



Tytuł

Unravelling the Fibre Art of Geta Brătescu

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Abstrakt

During the 1960s and 1970s, Romanian artist Geta Brătescu (1926–2018) integrated textile fabrics in her artistic practice. She expanded her collages of geometrical paper with collages of hand-sewn textile patches. I chose this Romanian case study of the 1970s in order to expand a post-war notion of abstraction with a female, tactile material, and peripheral perspective. This paper argues that Brătescu's abstract textile collages convey her marginalized gender identity, which also transcended her geographical marginalized position in Eastern Europe. Since the 2017 Venice Biennale, Brătescu's art has received international recognition, but as Adrienne Rich argued in her "Notes toward a Politics of Location" (1984), a woman's peripheral situation does not begin in a country, but with the geography of her body. For the first time, this original research sheds light on Brătescu's artworks with traditional female and tactile materials such as textiles, yarns and fibres. In 1978 Brătescu created the series Vestiges with textiles that carry Brătescu's personal memories, as she used her mother's old clothes. Her textile collages refer to Romanian traditional female craftsmanship, personal relations, women in mythology, and pictorial traditions of abstract painting. During the 1960s and 1970s, women painters in the art centre of New York tried to utilize abstraction's emancipatory potential as a non-binary formal language. However, for women artists, abstraction has always also been an ideological rather than a neutral aesthetic category. I claim that abstraction's aesthetic promise and ambivalence connect Brătescu's textile collages to a transnational but peripheral location as a woman artist. Thus, this case study proposes a social art-historical and formalist approach to overcome oppositional juxtapositions between centre and periphery and pursue a nuanced transnational perspective on women's

art of Eastern Europe.

Przepraszamy, ten wpis jest dostępny tylko w języku Amerykański Angielski.

Unravelling the Fibre Art of Geta Brătescu

Since her exhibition 'Apparitions' at the Venice Biennale in 2017, Romanian artist Geta Brătescu (1926–2018) has achieved international recognition for her lifelong artistic practice.¹ Brătescu was the first woman artist featured in a solo show and retrospective in the Romanian Pavilion in Venice. The exhibition, curated by Magda Radu, displayed her employment of different materials and media such as photography, video, lithography, drawing, paper collage and installation art, including fibre. This paper highlights her diverse employment of fibre, wool, yarn and textile patches in the artworks that she created throughout the post-war and post-communist era. From the 1960s until the early 1980s, variations of fibre appeared in her art, predominantly in three different forms: woven tapestries, embroidered drawings and hand-sewn textile collages. These three bodies of work structure the argument and exemplify how each technique reflected and wove in a mythological or personal motif, grounded in traditional folk art, ancient mythology, women's craft and family history. Moreover, Brătescu's textile art draws on a set of domestic techniques that points beyond local traditions and connects her to women artists' transnational fibre art practices. However, rather than seeking affiliation with a unified feminist project, Brătescu strove towards an independent subjective expression in her formal dedication to abstraction. More than pinning her artistic subject to her gendered or national heritage, though, I propose here to complicate transnational boundaries, in order to diversify the international map of fibre artists. Brătescu's fibre art does not refer to a consistent or unified practice, but rather reflects the complexities and contradictions of the environments and political climates she was working in.

Woven tapestries

The establishment of the International Tapestry Biennial in Lausanne (1962) played a pivotal role in the recognition of the tapestries and modern fibre art of Eastern European artists. During the first years, Polish art such as Magdalena Abakanowicz's fibre sculpture *Red Abakan* (*Abakan czerwony*, 1969) attracted a great deal of attention from the Swiss and French press.² The success of the Lausanne Biennial led to international interest in contemporary fibre art throughout the 1970s. Whereas art historical surveys have highlighted Abakanowicz's contribution to this movement early on, artists from other Eastern European countries remain understudied.³ Brătescu participated in 1965 and 1969 in the 2nd and 4th International Tapestry Biennials in Lausanne. In 1969, she exhibited a tapestry titled *Esop Unleashed* (*Esop dezlănțuit*, 1966).⁴ The

