

BEYOND DOMESTICITY

REVALUING GENDERED TEXTILE ARTS IN THE CONTEXT OF RELATIONAL PROSPERITY

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical undervaluation of textile crafts in Western societies, largely due to their association with female labor. Often dismissed as “women’s work,” textile arts have been marginalized despite their rich cultural and social significance (Nochlin, 1971). This study challenges these perceptions by emphasizing the value of textile crafts in fostering a more relational and ethically grounded vision of prosperity in fashion. Through an analysis of communal practices like knitting groups, the paper explores how textile arts function as forms of relational art (Newmeyer, 2008). These practices nurture community, preserve cultural heritage, and act as platforms for social and political expression. They embody a prosperity rooted not in commerce but in social connection and collective well-being. A case study of Italian textile artist Maria Lai illustrates how textile arts can reshape relationships with urban space and reframe fashion as inclusive and sustainable. Lai’s work, grounded in personal narrative and community engagement, highlights the potential of textile crafts to move from the margins to the center of a more ethical fashion discourse. Ultimately, this paper calls for a revaluation of textile material culture as a path toward sustainable, relational prosperity in the fashion industry.

Keywords: *Heritage, Gender, Textile, Relational art, Community*

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, certain artistic and cultural practices have been undervalued, often because they are linked to gendered labor. Textile crafts—like knitting, weaving, embroidery, and quilting—are prime examples. These forms of creativity have often been dismissed as “women’s work” and confined to the domestic sphere, leaving them excluded from the domains of high art and economic recognition (Gullickson & Hafter, 1997). This pattern reflects deep-seated societal biases that devalue activities associated with femininity, seeing them as less important. In Western cultures, the connection between textile crafts and the domestic realm has further entrenched their marginalization, limiting their acknowledgment as valuable

contributions to culture or the economy (Costin, 2012).

Yet, textile arts are far more than decorative or utilitarian objects. They hold profound cultural, social, and political significance. These crafts carry rich histories and narratives, often embodying the traditions and struggles of entire communities. As creative practices, they foster human connection, build social ties, and even create spaces for political expression, especially when pursued collectively (Corbett & Housley, 2011a). By dismissing textile crafts, society misses the opportunity to recognize their artistic power and their potential to contribute to more inclusive and ethical cultural and economic systems.

This paper seeks to challenge these entrenched biases by reframing textile crafts as central to a more relational and ethically grounded concept of prosperity in fashion. Unlike conventional ideas of prosperity, which are often tied to economic metrics, relational prosperity focuses on human relationships, community well-being, and cultural sustainability. By examining textile arts as a form of relational art, this study emphasizes their ability to connect people, preserve heritage, and inspire sustainable practices within the fashion industry.

The analysis begins with an exploration of the historical and gendered biases that have long marginalized textile crafts, setting the foundation for revaluing their cultural and economic importance. Using relational art theory, the paper argues that communal textile practices represent a unique kind of prosperity—one that transcends material wealth and emphasizes shared human experiences. To illustrate this, it examines the work of Maria Lai, an Italian artist whose textile creations demonstrate the transformative potential of these crafts. By situating Lai's art within the broader framework of relational prosperity, the research highlights the vital role of textile arts in shaping a more inclusive, ethical, and sustainable future for fashion.

Ultimately, the paper advocates for a paradigm shift in how textile material culture is valued within the fashion industry. It calls for a move away from profit-driven priorities and toward a model that centers on relational, ethical, and sustainable practices. By embracing this perspective, the fashion industry can redefine prosperity in a way that supports both human and environmental well-being.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF TEXTILE ARTS

The history of textile arts is deeply woven into the cultural and social fabric of gender dynamics, particularly in Western societies. Textile crafts—knitting, weaving, quilting, and embroidery—have traditionally been linked to domestic labor and femininity (Chen, 2019). Consequently, they have often been dismissed as secondary to other artistic forms, viewed as practical rather than expressive, and confined to the private realm. This marginalization stems not from a lack of skill or creativity in textile work but from deeply ingrained biases

that equate women's labor with lower cultural and economic value (Hermkens, 2007).

