Master's Thesis
Visual Communication
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Katarina Matić

TYRANNY OF THE PAST:

Unveiling Hidden Female Legacies through Threads of Tradition

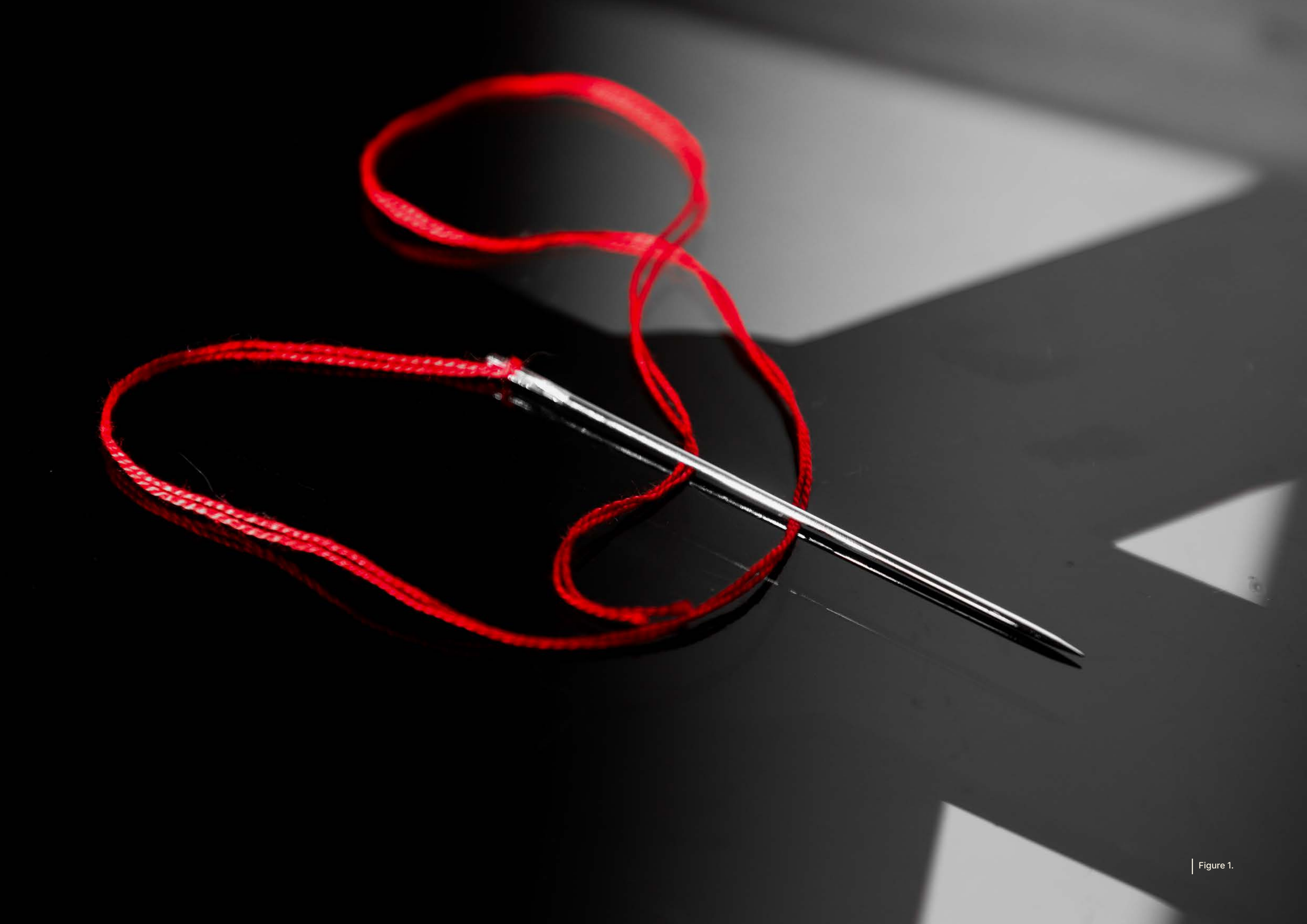

Figure 1.

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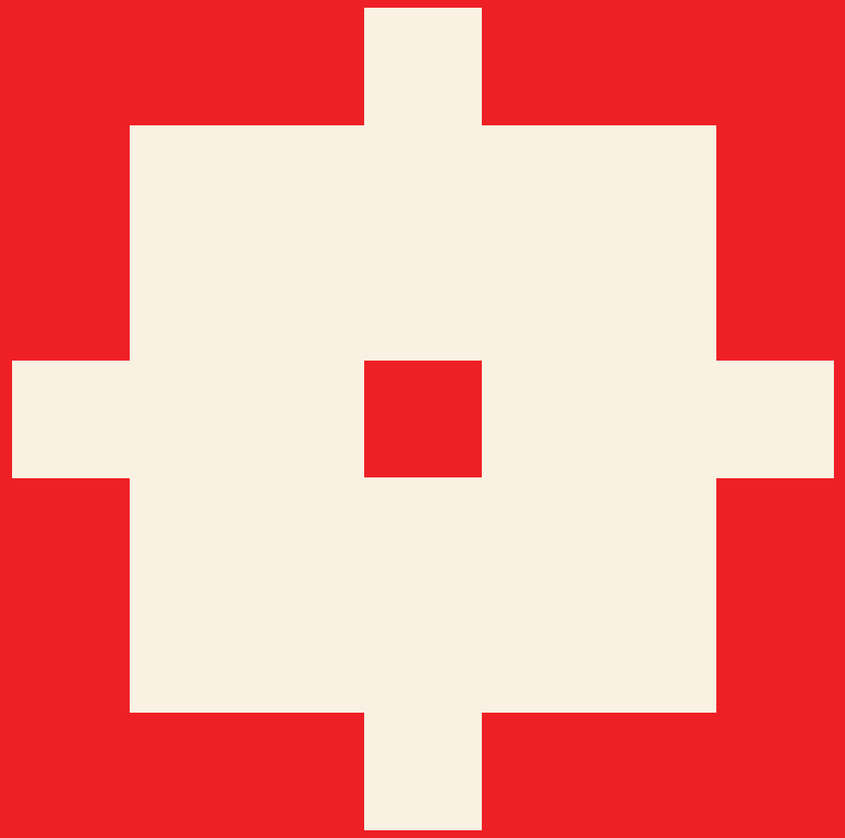
Master's Thesis

Kunstuniversität Linz (University of Arts Linz)
Master of Arts (MA)
Visual Communication (Graphic Design and Photography)



I hereby declare that this dissertation is my own original work and has not been submitted before to any institution for assessment purposes. Further, I have acknowledged all sources used and have cited the references.