traditional craft of weaving formed Brătescu's approach towards textile work, as well as enabled her access to the International Biennial in Lausanne. Her tapestries embody these two notions – the traditional and the transnational – on one hand, in their traditional material and technical production and, on the other hand, in their formal and narrative drive towards a transnational language of abstraction. Whereas the 190 x 270 cm wall hanging followed traditional dimensions, the red outlines of the characters transition more into an abstract play of lines and forms, rather than represent Aesop, the Greek storyteller, one of Brătescu's most recurrent themes. The tapestry displays two heads that might belong to animals from his fables such as a camel, a bull, a lion or the author himself, as he is considered more an archetype than a historical figure. Talking about the meaning of Aesop in her work, Brătescu said: 'I have explicitly invoked Aesop – the character himself since he, even more so than the fable, seemed paradigmatic in a sense contrary to that of totalitarianism.'⁵

Art historian and curator Magda Radu has suggested that Aesop, who embodies unleashed creative energy and ultimate, unlimited freedom of expression represented an alter ego for Brătescu.⁶ This master of ancient fables entered her own universe and mind as the driving force of her art production, liberated from specific cultural meanings. Her underlying mythological themes and recurring archetypal references strive towards a transnational and narrative language of abstraction that distinguishes her work from global geometric movements of abstraction and Concrete art movements, usually associated with transnational abstraction.⁷



Geta Brătescu, *Composition (Compoziție)*, 1972, Tapestry, 194.5 x 74.5 cm / 76 5/8 x 29 3/8 inches Courtesy Manuela & Iwan Wirth Collection Photographer: Jon Etter

After exhibiting her tapestries at the International Tapestry Biennials in Lausanne, she continued creating tapestries throughout the early 1970s, including works such as *Axia* (1970), *Zburătorul* (1971), *Wind Instrument-Insect (Suflător-insectă)*, 1972), *Three Planes (Trei plane)*, 1972), *Flying Figure (Byzantine Spaceman) – Statură volantă (Cosmonaut bizantin)*(1972), *Round Stool and Curtain (Scaun rotund și draperie)*, 1972) and *Composition (Compoziție)*, 1972).⁸ Brătescu and other Central Eastern European artists, such as Abakanowicz, Wojciech Sadley, Jolanta Owidzka and Jagoda Buić, showcased modern principles of individual expression and artistic sovereignty, free from political ideologies imposed by the communist state.⁹ They employed raw materials, abstract forms and unusual

vertical and three-dimensional formats. Whereas in Lausanne, Brătescu's tapestries joined a progressive contemporary fibre art movement in Romania, her dedication to abstract characters and form as well as to essential characteristics of weaving allowed her work to exist between different public and private spheres. There were two types of folk art: one focused on producing communist objects and one centred on craft and local materials. The communist state authorities set up the Central Union of Handicraft Cooperatives (UCECOM) to produce folk art, in order to propagate national proletarian culture (*arta populara*).¹⁰ UCECOM received state commissions to produce red textiles with simple geometrical patterns. These significant red textiles of low industrialised quality differed from Romania's long-standing hand-woven traditions. Brătescu employed traditional weaving techniques and combined them with the abstract play of forms and characters, in order to pursue her individual artistic practice. Rather than seeking a form of resistance, abstraction allowed her to avoid an explicit political or ideological affiliation.