These attitudes are rooted in historical narratives that elevated male-dominated forms of artistic and economic production. As feminist art historian Linda Nochlin famously noted in her 1971 essay *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*, systemic barriers excluded women from participating in elite cultural spaces (Nochlin, 2021). Textile crafts, predominantly practiced by women, were categorized as “craft” instead of “art”—a distinction that diminished their perceived value. Industrialization further reinforced these biases, divorcing textiles from their artisanal origins and associating them with mechanization and alienated labor (Dragicevic Curkovic, 2021).

Despite this, textile arts have long been a powerful medium for cultural preservation and innovation. Throughout history, they have served as tools for storytelling, identity formation, and community cohesion (Kelly, 2014). Medieval embroidered textiles, for instance, were far more than decorative objects; they encoded genealogies, religious stories, and historical events (K. Rudy & Baert, 2007). Similarly, the long-debated history of African American quilting traditions in the 19th century combined practicality with resistance, with patterns often embedding symbols of freedom along the Underground Railroad (Kimberly Wulfert, 2010). Is worth mentioning the scholarly dispute on Underground Railroad patterns.

These examples challenge the simplistic view of textile arts as mere domestic handiwork, highlighting their depth and cultural significance.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, feminist artists and scholars have worked to reclaim and redefine textile crafts as a form of resistance against patriarchal norms (Kelly, 2014). Feminist art movements of the 1970s, for example, elevated the status of “women's work,” integrating it into the broader art historical canon (Felshin, 1995). Artists like Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro disrupted traditional hierarchies by incorporating textiles into their art, asserting their place within the fine arts arena. More recently, scholars have highlighted how textile crafts operate as subversive aesthetic strategies, offering tools for feminist critique and political expression (Wells, 2021).

Yet, the perception of textile arts remains complex and contradictory. On one hand, they are celebrated in certain contexts as high art or vital cultural heritage. On the other, they continue to be

undervalued in mainstream artistic and economic discourses (Nelson et al., 2005). This tension reflects larger societal struggles to fully recognize traditionally feminized labor and its intersections with cultural identity, heritage, and economic equity.

By critically examining the historical and gendered biases surrounding textile arts, we can begin to unravel the prejudices that have long marginalized these practices. Reframing textile crafts as central to cultural production—not peripheral—creates space for a more inclusive and equitable understanding of their artistic and social contributions. This reevaluation is vital, not only for honoring these crafts but also for developing relational prosperity models that celebrate their role in fostering community, preserving heritage, and promoting sustainable cultural practices.

RELATIONAL ART AND ITS ROLE IN PROSPERITY

Relational art, as theorized by Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* (1998), shifts the focus of art from creating objects to cultivating social experiences and connections (Martin, 2007; Nicolas Bourriaud, 1998). This perspective provides a compelling framework for examining textile arts, particularly their ability to foster relationships, build communities, and create spaces for collective engagement. Textile crafts, often practiced in communal settings, exemplify relational art by emphasizing human interaction and the shared process of creation (Burisch, 2016). This quality aligns naturally with a reimagined concept of prosperity—one rooted in relationships rather than transactions.

Traditional definitions of prosperity tend to focus on material wealth and individual achievement. In contrast, relational prosperity prioritizes social cohesion, cultural sustainability, and ethical practices (Diwan, 2000). Textile arts, through their inherently relational nature, offer a tangible model for this alternative understanding of prosperity. Consider communal knitting groups: the act of creating together fosters meaningful connections among participants, turning individual artistic efforts into shared experiences. These gatherings often become spaces for storytelling, mutual support, and even political expression, transcending the physical outcomes of the craft to generate invaluable forms of human wealth (Michna, 2020).