Katarina Matić
Linz, 2026.

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Univ. – Prof. Tina Frank

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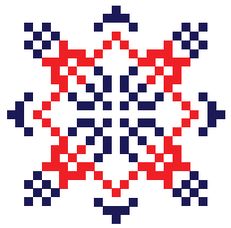
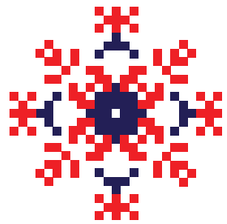
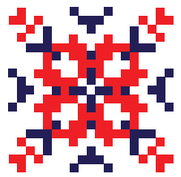






ABSTRACT

Women's biographies, stories and experiences have been shaped, intertwined and suppressed for a long time by historical, social and familial narratives. As a woman, today, learning from the experiences of those who came before me, while simultaneously being a witness and listening to the stories unfolding around me, often I find myself in an in-between position which I would describe as a sense of living my own life through the lives of the women before me, as if our stories are constantly intertwining.

This thesis draws on feminist theories, memory studies, and textile-based practice to examine how art can serve as both an archive and an act of reparation or healing. By reworking and repurposing traditionally "feminine" techniques within a contemporary artistic context, the project reflects the relationship between the intimate and the collective, the private and the political, and encourages a re-inscription of women's voices through embroidery and collage.

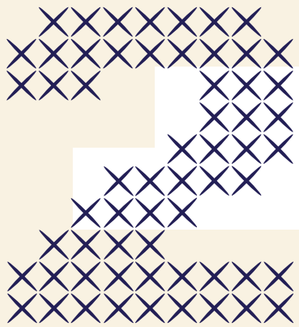
Through a series of double-sided portraits of Mileva Marić, Nadežda Petrović, and Milunka Savić, the project combines embroidery, collage, and archival photography to explore "the tyranny of the past" which, in this work, represents the mechanisms through which tradition, patriarchy, and social expectations shape women's identities and determine their visibility or erasure.

In the course of this research, I position myself both as researcher and participant, reflecting their lives through my own existence, and narrating their stories in such a manner, while trying to keep their complexity, and sometimes even their tragedy intact.

The projects opens space for reflection, trying to answer the following research questions: how artistic practice can serve as a method for reassembling and reconnecting forgotten, distorted, and silenced women's histories; and how does the concept of "the tyranny of the past" continue to shape women's experience today, particularly within the Serbian and Balkan cultural context?

Tyranny of the Past: Unveiling Hidden Female Legacies through Threads of Tradition project proposes that the acts of stitching, cutting, mending, and reconnecting are metaphorical strategies of resistance that challenge one-sided historical narratives of women.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Looking back at where this thesis has taken me, I can't help but feel grateful for the path I have chosen and for the persistence that brought me here. Before anything else, I want to thank myself, as a reminder of why I chose to follow this direction and believe in my work as an artist. To that, I offer my sincere gratitude:

To my supervisor, Tina Frank, for her guidance and for the many thoughtful exchanges that shaped the development of this project.

To the University of Arts Linz and the city of Linz for giving me two wonderful years of growth, discovery, and transformation, both as a person and as an artist.

To my colleagues and everyone I had the chance to meet along the way.

To Teresa and Eliana for all the group work, the brunches, the laughter, the motivation, and even the Portuguese lessons. You will always be part of how I remember my time in Linz.

To my friends back home for countless talks about different topic and always waiting for me when I get home.

To Anja, for her friendship, constant support, patience, and for being by my side through every stage of this journey.

To my pets, especially Bruno and Pufna, for their quiet company throughout the long hours of writing and making the artwork, and for always knowing how to calm me during the process.

To my family for always waiting for me at the airport but especially my father, Prvoslav, for his unwavering support in my artistic journey.

Хвала вам!

Figure 2.

INTRODUCTION

Chapter One

The stories we inherit are rarely neutral, just as the stories we later tell and pass on are never free from the chains of a number of influences. They are shaped by the storytellers, the emotions involved, the chosen words, and the listeners. By the time stories reach us, they have already been molded by cultural expectations, family traditions, political beliefs, and by everything that has been silenced, suppressed, forgotten, or intentionally erased. We receive these stories, carry them within ourselves, and then repeat them again and again.

I have always been fascinated by the way narratives are repeated, reshaped, resold, or rewritten across generations. This interest became more concrete when I started to examine not only how women's stories are told, but how their influence, achievements, and contributions were portrayed, distorted, or left out. At the same time, I also started to question my own story: How do I approach the narrative of my life? How do I shape, tell, and understand my story in a world where women's stories share similar fates of distortion, silence, or erasure?

As a woman, I quickly learned that many parts of my identity, my possibilities, limitations, fears, and ambitions, were shaped not only by my immediate surroundings but by the experiences of generations of women before me. Their struggles, their resistance, their silence, and even the stories never written down continue to echo in the present. I became increasingly aware of how this layered history has shaped both me and the women around me. This curiosity frequently appeared in conversations with friends, where we would repeatedly return to discussions about women's pasts and their present realities, questioning how these overlapping narratives continue to define us.

These questions led to a conversation with a friend about the experiences of women today. She mentioned the word trauma and recommended Gabor Maté's *The Myth of Normal*, in which he explores trauma and its long-term effects. Because I am deeply interested in language, especially words of Latin origin and the histories they carry, I decided to read the book. I wanted to understand and know more about trauma, its definition and the way I personally define it. Maté's writing encouraged me to consider the bigger picture he was painting, perhaps even more broadly than he intended. It was inspiring to recognize how interconnected we all are through the ways we live, share knowledge, tell stories, pass on emotions, and inherit trauma through being human. As Maté writes:

"Unity, it turns out, extends well beyond the unitary individual." [1]

This led me to question the kinds of trauma woman have experienced collectively, not only individually, but as a group shaped by the shared histo-

[1] Gabor Maté, *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture* (New York: Avery, 2022), 51.

ry. I began to consider how these accumulated experiences continue to influence society today. During this process, I encountered the term "the tyranny of the past," in the same book by Maté, which became an important starting point for this thesis.

