit the suffering mother.

This was followed in 1919 by the adoption of Van Wouw's *Nooientjie van die Onderveld* for the cover of the women's weekly *Die Boerevrou*. The *Nooientjie* appears on the cover with a refrain from one of Jan F Cilliers' poems *Ek sien haar wen want haar naam is Vrou en Moeder* ('I see her triumph because her name is woman/wife and mother'), clearly placing emphasis on the importance of the mother of the nation. In 1949 with the opening of the

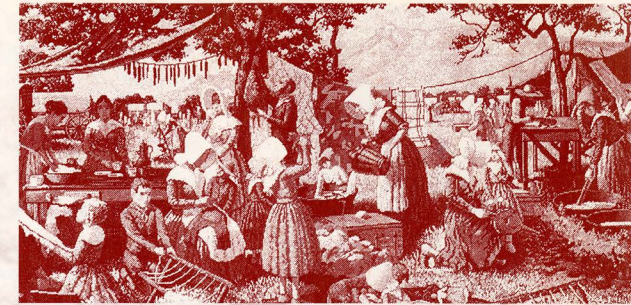
Voortrekker Monument, the Afrikaans mother was again foregrounded in another Van Wouw sculpture of a Voortrekker mother with two children, taking up central position in front of the main entrance to the Monument.

The *Moedersveldtog* of 1952 should thus be seen as part of a whole tradition of objectification of the Afrikaans woman. M S P Pienaar (Kruger 1988 sup. 1), the chairperson of the *Vrou- en Moederbeweging* summarised the reasons for a *Moedersveldtog* in the word *volksdiens* when she said that 'the deeds of the mothers are a continuous source of strength and motivation'.

The idea of *volksdiens* presents an interesting context in which to examine the making of the Tapestry. By introducing the idea of a tapestry at a meeting of the *Vrou- en Moederbeweging*, in the year of *Moedershuldiging* 1952, the Afrikaans woman is located both as subject and object. As object she is honoured in the *Moedershuldiging* campaign, but at the same time she is seeking to give something back to the nation. The process which venerated her as object for her *volksdiens*, was the same process which laid the foundation for an opportunity to operate as subject in history - to render *volksdiens* - by executing the Tapestry.

In my opinion it is this fluctuation between the status of women as subject and object which underlies the concept of the *volksmoeder* and which is in fact present throughout the history of the Afrikaans *volksmoeder*. This ambiguous fluctuation is implied in the words of Anne McClintock (1993:72):

[t]he icon of the *volksmoeder* is paradoxical. On the one hand, it recognises the power of (white) motherhood; on the other hand, it is a retrospective icono-



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graphy of gender containment...within an iconography of domestic service.

Because of the generic category of mother, the *volksmoeder* was doomed to operate within the domestic sphere - as object, but also ironically enough, when she tried to present herself as subject.



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The Tapestry, however, provided a way of escaping the domestic sphere in order to enter the public sphere. Kruger (*Golden Fleece* 1979:27) comments that the Tapestry had the:

1 Nellie Kruger, the initiator of the Voortrekker Tapestry

2 Tapestry panel: The Birthday

3 Tapestry panel: Outspan at Thaba Tchu

4 Two of the embroiders, M S Pienaar and J F Coetzer and their guest Sannie Visser review pictorial documentation of the making of the Tapestry



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deep-sensitivity of a language true to women - a language without words [spoken] through the medium of needle and wool.

It is this 'language without words' which granted the women limited symbolical representation in the public sphere: the Tapestry signified a symbolic language which enabled the women to transcend their containment in the domestic sphere and to enter the public sphere.

One of the ways in which the symbolic language of the Voortrekker Tapestry manifested itself was through labour. The fact that the Tapestry took almost eight years to complete, is standard information whenever it is discussed. The type of labour that is needed for needlework - whether embroidery or tapestry - invokes the domestic sphere. The image of the embroidering woman with 'eyes lowered, head bent, shoulders hunched - the position [which] signifies repression and subjugation' (Parker 1984:10) - conjures up the domestic woman. Kruger (1988 sup. 47d) described a typical needlework class when she writes 'the women sat very still embroidering...They are not in any hurry, but completely devoted to a task that pleases them'. Parker (1984:10) writes that the embroiderer's silence also suggests 'a self-containment, a kind of autonomy'.

The manner in which embroidery signifies both self-containment and submission is the key to understanding women's relation to the art. Embroidery has provided a source of pleasure and power for women, while being linked to their powerlessness (Parker 1984:11).

In this sense the *volksmoeder* as object and subject is condensed in

the embroiderer whose silence signifies both her powerlessness and her subjugation, and her self-containment and autonomy:

Paradoxically, while embroidery was employed to inculcate femininity in women, it also enabled them to negotiate the constraints of femininity (Parker 1984:11).