The political dimensions of relational art

within textile crafts are particularly noteworthy. Crafting has historically been intertwined with resistance and social critique. During the suffragette movement, for example, embroidery and banner-making were powerful tools for visibility and empowerment, embedding messages of solidarity into fabric (D. Jones, 2020). In recent years, movements like craftivism have emerged, combining traditional crafting techniques with activism to address contemporary issues such as climate change, labor rights, and gender inequality (Corbett & Housley, 2011b). These examples demonstrate how the relational nature of textile practices can foster not only social prosperity but also systemic change.

In addition to their political relevance, textile crafts play a vital role in preserving cultural heritage. Practices such as weaving, embroidery, and quilting often pass down through generations, creating a living archive of communal knowledge and tradition. By engaging in these crafts, practitioners reaffirm their ties to their communities and histories, transforming individual acts of creation into collective acts of memory (Sotomayor & García, 2019). This relational dynamic is particularly profound in Indigenous and marginalized communities, where textile arts frequently serve as tools for cultural resilience and identity preservation (Newmeyer, 2008).

Within the fashion industry, the principles of relational art present a radical alternative to the commodification and alienation that dominate conventional production models. By adopting relational practices, the industry can pivot toward a concept of prosperity that centers ethical relationships over profit. This might involve re-centering the role of craftspeople, fostering transparency in production processes, and embracing the collaborative potential of textile arts. Such an approach would not only elevate the cultural value of fashion but also align with sustainability goals, promoting human-centered and environmentally conscious practices (Senanayake & Gunasekara Hettiarachige, 2020).

Relational prosperity, as embodied in textile arts, offers a vision of the future where creativity, community, and ethical practice are deeply interconnected. By valuing the relational dimensions of these crafts, we take a step toward redefining prosperity in ways that honor both human and environmental interdependence. Textile arts thus transcend their status as cultural artifacts;

they become active agents in shaping a more inclusive and sustainable understanding of wealth and well-being.

REIMAGINING PROSPERITY IN FASHION

The concept of prosperity has traditionally been tied to economic growth and material accumulation. Within the fashion industry, this paradigm manifests in the prioritization of profit-driven practices, mass production, and conspicuous consumption. However, these models often exacerbate social inequalities and environmental degradation, prompting the need for alternative frameworks. Reimagining prosperity in fashion involves shifting the focus from mercantile success to relational, ethical, and sustainable values. Textile arts, with their emphasis on community, heritage, and shared creativity, provide a blueprint for this transformation.

At the core of this reimagined prosperity is the recognition that wealth is not solely material but also relational. Textile crafts exemplify this principle by fostering human connections and cultural exchange. Practices like communal knitting circles, embroidery workshops, and weaving cooperatives create spaces where individuals come together, collaborate, and share knowledge (S. Jones, 2022). These interactions generate forms of social wealth that cannot be quantified in economic terms but are essential for individual and collective well-being. By integrating such relational practices into the fashion industry, we can move toward a model of prosperity that values people and their connections as much as products.

Sustainability is another critical dimension of this reimagined prosperity. The fast fashion industry has long been criticized for its unsustainable practices, from exploitative labor conditions to excessive waste generation. By contrast, textile crafts are often rooted in principles of resourcefulness and longevity. Many traditional crafting techniques, such as hand-weaving and natural dyeing, rely on renewable resources and prioritize quality over quantity. Incorporating these practices into contemporary fashion production not only reduces environmental impact but also reinforces the idea of prosperity as stewardship of shared resources.

Ethics plays a vital role in this new vision of prosperity. Revaluing textile arts requires addressing the systemic inequities that have marginal-

ized these crafts and their practitioners. The global fashion industry often relies on the labor of artisans and craftspeople in the Global South, yet their contributions are frequently undercompensated and undervalued (Bick et al., 2018). Reimagining prosperity involves recognizing and fairly compensating the skill and creativity of these workers, ensuring that the benefits of their labor are equitably distributed. Additionally, it calls for greater transparency and accountability in fashion supply chains, fostering relationships of trust and mutual respect between brands, makers, and consumers.