The central focus of this thesis emerged when I connected trauma with the female experience. It came from a deeply personal and intuitive realisation: the sense that I was carrying fragments of female history within my own body, behavior, and artistic practice. Living far from home intensified this awareness. Over time, I felt a growing need to understand my cultural past and to connect with the stories that shaped the women before me, not only through reading, but through long conversations and hours of listening to women around me. As Jane Hardwicke Collings in her text *Herstory – A Womanifesto* says:

"Reclaiming implies something has been taken away from us. Reconnection implies that we have actually lost connection with something." [2]

This understanding led me to research the lives of some of the most important female figures in Balkan and Serbian history, women who played significant roles yet were rarely given the recognition they deserved: Mileva Marić, Nadežda Petrović, and Milunka Savić. The deeper I delved into their stories, the more I encountered narratives marked by intelligence, courage, creativity and strength, but also by erasure, tragedy, and distortion. All of these women—scientists, artists, soldiers, teachers, and carriers of cultural knowledge—challenged, defied and resisted the limits of their time. Yet their contributions were often questioned, overshadowed, or absorbed into patriarchal systems that reduced their influence.

Their stories touched me, not only because of what they achieved, but because they revealed a shared pattern: women's legacies often survive in fragments which are partial, incomplete, shaped through someone else's voice, or through the lens of patriarchy and male dominance. This pattern continues today. In academic, political, cultural spaces women still struggle for recognition, legitimacy, and space to make themselves heard. In the current global political climate, these struggles are much more delicate. My artistic research emerged from this tension and the desire to uncover, unveil, and restitch women's stories that continue to echo in the present. I strongly felt that their experiences were connected to our own, and I began to question how their lives might reflect the experiences of woman today.

Working with textiles proved to be a natural and central method in my research. I have always been deeply connected to the sense of touch, and after years of mainly digital work, I longed for a medium that was slower, tactile, and physical. Textiles carry a long cultural history. They are often linked to women's invisible labor, domestic space, and silence, but at the same time, they hold a potential for repair, reconstruction, and resistance. From the beginning, stitching and the use of red and blue thread played an essential symbolic role in my artwork. I immediately recognised its importance to me personally, to my cultural background, and to the story I wanted to tell. This led me to the realisation that this project could only be told through embroidery.

As a child, embroidery seemed to me as something old, fragile, and sometimes distant, quietly stored somewhere in a drawer or a box of my grandmothers' home. Later, I discovered how close it actually was to me and my family: The embroidered works of my grandmother, my mother, and her sister showed me that these textiles were not decorative objects, but archives of care, memory, and survival. In this project, embroidery, threading techniques, quilting, perforation, and even the exposed reverse side of the fabric became more than just aesthetic or design elements. They function as conceptual tools, as forms of writing that reveal, interrupt, and reconnect. Through these tactile gestures, I want to reopen the narratives of the women I research and approach them through touch, repetition, slowness, and attention. Textiles allow me to explore how history can be preserved, repaired, and retold through the body as much as through language.

This thesis places my artistic practice within feminist theories of materiality, memory studies, and storytelling, moving from contextualizing the central themes to presenting the theoretical background and the analysis of the artistic project itself. It argues that contemporary textile portraiture can function as both an archive and a counter-narrative, creating space for women's histories that have been fragmented, domesticated, or forgotten. Through double-sided textile portraits, I explore layered identity, the tension between visibility and privacy, and the possibility of addressing historical wounds through material processes.

Based on these concerns, this thesis is guided by two central research questions: first, how can artistic practice function as a method for reassembling and reconnecting women's histories that have been fragmented, silenced, or distorted? Second, how does the concept of "the tyranny of the past" continue to shape women's experiences in the present, particularly within the Serbian and Balkan cultural context? Ultimately, this research asks how artistic practice, particularly one rooted in "feminine" craft techniques, can challenge dominant historical narratives. Here, the term "feminine" refers not to biological or essential qualities, but to practices that have been historically and culturally gendered as feminine due to their association with women's domestic labor, care, and exclusion from institutional art histories.

[2] Jane Hardwicke Collings, *Herstory – A Womanifesto* (ebook PDF, 2018), 2, accessed November 10, 2025, https://janehardwickecollings.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/herstory_ebook.pdf.

CONTEXT

Chapter Two

To understand this project, it is necessary to consider the cultural, historical, and social contexts in which it is situated. The lives and legacies of Mileva Marić, Nadežda Petrović, and Milunka Savić, as well as the broader position of women in Serbian and Balkan history, are deeply shaped by patriarchy, rigid gender roles, and long-standing traditions. At the same time, the textile practices central to this project carry their own cultural histories within Serbian households, functioning as vessels of memory, identity, care, and domestic labor.

This chapter outlines the contextual framework necessary to understand both the motivations and the materials of this thesis. It begins with an overview of women's social and historical positions in Serbia and the Balkans, continues with an examination of embroidery and textile traditions, and concludes by situating the three central figures of this project within their historical moments.

2.1. Women in Serbian and Balkan History

I could start this chapter by listing the academic books and articles I have read about women's history in Serbia, or I could begin with the personal stories and experiences passed down by the women in my own family. This is not a question I'm asking, instead it's a statement I'm making, because it is important to acknowledge that this subject is both deeply personal and subjective. I cannot offer you an entirely objective position here, as I am intimately connected to the stories I am trying to represent. They live in me and through me, and I carry them not only in my mind but in my bones.

Women's lives in Serbian and Balkan history have always been shaped by patriarchy, strict social rules and a culture deeply stained by war, religion, the push and struggles around national identity. These forces cannot be separated from the people who lived through them. They create a unique experience that remains deeply tied to those who carry it. Balkan women don't just carry their own burdens, they also carry the weight of previous generations and it is very noticeable throughout the ways we live, express ourselves, and connect with other people.

For much of the region's history, women stood at a crossroad of duty, sacrifice, and silence. They were expected to hold the emotional and domestic stability of the family while remaining invisible in public, political, scientific, or cultural spheres of life. In traditional Balkan society, the biggest focus point is the family, both in literal but also in a broader context, as it is everything in our culture. It is the cure to each illness, physical or mental, family is the beginning and the end. Gender roles weren't just suggested in the family, they were enforced. Patri-

archy and religion strongly shaped a woman's life from birth to death, determining her worth, her duties, and her place in society.

"She is a necessary family member, wife, mother, housewife and rarely more than that. She does not have the right to dispose of her property independently, she is educated up to two grades, as much as is necessary "for correspondence", in mixed schools, where girls are more educated and taught good manners, handcrafts and beautiful singing than they are educated and acquire knowledge for further advancement." [3]

Women were mainly tied to motherhood, care work, and the maintenance of the household. Their labor, which was physical, emotional, and cultural, was essential but rarely acknowledged as such. Domestic work often extended beyond the home and into the community. Women preserved stories, built connections, and passed down cultural knowledge through practices like embroidery, weaving, and textile-making, but also many other. I heard the same pattern in the stories from my mother, my grandmother, aunts, cousins. The details change, the beginnings and endings shift, but the heart of it stays the same. Women "stayed in their lane," helped where they were allowed, and above all, raised families.