The vertical tapestry *Composition* is another hand-woven piece that pushed the abstraction of content further by focusing on the string, and transferring the idea of the line from her graphic art and drawings¹¹. The tapestry, 194.5 cm long and 74.5 cm wide, shows an asymmetrical composition with vertical orientation, determined by Brătescu's signature in the top left corner. Various shades of brown, beige and white fibre create abstract lines, bands and shapes that alternate between foreground and background, forming a network of geometrical and organic forms. Other than the woven structure, the tapestry does not share any details with ornamental and red dominated folk designs. Rather, Brătescu's tapestry design relates to compositions that she explored in drawings and the graphic arts. Brătescu always favoured drawing as the medium that felt 'most natural'.¹² Thus, all other media, such as lithography, photography or film, but also her collages, tapestries and textile work 'are or contain drawing'.¹³ In the early 1970s, she created two abstract lithographs *The Studio (Atelierul, 1971)* and *The Working Desk (The Artist's Desk) (Masa de lucru (Masa artistului)) (1970)*. The works' titles refer to her studio as production site and place of unlimited mental creativity. In her own words she described the studio as 'a sort of interior self-portrait'.¹⁴ The lithographs' intermingling lines and planes of different coloured density convey only an abstract idea of scattered materials on a working desk. The vertical tapestry *Composition* diminished any figurative reference and shifted the focus even more onto the relation between abstract lines and the qualities of the material surface. While lithography operates similarly to drawings, with lines and transparent effects and shades of grey, in Brătescu's woven tapestries interlacing threads of rather raw texture create a dense surface based on the structure of a grid.¹⁵ In its unravelled condition the spun yarn still relates to the line, but by fastening the threads, the material and structure interrelate with each other, which constitutes, what Anni Albers called, the 'essence of weaving'.¹⁶ In 1963, Albers defined woven textiles by 'this overlapping of outer and

inner characteristics'.¹⁷ Inner structure and outer tactile surface distinguish weaving from painting, as well as embroidery, which operate on the pictorial surface.¹⁸ The entanglement of threads refers inherently to the process of weaving rather than to a stable object.¹⁹ In the words of Romanian curator Andrei Pelsu, who wrote an essay for Brătescu's exhibition at the Simeza Gallery in 1981 in Bucharest, 'Symbolically, weaving is always accompanied by its reverse: unravelling.'²⁰ The engagement with the 'event of the thread'²¹ relates Brătescu's practice to transnational weaving techniques from Peruvian carpets, North American fibre sculptures to Romanian peasant art, more than to a national or ideological tradition of objects. Her tapestries incorporate the 'essence of weaving' in their technical production, and feature abstract compositions and mythological characters that embody her aspiration of liberated artistic expression. In this coalition, they incorporate and transform local craft traditions and transgress restrictive national and ideological boundaries.

Embroidered drawings

Although Brătescu did not proceed further making tapestries, she continued merging traditional craft with abstract, mythological figures of individual freedom and unleashed feminine creativity. She stopped weaving, 'because it was too difficult; it's too demanding.'²² Instead, she started to make embroidered textile works in the *Portraits of Medea (Portrete ale Medei)* series. Their production allowed more freedom in adapting the traditional craft. In this series, Brătescu designed a specific formal composition of an organic shape that resembled the outline of a head. Again, she first developed this outline in her drawings and litographs. Her drawing *Pre-Medeic Drawing (Form-Inform) (Desene pre-medice (Formă-informă) (1975–1978)* features morphological closed round figures in a composition of overlapping organic shapes. She developed this specific round outline from observations in nature. 'I had drawn an island landscape with a tree from above – a lithograph project. I held up the drawing to look at it – the drawing turned into a profile [...] I chose the portrait-side and repeated it in new variants.'²³ The various *Portraits of Medea* on textile includes the series *Medeic Callisthenic Moves (Exerciții medice, 1980–81)*, a set of six embroideries on bleached linen, *Metabola (1981)* and *Medea's 10 Hypostases (Medeea – 10 ipostaze, 1980)*, a series of ten stitched textile drawings.



Geta Brătescu *Hypostasis of Medea VIII (Ipostazele Medei VIII)* 1980 Coloured sewing on textile 85 x 60 cm / 33 1/2 x 23 5/8 inches Photographer: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zürich Courtesy Manuela & Iwan Wirth Collection

Other than hand-made Romanian embroidery, the various series share irregular stitching patterns, created with the sewing machine.

Straight and zig-zag stitches of coloured threads impregnate and constrain the textile surface. Other than weaving's reliance on the inner structure of the grid, the embroidery's constructive purpose is limited to fixing the textile layers onto the underlying beige ground. Most of the stitching serves a purely pictorial purpose, which she emphasises in her combinatorial techniques. While she mainly employed a sewing machine, certain parts reveal hand sewn additions. In the lower left corner of *Hypostasis of Medea VIII (Ipostazele Medei VIII)*, she threaded beige yarn through the loops of the white stitches on the grey textile. The sewing machine's repetitive labour did not completely cancel out the involvement of the artist's hand in the process. By connecting single stitches and crossing rows, she created a second, purely pictorial system of entanglement.