Ambivalent status: tapestry as art or craft

Tapestry, usually a domestic activity, was brought into the public sphere, and consequently Kruger, consciously or not, tried to change the perception of tapestry from 'craft' to 'art'. She repeatedly pleaded for the recognition of the Tapestry as art. Kruger recognised something of the separation between 'art' and 'craft', and she attempted to present her 'craft' as 'art' in order to stress the importance of the Tapestry.

Kruger's attempt to change the status of tapestry from 'craft' to 'art', was effected by invoking earlier tapestries with the aim of establishing not only a local, but also an

international tradition of embroidery. The Bayeux Tapestry of c.1088 provided enough justification for Afrikaans women to believe that their Tapestry, too, could become an everlasting document of Afrikaner history captured through their skill and devotion. Kruger (1988 sup. 3) went so far as to say

...it feels to me as if the Afrikaans women can create a piece of art greater than the famous Bayeux Tapestry. We just have to start.

There was also a local tradition of embroidery in the form of historical tapestries, and of the teaching of needlework skills to women. In December 1947 and in January 1948, Kruger - then the editor of the women's section of *Die Ruiter* - published two articles in this weekly journal.

The first article focused on an embroidery (*muurkleed*) which was executed in 1915 by a branch of the *Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie* (SAVF) in Pretoria, and the second on a piece of needlework which was made by M G Wapenaar in 1917. Wapenaar embroidered the names of Voortrekkers, and of the members of the national parliament and provincial council of 1919, on a bedspread. Although Kruger does not claim these two pieces to be outstanding works of art, they enabled her to postulate a tradition of embroidery, thereby raising the esteem that needlework as a 'craft' held.

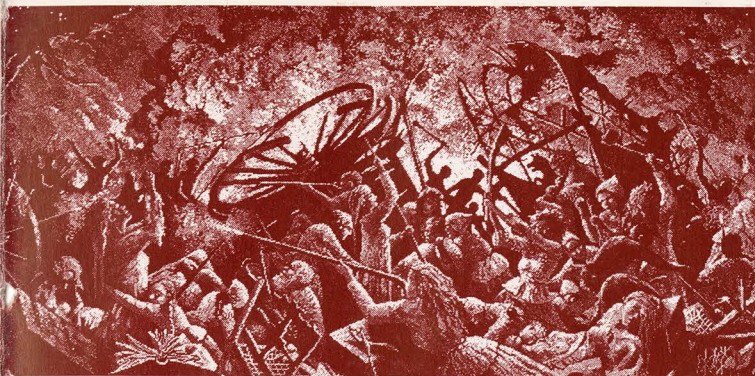
By using the terms 'tapestry' and 'embroidery' indiscriminately, they become generic forms which enable Kruger to articulate a tradition of 'women's work'. Furthermore, both the 1915 and 1917 examples employ only written forms, whereas images form the basis of the Voortrekker Tapestry. Although Kruger was



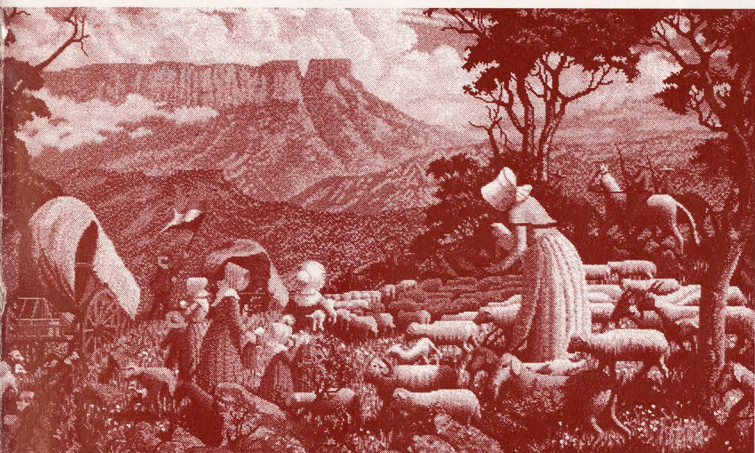
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5 Nellie Kruger looks on as Mrs Lena Nicol, wife of the Administrator of the Transvaal, works a few stitches

6 Tapestry panel: Bible Study



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7 Tapestry panel:
Murder at Bloukrans

8 Tapestry panel:
Joyful Prospect
(*Blijde Vooruitzicht*)

9 Two of the embroiders,
M Steyn and M S Pienaar
examining a panel

The separation of 'art' and 'craft' is duplicated in the gender-based division of labour. Needlework is the domain of women, to be done in the domestic sphere. The moment it moves into the public sphere - into the domain of men - it is subjected to criticism and exposed to external constructions of women's work. Some of these external constructions become apparent when the Board of Control of the Voortrekker Monument would only accept the gift tapestry 'if it is satisfactory in quality and object' (1988 sup. 7). In her response Kruger (1988:5) reinforced these constructions of what 'women's work' entailed:

Just as the Board of Control of the Voortrekker Monument would only accept our gift if the quality of the work was satisfactory, Coetzer also had his reservations. We did not blame them.

not explicit about this, the implication was that the Voortrekker Tapestry was an improvement on the earlier tradition, not only in scale and form, but also in content.