"According to the Civil Code, which was applied for the next hundred years, the woman remained under the authority of the husband, that is, the husband determined where the family would live and managed the property independently. The wife was obliged to take care of the house and children and to obey her husband. During inheritance, the male member had priority, while matters of marriage, more precisely, its conclusion and divorce, fell under church matters." [4]

When I was a child, I remember sitting on my grandmother's lap while she, limited to a bed by illness, told me stories again and again. Most of the stories were meant for children, yet they always carried deeper lessons and meanings. Those moments taught me how to really listen to women, to recognize the meanings beneath their words and silence. I cherish the memory of her voice, even if many stories have faded. Most women didn't have much formal education, so knowledge moved through conversation, trust, and closeness. The Serbian phrase *sa kolena na koleno,* literally "from knee to knee," but more accurately understood as "from generation to generation," is an expression describing how certain stories were never written down but passed verbally through generations. Outsiders might call it gossip, but I see these talks as an unofficial archive, a way woman held on to the truths of their lives. Some of the clearest, most honest things I've learned came from women talking in kitchens, courtyards, and living rooms.

These were the spaces where women shared their victories, fears, heartbreak, and wisdom. Yet, because these stories stayed inside the home and never made it onto paper, they faded or got twisted by the official histories. Patriarchy kept women from education, which made it even harder for their ideas and skills to reach anyone beyond their immediate circles.

"Women did not face injustice only when enrolling in school. A major problem for them was finding employment in their profession after graduating from school." [5]

The unstable political history of the Balkans, its wars, occupations, and nation-building, further constrained women's lives and erased their political presence. Women's voices and their political roles were silenced and erased *silom ili milom* which is a Serbian expression meaning "by force or through coercive compliance."

War shaped the Balkans in brutal and repeated cycles, each one strengthening ideals of masculinity like heroism, sacrifice, public power. It didn't only affect females, this has also affected males, putting so much burden and trauma onto them which later lead to the disbalance of the male and female roles and the result we have today. History books turned soldiers, rulers, politicians, and scientists into central figures, while women's stories were pushed aside. Even when women served as nurses, fighters, intellectuals, or cultural workers, their contributions were documented only in relation to male achievements, rarely recognized as independent acts. Women often faced the aftermath alone, left to raise families by themselves and expected to fill both mother and father roles, all while tucking away their own hopes. Rarely did anyone call these acts independent, or even remarkable. Both men and women suffered, but in different ways. Through the long-term trauma of this culture, we forgot to look after each other and care. It has for sure left its wounds, and they are visible on the surface as well on the inside as they shape our society.

Religion added another layer of pressure. It reinforced expectations of modesty, obedience, endurance and purity. Women carried the family's honor on their shoulders, but that responsibility did not come with authority or power. This cultural narrative often split women into two roles: the idealised mother, connected to the Virgin Mary, or the object of male desire, whose value was measured by patriarchal standards.

Across generations, Balkan women have carried an immense emotional burden. Through war, displacement, poverty, and loss, they held families together while their own needs were ignored. Many were forced into roles they never chose themselves, raising children alone while grieving the loss of husbands or male relatives, who

[3] Avant Art Magazin, "Kada su ženskinje) postale građanke u Srbiji: slika žene kroz vreme," accessed August 10, 2025, https://www.avantartmagazin.com/kada-su-zenskinje-postale-gradanke-u-srbiji-slika-zene-kroz-vreme/. Translated from Serbian by the author.

[4] Ženska inicijativa, "Položaj žena u Srbiji od Prvog srpskog ustanka do kraja Prvog svetskog rata," accessed August 10, 2025, https://zenskainicijativa.rs/polozaj-zena-u-srbiji-od-prvog-srpskog-ustanka-do-kraja-prvog-svetskog-rata/. Translated from Serbian by the author.

[5] Ibid.

were taken by the brutal wars and violence. Families often favored sons, reflecting deep beliefs about lineage and survival. And when I say favored, I don't actually think that was a positive position for males to be in. I find that placement as also a deep burden they had to oblige by. That preference, along with everything else, forced women into a quiet, private resilience that history mostly ignored. At the end, men's heroism got statues and songs, while women's endurance was just expected, so no one bothered to notice. Both suffered, but it was seen differently in the eyes of society as a whole, so the reward was also different.

Despite all of these conditions, many women managed to defy the expectations and entered science, art, education, medicine, and the military. Yet their stories were very frequently overshadowed, and like before, attributed to men, or removed entirely from the history. While doing my research and searching for significant female figures within my culture, I found many remarkable names: Isidora Sekulić, Katarina Ivanović, Marija Maga Magazinović, Draga Ljočić, Danica Tomić, and many others. What was very interesting to me is how often these names surfaced not through academic literature, but through personal conversations. People would tell me, almost proudly, "You should include her," as if passing on a story that needed to be remembered. It felt very similar to the traditional transmission of stories *sa kolena na koleno* ("from generation to generation"), through speech and memory rather than books and writing. And it has also warmed my little heart knowing that at least some people remember and want to talk about these women. Many of them share a similar pattern of experience with Mileva Marić, Nadežda Petrović, and Milunka Savić. Each one has risen above the limitations of her time, each carved a space for herself in a society that gave her little room, and yet each was ultimately misrepresented, fragmented, forgotten, or at least less talked about than a man within dominant historical narrative.

As I explain these influences on women throughout Balkan history, I want to conclude by saying that the culture we were raised in is not entirely negative. Many of these elements also have positive sides, and there are ways in which women in our society have been nurtured, supported, and even protected through certain traditions and practices. I cannot simply place all blame on male dominance, because the circumstances we live in today have been shaped by many different factors over time. It is important to know there are always two sides of the story, just like my two-sided portraits showcase. I am trying to be very specific about what I am referencing, which stories I am drawing from, and why they matter to me, which may sometimes sound as though I am only criticizing the history behind us, but at the same, I'm using this history and tradition to showcase that history also holds beautiful and meaningful aspects. Despite all the challenges these women endured, their stories could not have emerged more powerful or more beautiful.

