

Anonymous was a Woman

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Keywords: Cocoon, narrative



My design was inspired by the discovery of a rich history of strong women on my mother's side. This discovery came about as I was studying the history of ancient textiles and learned that string skirts are among the oldest extant clothing (Barber, 1995). Today we can only guess at the purpose or meaning of these ancient string skirts. However, strings in modern times are symbolically associated with connections; and I chose to create a cocoon coat (symbolizing shelter and comfort of family) out of a web of yarns and thread to explore and preserve the history of the women in my maternal lineage. Thirteen women, spanning seven generations, are represented in this coat. The oldest woman represented is my great-great grandmother who was born in the mid-1800s, and the youngest female is my 13-year-old granddaughter. Each of these women's lives are/were varied and adventurous. This cocoon coat is designed as a celebration of the collective spirit of the women in my family.

To celebrate each life, silk organza envelopes containing a photo of each woman, as well as mementos and symbols of specific events in our lives, are suspended in this string web. Hundreds of years from now, when the threads rot away and the envelopes reveal their contents (glimpses of mysterious lives once lived fully,) I envision my coat being just as mysterious as those early string skirts are to us.

The outer web of fabric was created using a variety of yarns and threads on a wash-away stabilizer. I began by laying out a lattice grid using the prominent chenille yarn. The grid was placed on top of a piece of water-soluble stabilizer. The stabilizer was pieced together to be wide enough so the finished fabric web was seamless. Other yarns and threads of gray, silver, and taupe were added to the grid. Another layer of water-soluble stabilizer was added, sandwiching in the threads, which were pinned carefully and rolled up to take to the sewing machine, where machine stitching was applied to the entire piece, vertically and horizontally, to secure the yarns when the stabilizer was washed away. The pattern piece was then traced onto

the fabric in progress, and a yarn was couched around the pattern edges to provide a stable shape. Once the stabilizer was removed, the cocoon coat was assembled with a soft layer of wool gauze beneath the web. Bias tape created from the wool gauze was hand stitched to finish the edges.

The silk organza envelopes were created using digitizing software, sewn out on an embroidery machine, pressed, folded, and then hand-stitched into their envelope shapes. The shapes for the envelopes were taken from envelopes found in my mother's things. Images of paper items were transferred to silk fabrics using two transfer techniques (one using a xylene blender and the other a transfer paper.) Mementoes include a variety of items, such as a wedding ring, ration stamps, World's Fair tickets, and a newspaper article reporting on how my mom delivered a patient's baby in an ambulance during a snow storm. Hand beading completed the ornamentation.



Works Cited

Barber, E. W. (1995). *Women's work: The first 20,000 years: Women, cloth, and society in early times*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.