Maria Lai's work offers a compelling example of how textile arts can embody this reimagined prosperity. Her projects, deeply rooted in community engagement, demonstrate how fashion and art can serve as tools for fostering social cohesion and cultural resilience (Huang & Anderson, 2019). By using textiles to narrate local histories and engage with urban spaces, Lai's work transcends the aesthetic to address relational, ethical, and environmental concerns. Her practice highlights the potential of textile crafts to inspire a more inclusive and sustainable approach to fashion, one that values collaboration over competition and legacy over short-term gain.

Reimagining prosperity in fashion is not merely an aspirational goal; it is a necessary response to the crises of inequality and unsustainability that plague the industry. By drawing on the principles exemplified by textile arts—relationality, sustainability, and ethics—fashion can redefine its purpose and role in society. This shift requires a collective effort, involving brands, designers, policymakers, and consumers in the creation of systems that prioritize human and environmental well-being over profit. In doing so, fashion can become a conduit for a more inclusive and equitable prosperity, one that reflects the interconnected nature of our global community.

CASE STUDY: MARIA LAI'S CONTRIBUTION

Maria Lai (1919–2013), an Italian textile artist from Sardinia, serves as a profound example of how textile crafts can embody relational prosperity in fashion and art. Her work challenges traditional hierarchies of artistic value, emphasizing community, heritage, and the interplay between the personal and collective. By integrating textile arts into public and participatory practices, Lai redefined the role of

craft in cultural production, illustrating its capacity to foster social connections, preserve traditions, and inspire ethical approaches to creation and consumption.

Lai's artistic practice was deeply intertwined with her Sardinian roots. Her works drew on the traditions, narratives, and landscapes of her native region, transforming them into universal expressions of relationality. One of her most iconic projects, *Legarsi alla Montagna* (*Binding to the Mountain*, 1981), exemplifies her approach to art as a communal experience. Commissioned by the mayor of Ulassai, a small Sardinian village, the project engaged the entire community in a symbolic act of connection (Iannelli & Marelli, 2019).

For this performance, Lai invited villagers to bind their homes to the nearby mountain with ribbons, creating a physical and metaphorical thread that united the community. The project was inspired by a local legend about a girl who was saved from a collapsing mountain by following a ribbon. By referencing this story, Lai linked the collective memory of the village to a shared creative act, transforming an abstract concept of unity into a tangible and participatory experience. *Legarsi alla Montagna* illustrates how textile materials, when used relationally, can transcend their utilitarian origins to foster connections and build social prosperity.

While Maria Lai's work is often celebrated for its poetic and communal qualities, it is equally crucial to acknowledge its political implications. Her practice, though not explicitly framed within traditional political discourse, performs a form of soft resistance—one that challenges dominant narratives of authorship, power, and value through relational and material means. In "Legarsi alla Montagna," for instance, the act of binding a village together with fabric becomes a metaphor for social cohesion, but also for reclaiming agency in the face of institutional and cultural fragmentation. By inviting collective participation, Lai subverts the hierarchy between artist and audience, and by using textile—a medium historically relegated to the private, feminine, and marginal—she reclaims and elevates a mode of expression often excluded from dominant art and political arenas.

This politicization of care, memory, and community through textile art resonates with contemporary forms of craftivism, where traditional crafts are employed as tools for social critique

and protest. Lai's work prefigures these movements, using the language of thread, stitching, and weaving to construct a counter-narrative to both patriarchal art histories and capitalist frameworks of production. Her pieces become sites of micro-political intervention: slow, embodied, and rooted in place, but deeply critical of systems that displace, silence, or commodify. In this sense, Lai exemplifies how textile arts can operate not only as cultural or aesthetic contributions, but as instruments of political imagination and communal empowerment.

Maria Lai's work exemplifies the transformative potential of textile arts when applied to urban and public spaces. Her projects not only blurred the boundaries between art, craft, and social practice but also redefined the role of public spaces as sites for connection, storytelling, and collective memory. Through her innovative use of textiles, Lai demonstrated how urban spaces could become relational environments, fostering a sense of community and cultural identity.