Today, women have more visibility, rights, and platforms, yet the past still haunts the present. The emotional and cultural inheritance of earlier generations continues to shape women's experiences, often resulting in misunderstanding, resistance, or conflict with patriarchal norms that persist in contemporary society. Understanding this history is essential for this thesis, as it reveals the structures that shaped the lives of the three women central to this work and highlights recurring patterns of silence, endurance, erasure, and resistance that continue to influence women today. This context forms the foundation for interpreting both their stories and the artistic methodologies used in this project to reconnect with them.

2.2. Embroidery and Textile Traditions in Serbia

"The art of embroidery has been the means of educating women into the feminine ideal, and of proving that they have attained it, but it has also provided a weapon of resistance to the constraints of femininity." [6]

I begin this subchapter with Parker's words because they capture the dual nature of embroidery: it is both a tool of social conditioning and a form of resistance. When I decided to work with stitching and embroidery, Parker's writing became essential to my work and the path that I was taking. Although her research focuses mostly on broader European embroidery histories, I immediately recognized the parallels with the traditional role embroidery holds in Serbia.

Most people in Serbia remember having a small crocheted doily, made by their mothers or grandmothers and placed on the tables, the television, or shelves. These small cloths, with their delicate patterns, became visual markers of "old times," objects tied to memory, domestic rituals, and a sense of familiarity. Even today, many of us associate them with childhood, with our grandmothers' homes, and with a style that is sometimes joked about but never forgotten. While these objects may be fading from everyday use, the women who made them, the grandmothers, mothers, and aunts who crocheted, embroidered, and sewed, remain unforgettable and deeply present in the cultural memory.

In Serbian households, textile objects were often kept for decades, sometimes for lifetimes, serving as a time capsule of family memory. These textiles formed a quiet feminine archive, an archive rarely discussed in histori-

[6] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984), ix.

Figure 3.

cal writing, yet one that deeply shaped cultural identity. A tablecloth embroidered by a grandmother, a towel prepared for a daughter's wedding, or a decorative cloth passed from mother to daughter carried traces of the hands that made them and the whispered stories that accompanied the stitching. When I first told my mother the theme of my master thesis, she opened a box full of embroidered cloths so that I could understand them more and see the patterns. This helped me, not only in a practical way, but also in a sense of connecting to my roots and to the feminine story.

Textile traditions hold a central place in Serbian cultural history and have long served as one of the main ways women expressed identity, passed down knowledge, and preserved memory. For centuries, embroidery, stitching, sewing, and textile-making were not hobbies but essential parts of life. They were skills learned in childhood, refined over generations, and carried almost exclusively through female lines. For many women, these skills were their only form of education. Yet within this limit, textiles became a space where women could embed their creativity, their emotions, and their sense of belonging.

As one source explains:

"In Serbia, mostly in the villages, embroidery was a mandatory job for women. Girls were taught how to embroider from an early age. Although many items were decorated with embroidery, as well as men's clothing, embroidery dominated women's and girls' clothing. In addition to being an ornament, embroidery was an indicator of social status, material condition, age, regional and national affiliation." [7]

Historically, Serbian embroidery was never just decorative. It carried symbolic, protective, and social meaning. Textiles accompanied women through every stage of life, birth, childhood, marriage, motherhood, and death. Embroidered garments and ritual cloths were made for dowries, celebrations, and religious ceremonies, functioning as cultural documents with emotional and spiritual value. Through these textiles, women found a way to preserve tradition, even though their work remained within the domestic sphere and was rarely acknowledged as cultural production.

"Historically, through the centuries, it has provided both a weapon of resistance for women and functioned as a source of constraint. It has promoted submission to the norms of feminine obedience and offered both psychological and practical means to independence." [8]

Embroidery can also be understood as a form of storytelling. Each stitch carries time, patience, and emotional investment. Motifs carry regional identity, local marks, and sometimes hidden messages. Since stitching takes time and is repetitive, it possesses a medita-

[7] Wikipedia contributors, "Srpski vez," *Wikipedia*, accessed August 10, 2025, https://sr.wikipedia.org/sr-el/%D0%A1%D1%80%D0%BF%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B8_%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%B7. Translated from Serbian

[8] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xix.

Figure 4.

tive quality that mirrors the processes of remembering, processing, and healing. For many women, embroidery was both an accepted form of creativity and a private space for reflection and emotional expression. Although dismissed as "craft" rather than "art", a distinction Parker critiques in depth, it shaped aesthetic sensibilities and preserved cultural knowledge across generations.

The marginalization of textile work parallels the marginalization of women's contributions more broadly. What women created or preserved in the home was often considered secondary, decorative, or trivial. The division between "art" and "craft," deeply rooted in both Western and Balkan cultural frameworks, reinforced patriarchal hierarchies that valued male-authored work over female labor. The same dynamic persists today: when a man cooks, he is a chef; when a woman cooks, it is seen as her duty. When a man crochets or embroiders, it becomes avant-garde; when a woman does it, it is seen as a domestic skill she is expected to have.

From a contemporary perspective, these textile traditions reveal alternative forms of knowledge. Women recorded their lives not through written documents or monuments, but through fabric, thread, repetition, and care. The materiality of embroidery captures gestures, decisions, and emotions, making textile work a form of embodied memory, a physical echo of presence and experience.

In this thesis, embroidery becomes the central medium precisely because of this cultural inheritance. Through stitching, cutting, perforating, and exposing the backside of the fabric, the project engages with the same material language through which generations of Serbian women expressed themselves. It transforms an intimate domestic practice into a contemporary feminist strategy, allowing textiles to function as carriers of history and tools for reconnecting with stories that were fragmented or erased. As such, embroidery becomes not only a technique but as a conceptual method for rewriting, revealing, and repairing women's narratives.

2.3. The Three Women in Their Historical Moment

The stories of the three women I have chosen for this project are full of tension between individual achievements and collective visibility, a tension that characterises much of women's history in Serbia and the Balkans. Mileva Marić, Nadežda Petrović, and Milunka Savić, as the central figures of this project, lived in very different social and professional contexts, yet their lives reveal strikingly similar patterns of perseverance, exclusion, and historical misrepresentation. Understanding their historical circumstances in which they lived is essential for recognizing the cultural and political forces that shaped their lives, and for situating the artistic re-stitching of their narratives that is developed in later chapters.