The combination of soft material and network of lines resemble an image of an animated organism. The Romanian word *rauri*, which describes a specific type of blouse embroidery, literally translates into 'river' and captures the consecutive and processual character of needlework. Brătescu draws upon the handmade technique of embroidery, traditionally executed by women in the upper classes of Victorian England, as well as Romanian peasant homes. However, she complicates the traditional notion of the craft by including the sewing machine and tackling painterly problems, such as the abstract employment of a line on a surface.

Moreover, Brătescu challenged traditional feminine character traits by dedicating her abstract portrait to the conflicted figure of Medea.

In Greek mythology, Medea's passionate love for Jason and her God-like powers make her assist him in acquiring the Golden Fleece. When Jason abandons Medea, she reveals her ability to act violently, by murdering her children and Jason's new wife Creusa.²⁴ Her personal traits counteract the sensible, gentle and caring archetypal feminine mother. However, her agency also symbolises radical liberation, by even surpassing the oppressor's violence. Medea appears in Brătescu's work along other free-spirited female figures such as Brecht's Mother Courage and the women in Goethe's Faust. She embraced the subjective identification with these female icons, as well as their allegorical status.²⁵ She claimed: 'Femininity is a specific energy – it is an aura, a light that is a gift and which enriches the world through diversity. Femininity and not feminism.'²⁶ The Medea series highlights how Brătescu followed a mythological and abstract notion in depicting these female archetypes and free creative expression, without reducing their complexity and ambivalence. She dismissed the political feminist project as a 'uniform'²⁷ but embraced femininity and maternity, referring to Jung's association with creativity. Thus, her stance towards feminism and femininity diverges from the Western European and North American feminist movement. Although, there was a considerable engagement with female characters and goddesses in mythology, second wave feminism dissociated its political project mainly from essential ideas of femininity, especially as motherhood's socialised legitimation for women's role as housewife became a target of Western feminism.

The situation was quite different in Central Eastern Europe. Although intact patriarchal structures still required women to take on the workload at home and within the family, the communist authorities provided progressive policies of gender equality in terms of work and education.²⁸ More than constraints by gender roles, artists who did not emigrate experienced complicated relations between the public and private spheres, enforced from the collective structures of the communist state. Artists in Romania, like Geta Brătescu and Ion Grigorescu, found most individual freedom by withdrawing to their individual resources, such as the studio and the body.²⁹ Brătescu and Grigorescu turned to the camera, and found, in video and photography, new media that allowed them to document their practices and bodily actions in their studios. Rather than political ideas and collective action, Brătescu intertwined mythology and abstraction, in order to bring more universal themes into her practice.

Hand-sewn textile collages

Nevertheless, I do not want to suggest that Brătescu worked and lived in isolation. Nicolae

Ceaușescu had developed one of the most totalitarian regimes in Central Eastern Europe by the mid-1970s. However, before Ceaușescu introduced the July Theses in 1971, which led to new repressive cultural measures, artists benefited from his alienation from Moscow and the Romanian thaw. In 1968, Ceaușescu assured his support to the Czechs for the Prague Spring and promised to liberalise culture.³⁰ Especially between the mid-1960s and early 1970s, Romanian artists participated in Biennials, international exhibitions such as 'Romanian Art Today' (1971) at the Richard Demarco Gallery in Edinburgh, and exchange programmes with the United States and Western Europe. During the 1970s, Brătescu travelled to Poland, Rome, exhibited in Romania and abroad. Moreover, despite her slightly dismissive attitude towards Western feminism as 'uniform', she still identified with certain bonds between women, when saying, 'Everything that I do or have done, I see as women's art.'³¹