URBAN SPACES AS CANVASES FOR CONNECTION

Lai's *Legarsi alla Montagna* (*Binding to the Mountain*, 1981) is perhaps the most striking example of her impact on urban and communal spaces. By asking the villagers of Ulassai to participate in binding their homes to a mountain with fabric ribbons, Lai transformed the town into a living artwork. This act turned the village into both a literal and metaphorical tapestry, connecting individuals to each other and their shared environment. The ribbons, with their fluid, colorful presence, reimagined the village as a space of unity and creativity, transcending its physical boundaries to engage with natural and symbolic elements.

This project highlights the potential of textile arts to redefine urban spaces as places of relational prosperity (Price, 2015). By involving local communities in the creative process, Lai challenged the conventional top-down approach to public art, which often imposes external visions onto communities. Instead, her work emphasized co-creation, weaving together the narratives of individuals into a shared, collective story. This approach not only strengthened the community's ties to their environment but also fostered a sense of ownership and pride in their cultural heritage.

While Lai's work is rooted in the context of Sardinia, her methods and principles have broad applicability. Textile-based interventions in urban

spaces have the potential to address a range of global challenges, from fostering social inclusion to promoting sustainability (Gasparini, 2021). In contexts of urban fragmentation, for instance, participatory textile projects can serve as tools for bridging divides between different social, cultural, or economic groups (Suarez-Visbal et al., 2023). By inviting diverse communities to collaborate on shared creations, such projects generate dialogues and connections that transcend barriers (Scher, 2007).

Textile arts also offer unique possibilities for environmental awareness in urban spaces. Fabric-based installations can draw attention to issues of waste and sustainability by utilizing recycled or locally sourced materials. Temporary textile works, such as large-scale banners or installations, can engage urban populations in conversations about resource conservation and the environmental impact of the fashion industry.

Lai's use of textile materials was not incidental but deeply intentional. She understood textiles as carriers of cultural heritage, particularly in Sardinia, where weaving and embroidery have long been central to local identity. Her works often incorporated traditional Sardinian techniques and motifs, blending them with contemporary artistic approaches. For Lai, the act of weaving symbolized both the preservation and reinterpretation of tradition, bridging past and present.

One notable example is her *Geografie* series, in which she used sewn thread to create intricate maps on fabric. These maps were not literal but abstract, representing emotional and narrative landscapes rather than geographic ones. Through these pieces, Lai emphasized the importance of storytelling and personal memory in the preservation of cultural identity. Her *Geografie* demonstrated that textile arts are not static artifacts but dynamic practices capable of evolving while retaining their connection to heritage.

Textile arts, as illustrated by Lai's work, can play a significant role in cultural preservation and urban renewal. Sardinia, Lai's homeland, has long been characterized by a rich textile tradition, which she integrated into her projects as a way to celebrate and preserve local heritage. In doing so, Lai elevated crafts historically associated with rural and domestic spaces, bringing them into urban and public contexts.

This repositioning of textile arts challenges the traditional divide between "high" and "low"

culture, offering a model for how urban spaces can become platforms for the celebration of diverse artistic practices. For cities grappling with issues of cultural erasure and homogenization, such approaches provide a framework for integrating local traditions into urban renewal projects. Textile installations, for example, can transform public spaces into dynamic arenas that celebrate communal identity and historical continuity while encouraging creative engagement from residents and visitors alike (Price, 2015).

BEYOND THE URBAN: THE BROADER INFLUENCE OF LAI'S METHODS

Lai's approach to textile arts extends beyond urban spaces, offering insights into the broader potential of textiles as tools for social and cultural transformation. Her methods—grounded in participation, storytelling, and relationality—highlight the ability of textile crafts to foster connections across different scales, from intimate, localized interactions to broader societal movements.

In rural or underserved areas, textile-based projects inspired by Lai's work can be used to strengthen community ties and preserve cultural traditions. For instance, workshops or collaborative art-making sessions can provide spaces for intergenerational dialogue, ensuring that traditional techniques are passed on while fostering innovation. Similarly, the relational aspects of textile arts can inspire new approaches to community-driven design, emphasizing co-creation and inclusivity in both urban and rural settings.