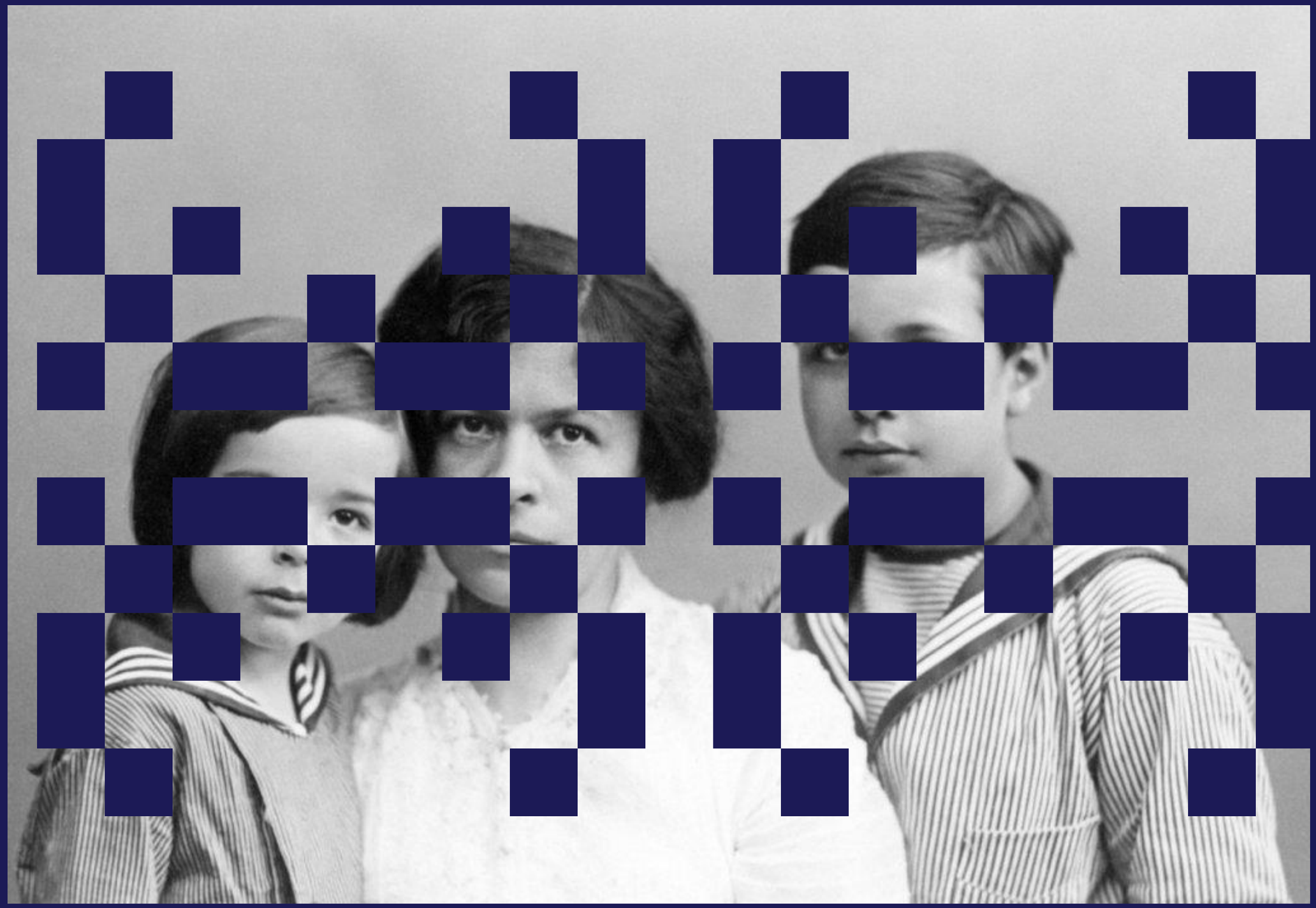


Figure 5.

MILEVA MARIĆ
(1875–1948)

Mileva Marić was a Serbian physicist, scientist and a mathematician, born in Titel, Serbia in 1875. Exceptionally bright and naturally talented in mathematics and science, she stood out from an early age. At nineteen, she became one of the first women admitted to the prestigious Swiss Federal Polytechnic in Zurich (ETH), where she studied mathematics and physics. She was a strong student, earning high marks and demonstrating a deep understanding of theoretical physics. However, her academic success was met with skepticism from male peers and professors who were often dismissive of women in intellectual fields. Women were rare in these fields, and Mileva was forced to prove herself within an environment shaped by male dominance. These structural barriers are essential to understanding why her scientific contributions were later marginalized.

Moving to Zurich also brought Mileva a significant personal encounter. There, she met Albert Einstein, and their meeting changed both of their lives as they became romantically and intellectually involved. Marić had to navigate the pressures of being expected to fulfill the role of a wife and a mother while simultaneously engaging in collaborative scientific work with Einstein. Their collaboration remains the subject of debate, complicated by the lack of documentation, the destruction of letters, and the patriarchal biases of scientific institutions at the time. Some surviving correspondence suggests that she may have worked with him on his early research, yet her role was largely ignored in favor of the narrative of Einstein as a solitary genius.

Although their relationship began with mutual intellectual respect, it deteriorated significantly after their marriage. Einstein grew increasingly distant, and the emotional strain of their partnership was amplified by societal expectations that placed Mileva firmly within domestic roles. While Einstein's professional achievements were celebrated, Mileva's opportunities to continue her own academic work diminished. She carried the responsibilities of motherhood and household work, which overshadowed her potential as a scholar and made it nearly impossible for her to pursue her intellectual ambitions.

In 1914, Einstein wrote a list of restrictive rules for Mileva, exposing the deep dysfunction and imbalance in their marriage. These rules were cold, rigid, and transactional, demanding her emotional withdrawal, silence, and unquestioned attention to domestic duties. During this time, Einstein's fame grew ever more rapidly, while Mileva remained largely invisible, both in the public narrative of his success and within the historical record. Her intellectual labor and emotional support went unacknowledged, and her own aspirations were diminished to the demands of her husband's career.

Mileva's life was further marked by profound personal tragedies, including the birth and disappearance of her first daughter, Lieserl, whose existence is documented only through letters. After her divorce from Einstein in 1919, she endured financial hardship and emotional difficulty, raising their two sons alone. Despite her extraordinary scientific training and intellectual promise, her contributions remained unrecognized during her lifetime. Her story reflects the systematic erasure of women from scientific history and highlights the emotional and structural burdens that shaped her life.

Mileva Marić's life stands as a testament to the many women whose contributions to science and intellectual work have been minimized or erased. Her story reveals how gendered barriers, societal expectations, and patriarchal historical narratives shaped the possibilities available to women in academic and professional spheres. Today, her intellectual legacy is being reevaluated, and her story continues to serve as a powerful reminder of the struggles and resilience of women in a male-dominated world.