In the tradition of needlework, earlier masters/teachers who guaranteed the continuity of the tradition, hold a seminal position. Kruger (1988 sup. 3) refers to Emily Hobhouse, who first saw the *kunssin* (artistry) and talent of the Afrikaans women and consequently wanted to teach them weaving, spinning and lace making. Subsequently Juanita Grant (Kruger 1988 sup. 3) said of the Afrikaans woman that 'she possesses a talent that will astound the world should she get the opportunity to develop it'. Grant referred to the talent of needlework and she became the pioneer of art needlework (*kunsnaaldwerk*) in South Africa.

By establishing a tradition of needlework, Kruger wanted to ensure that the Voortrekker Tapestry would be regarded with due respect, she wanted to raise its status from a mere 'craft' to that of 'art'.

Although Kruger supplied the Tapestry with a history, she simultaneously campaigned for tapestry and needlework as inherently female activities. Ironically, this insistence that tapestry is inherent to women and naturally women's work, discounted it as art. Kruger (1988 sup. 8) says that Afrikaans women want to pay respect to their nation

in a womanly manner...with women's powers and women's talents', and...since the woman's part is emphasised [in the Voortrekker Tapestry], wool and needle were considered to be an exceptionally suitable medium (Kruger s.a.:4).

We understood. They were men who had to consider a proposal of women's work completely unknown to them.

Despite her attempts to locate the Voortrekker Tapestry in the realm of art, Kruger repeatedly referred to the women embroidering the panels as the 'workers'. They stood in an asymmetrical relationship to the 'artist' Coetzer, who designed the panels. The idea of a craft workshop was set up where there was one designer/artist and numerous workers. Parker and Pollock (1981:69) write that in craft history the concern is more with the objects - how they were made, their purpose and function - than with the makers, who are of secondary importance.



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When permission was asked from the Board of Control of the Voortrekker Monument for the women to embroider their names onto the panels which they executed, the wish was granted provided that '...[they] would not be prominent' (Kruger 1988:29). This decision represents an attempt to undermine the 'art' status of tapestry and the creative contribution

of the women. The name of the artist who designed the tapestries may (must) appear on the tapestries, but the so-called workers have to request permission to add theirs. Nevertheless, their names do appear and the Tapestry is very much the work of individual persons. Despite the fact that the women were referred to as 'workers', which implies a degree of anonymity and therefore a lack of creative input, the nine women received abundant praise and recognition both in the ranks of the *Vrou- en Moederbeweging* and in the press. Every time a tapestry was either presented to a worker or given back after completion, a social function was arranged and attended by the press and other notables. Despite the fact that Kruger referred to the women as workers in a craft context, they were accorded prominence and represented through their names on the individual panels. Once again the parameters which are used to distinguish between 'art' and 'craft' seem to be obscured by numerous contradictions.

Conclusion

Kruger attempted to raise people's esteem of tapestry from 'craft' to 'art', and because of the intimate relationship between needlework and femininity, she was 'negotiating the constraints of femininity'. By attempting to change people's views about the categories of 'art' and 'craft' - although perhaps not always very convincingly - Kruger was, by implication, also trying to change traditional assumptions about women.

These attempts to change the status of the Tapestry were repeatedly frustrated by either external or internal - Kruger's own - constructions of women's work. The Tapestry seems to fluctuate between the categories of art and craft



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in a way that is analogous to the fluctuation of the *volksmoeder* between the status of subject and object.

ENDNOTES

1. Although there is more than one tapestry, the official name is The Voortrekker Tapestry / Die Voortrekker tapisserie.

2. They were M S Pienaar, J W Prinsloo (three panels), H Rossouw (two panels), N Kruger (two panels), J F Coetzer (two panels), H J Combrinck, M B de Wet, A W Steyn (two panels) and M R Oosthuizen.

3. Fifteen panels measuring 36" in width, ten panels of 5', four panels of 6' and one panel of 9' in length.

4. Quotation marks are used with terms like 'art' and 'craft' to indicate questioning of these concepts and to avoid reinforcing existing hierarchies of 'high' versus 'low' art.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

All illustrations are from N Kruger *Die Geskiedenis van die Voortrekkermuurtapisserie*, Courtesy of the ATKV.

10 Tapestry panel:
detail from Vegkop 1836

11 Tapestry panel:
detail from The Departure



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