Geta Brătescu *Vestiges (Vestigii)*, 1978 Textile collage on paper 35 x 50 cm / 13 4/5 x 19 5/8 in Photographer: Ștefan Sava Courtesy Luisa Malzoni Strina Collection
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In 1978, she created the series *Vestiges (Vestigii)*, which testifies to the relation between mother and daughter. The hand-sewn textile collages comprise scraps of her mother's old clothes in small, irregular and frayed compositions of different textures and colours. Concerning their materiality and scale, they appear to be the most intimate and also most fragile textile works. There are no underlying fabrics or multiple rows of stitches which could fix the worn-out, frayed and stained fibre pieces. Each collage follows a colour scheme, such as orange or violet, whereas patterns and materials of fibre vary in each work. Sometimes she integrated small patches of crocheted lace, which underline the delicacy of the work. Each textile collage conveys an individual aesthetic and memorial value. In *The Subversive Stitch*, art historian Rozsika Parker emphasised how embroidery signified not only a domestic technique but also the legacy from mother to daughter.³² Her study focuses on embroidery's meaning for women, as both a 'weapon of resistance' and 'source of constraint'.³³

A third notion, also introduced in Parker's study, addresses the reparative function of the needle.

Parker refers to psychoanalyst Melanie Klein and artist Louise Bourgeois. In the latter's words, 'The needle is used to repair damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. It is never aggressive, it's not a pin.'³⁴ Brătescu was well aware of the relation between Bourgeois and her mother, which constitutes the context of this quotation. In her notes, she refers to Bourgeois' art with fibre and her mother's labour with

the thread restoring tapestries.³⁵ Brătescu's delicate employment of the needle in the Vestiges series conveys this reparative notion of Bourgeois' statement. In another variation of the series Vestiges (1982), she further transferred this integrative practice into a mixed media collage of textile, gouache and drawing on paper. Single pieces of fabric become centrepieces within a drawn and coloured circle. The circle creates a world, where the scraps of fabric and their memorial character receive a place of their own and become the centre of their own universe. By delicately embracing the patches of fabric, she honours the memory of her mother, and the material's and needle's meaning for women's bonds and experiences.

Brătescu's approach towards textiles, yarn and fibre is determined by her dedication to abstraction in formal compositions as well as figurative and mythological motives. Aesop, her studio, Medea and her personal relation to her mother convey her dedication to universal narratives of individual expression, and how ideas of liberation, heritage and tradition do not necessarily exclude each other. More than her motives, her employment of traditional techniques such as weaving, stitching and sewing represent her engagement in Romanian and transnational women's craft. Women artists and their practices relate to each other in a site of transnational periphery, beyond the limitations of their political situation and national heritage. Without cancelling out site-specific materials and techniques, Brătescu's woven tapestries, embroidered drawings and hand-sewn textile collages showcase the traditional and transnational characteristics of fibre art.

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29. Brătescu and Grigorescu also collaborated on video works such as Brătescu's video 'The Studio' ('Atelierul', 1978). Furthermore, a parallel can be drawn to a discussion on US and Western European artists, who resisted the idea of feminism because, to them, modernity already allowed them individual freedom in the studio. I thank Zsofi Valyi-Nagy for this reference, elaborated in Griselda Pollock's essay 'Killing Men and Dying Women: A Woman's Touch in the Cold Zone of American Painting in the 1950s', in *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, ed. by Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 219–294. ↵
30. See Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), p. 176. ↵
31. Gabriela Gantenbein, 'Play of Forms', p. 21. ↵
32. Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019), p. 2. ↵
33. Ibidem, p. ↵
34. Ibidem. ↵
35. Geta Brătescu, 'Geta Brătescu: Documents 1977–2009', p. 302. ↵

Stefanie Proksch-Weilguni

Przepraszamy, ten wpis jest dostępny tylko w języku Amerykański Angielski.

Stefanie Proksch-Weilguni is a PhD candidate in art history whose research focuses on feminist art of the 1970s. She has published peer-reviewed articles on contemporary Romanian performance art and written international exhibition reviews for Revista-ARTA. In 2016, her Master's thesis on Alexandra Pirici's and Manuel Pelmuș' project for the Venice Biennial was awarded the Sir Ernst Gombrich prize from the University of Vienna. Her current project focuses on Maria Lassnig's animation and experimental films of the 1970s and the group of Women/Artist/Filmmakers, Inc. in New York.

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