Figure 6.

NADEŽDA PETROVIĆ
(1873–1915)

Nadežda Petrović is widely recognized as one of the most significant Serbian modernist painters, yet her historical legacy is frequently overshadowed by national narratives of war and sacrifice. Born in Čačak in 1873, she pursued artistic education in Belgrade and Munich at a time when female artists struggled for institutional recognition and independence.

Her struggle was not only artistic but also deeply personal. She never married, which at the time was considered strange and seen as a failure for a woman. Her paintings were mocked and often rejected by the conservative artistic circles of Serbia. Many viewed her as "too modern" and "unfeminine," and she was repeatedly told that a woman cannot be a real painter. One example of the criticism she often received in Serbian artistic circles at the time is that her paintings were described as "ugly," "rough," and "unfeminine." The truth is that her work was pioneering in its expressive style, vibrant color use, and bold engagement with contemporary artistic movements, which challenged conservative expectations of women's roles in the arts.

Beyond her artistic production, Petrović was an active social and political figure. When she spoke out against Austria-Hungary and advocated for Serbia's fight for independence, even her close colleagues warned her that political engagement was "unfeminine" and encouraged her to focus on more "beautiful" subjects in her art, as long as her work did not provoke discomfort. She participated in feminist organizations, advocated for women's education, and was deeply invested in humanitarian work.

During the Balkan Wars and World War I, she volunteered as a war nurse, repeatedly exposing herself to extreme and dangerous conditions. She sacrificed her life caring for the wounded in horrific conditions, eventually contracting typhus and dying in 1915. Although her importance is recognized today, for a long time, she was sidelined and regarded more as a patriotic martyr than as an artist.

Her legacy reflects a complex intersection of artistic achievement, patriotism, sacrifice, and gendered expectations. While celebrated as a national hero, her artistic innovations were long overshadowed by her wartime service, revealing the ways women's creative contributions are often absorbed into broader narratives of national identity and conflict.

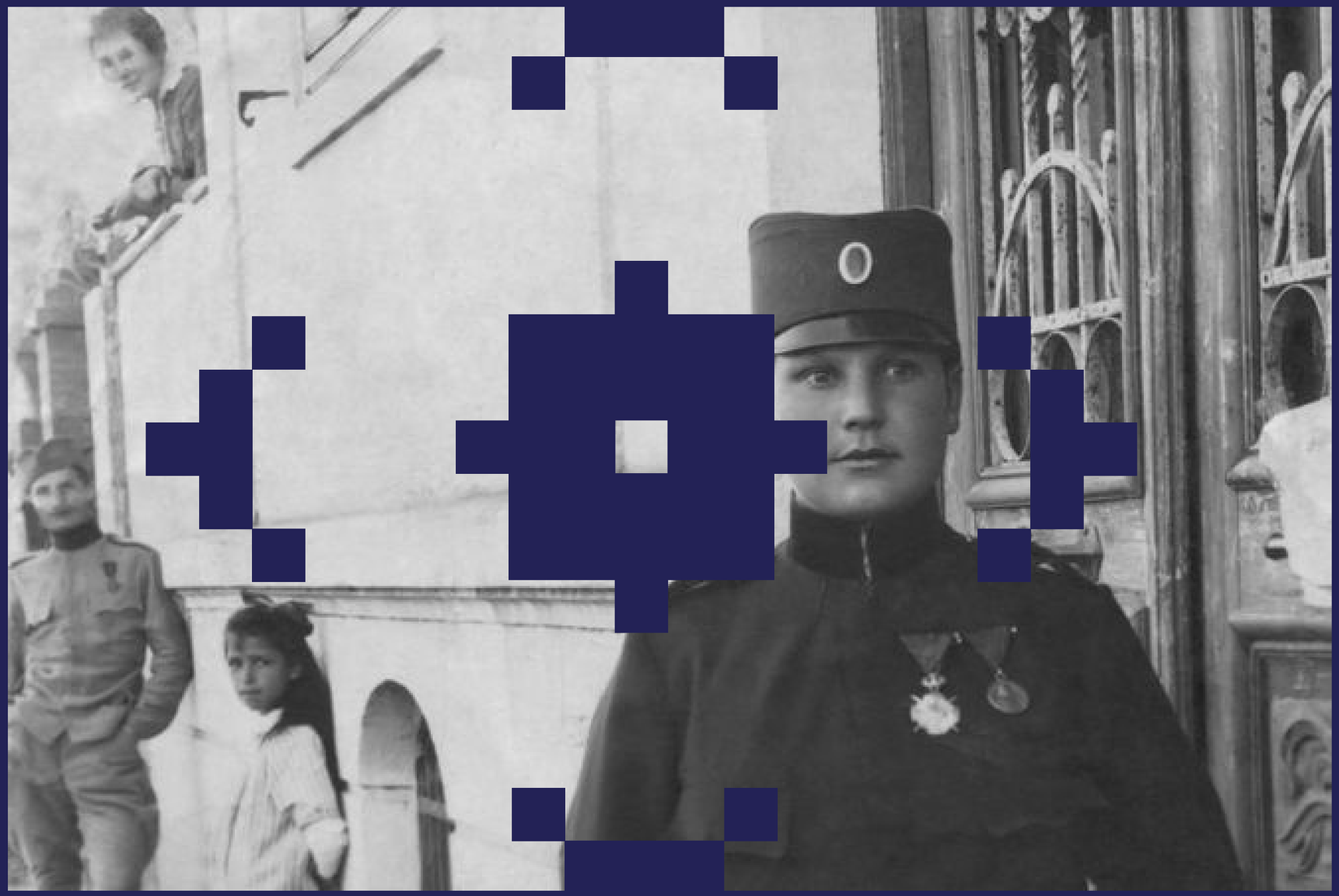


Figure 7.