The legacy of Maria Lai underscores the profound potential of textile arts to reshape how we understand and use urban spaces. By incorporating textiles into public and communal art projects, designers and artists can redefine these spaces as dynamic environments that prioritize relationality, inclusivity, and cultural sustainability.

In this way, textile arts become not only vehicles for aesthetic expression but also catalysts for broader societal change. They encourage us to view cities and communities as interconnected networks of people, histories, and practices, woven together in a shared tapestry of human experience. Lai's work invites us to imagine a future where textiles, long associated with the domestic and the personal, take on a central role in shaping public and collective life.

Her approach stands in stark contrast to the exploitative practices of the fast fashion industry, which often deplete natural resources and

marginalize artisanal labor. Lai's art highlights how textiles can embody an ethical relationship with the material world, promoting practices that prioritize care and stewardship.

Furthermore, Lai's commitment to collaboration and inclusivity serves as a model for ethical relationality in artistic and fashion contexts. Many of her projects involved collective participation, transforming audiences from passive observers into active co-creators. This participatory element disrupted traditional notions of authorship and authority, reflecting her belief in art as a shared human endeavor. Such an approach aligns with the relational prosperity model, which values community engagement and shared responsibility over individual profit or recognition.

Lai's contributions provide a compelling case for how textile arts can inform a reimagined fashion industry rooted in relational prosperity. Her work illustrates that textiles are not merely raw materials for clothing but carriers of cultural, social, and ethical value. By integrating the principles exemplified by Lai's art—community engagement, sustainability, and cultural heritage—fashion can move toward a model that prioritizes human connection and environmental stewardship over commercial gain.

Through her visionary approach, Maria Lai not only elevated the status of textile crafts but also demonstrated their potential to shape more inclusive and sustainable futures. Her work serves as both a critique of and an alternative to the profit-driven paradigms of the fashion industry, offering a roadmap for practices that honor relational, ethical, and cultural dimensions of prosperity.

CONCLUSION

The undervaluation of textile crafts in Western societies, rooted in gendered biases and industrial commodification, has long marginalized these practices as peripheral to cultural and economic discourse. Yet, as this paper has demonstrated, textile arts are far more than decorative or functional pursuits; they are profound expressions of cultural heritage, social connection, and creative resilience. Reframing textile crafts as central to a relational and ethically grounded concept of prosperity challenges traditional hierarchies and highlights their transformative potential within the fashion industry.

By exploring the historical context and gendered perceptions of textile arts, we have uncovered the systemic biases that have excluded these crafts from broader recognition. At the same time, relational art theory illuminates how textile practices foster human connections, build communities, and serve as platforms for political and cultural expression. The case study of Maria Lai exemplifies how textile arts can bridge the personal and communal, the past and the future, offering a compelling vision of prosperity that prioritizes relationships and sustainability over material gain. Textile material culture provides the fashion industry with a framework for innovation, sustainability, and equity. It encourages a shift from profit-driven models to practices that respect the cultural, social, and environmental dimensions of fashion. By valuing the labor, skill, and stories embedded in textiles, the industry can move toward a system that honors both the artisans who create these materials and the communities they sustain. This approach aligns with a broader reimagining of prosperity as a relational concept—one that sees wealth not in terms of accumulation but in terms of connections, shared resources, and mutual care. As the fashion industry faces mounting pressures to address issues of sustainability, cultural appropriation, and labor exploitation, the lessons of textile arts are more relevant than ever. Revaluing textile crafts offers a path forward, demonstrating how fashion can reconcile creativity with responsibility, heritage with innovation, and profit with ethics. This shift requires a collective commitment to challenging entrenched hierarchies, amplifying marginalized voices, and fostering collaborations that prioritize inclusivity and sustainability. Ultimately, the future of fashion lies in embracing its interconnectedness with culture, community, and the environment. Textile crafts, long relegated to the margins, are poised to play a central role in this transformation. By recognizing their value and potential, we can not only redefine prosperity in fashion but also contribute to a more just, equitable, and sustainable world.

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