MILUNKA SAVIĆ
(1890–1973)

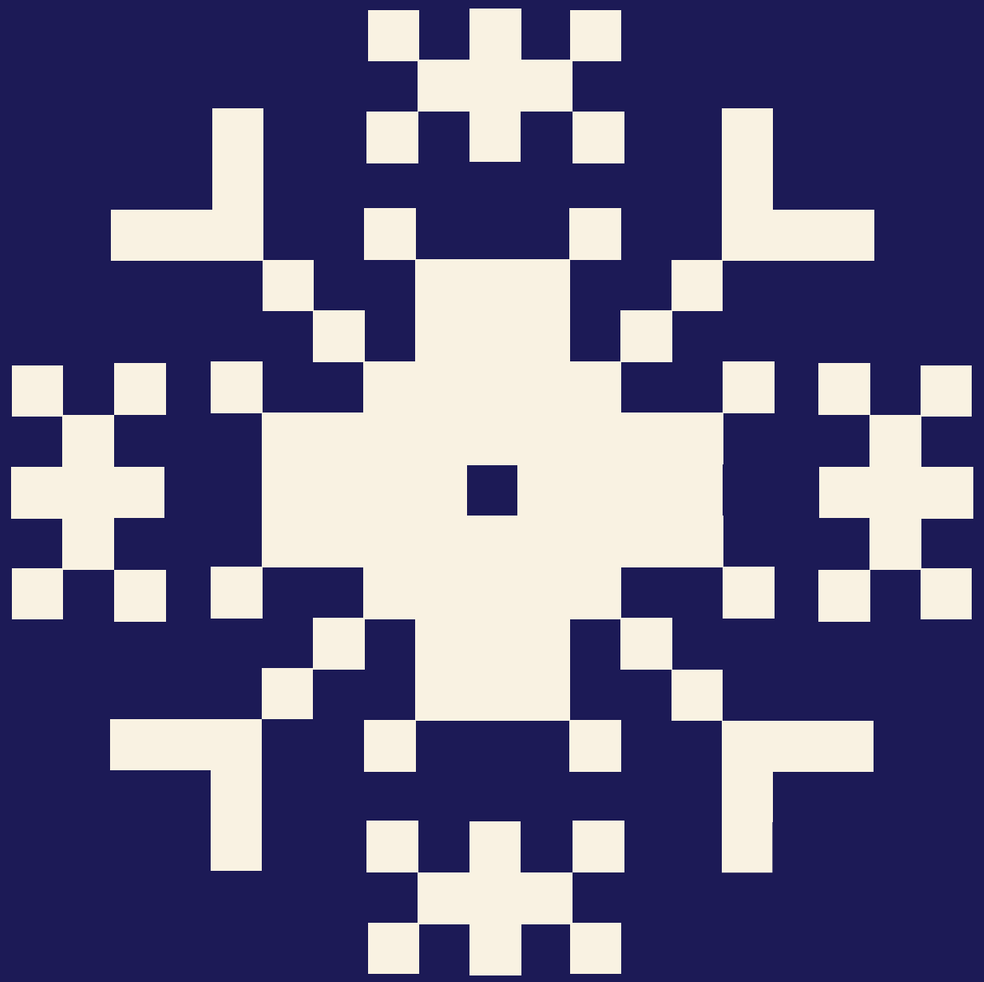
Milunka Savić is remembered as one of the most decorated female soldiers in history and a symbol of extraordinary courage in the Balkans. Born in the small village of Koprivnica near Raška in 1890, in what was then the Kingdom of Serbia, she grew up in a rural household where life was shaped by hard work, resilience, and strong communal values. These early experiences likely formed the foundation of her bravery and determination, traits that would later define her place in history.

Her entry into the military was unconventional and deeply personal. During the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), Serbia called for mass mobilization. Determined to protect her younger brother from conscription, Milunka cut her hair, disguised herself as a man, and enlisted in his place under the name "Milun Savić." Her skill and bravery on the battlefield quickly became undeniable. After being wounded and taken to a military hospital, her true identity was discovered. Instead of punishment or dismissal, her commanders, impressed by her courage, offered her a role as a nurse. She refused, insisting that she wanted to continue fighting. Her determination prevailed, and she returned to combat as a soldier.

Throughout the Balkan Wars and World War I, Milunka Savić earned a reputation for exceptional valor, particularly as a member of the Serbian Army's elite units. She fought in major battles, enduring some of the harshest conditions European soldiers faced. Her actions included leading charges, capturing enemy positions, and saving wounded comrades under fire. For these acts, she received numerous high military honors. It is widely believed that no woman in recorded military history has received as many decorations for courage on the battlefield.

After the wars, Milunka returned to Belgrade and quietly built a life away from the attention she had once held. She married Veljko Gligorijević, but the marriage was short-lived, and they later divorced. She worked humble jobs, including as a postal worker and cleaning staff for a bank. Despite her heroism, she lived in modest conditions and never sought recognition or reward. She adopted several orphaned children and raised her one biological daughter, offering them the same protection and love that had once driven her to join the military.

For many years, her contributions were overlooked by official institutions, reflecting the political and social shifts in Yugoslavia after the war. Only later in life, and especially after her death, did the public begin to fully acknowledge her extraordinary achievements. Today, Milunka Savić is celebrated as a national heroine in Serbia and an enduring symbol of moral strength, sacrifice, and the often-hidden roles women play in history.
Her story stands not only as a military legend but also as a testament to how personal courage can transcend the boundaries of gender, expectation, and time.



CONCLUSION

Even though their accomplishments and life paths were totally different, all three of them share a common thread: each has challenged the limitations they were restricted by the time they lived in. All of them contributed profoundly to Serbian and broader cultural history, and each was ultimately subjected to some form of erasure, misrecognition or distortion. Understanding their historical contexts provides a foundation for the artistic re-stitching of their stories undertaken in this thesis. Their experiences offer insight into the structures that shaped women's lives in the Balkans and underline the need for new narratives that honor the complexity of their contributions.

Figure 8.

THEORY

Chapter Three

The theoretical framework of this thesis brings together feminist historiography, memory studies, trauma theory and contemporary artistic discourse in order to examine how women's histories are formed, forgotten, retold and reclaimed. While the previous chapter focused on the broader cultural and historical conditions of women's experiences in Serbia and the Balkans, this chapter turns toward the concepts that directly inform the artistic strategies at the center of this project.

The main question running through this thesis is both personal and political: how do we understand and represent female histories that have been fragmented, silenced or filtered through patriarchal narratives? The theories discussed in this chapter do not function as distant or abstract ideas. Instead, they provide tools that shape the making, interpretation, and reception of the textile portraits that form the core of this project.

Feminists have long argued that archives are never neutral, that memory is always subjective, and that trauma does not end with those who directly lived through an event. Ideas and concepts such as HERstory and postmemory open up new ways of engaging with incomplete, silenced or distorted narratives. At the same time, materiality and craft theory help us understand why textile practices that are often tied to women's domestic labor hold strong political and symbolic weight.

3.1. Trauma, Memory, and the Tyranny of the Past

"Because we think in a fragmentary way, we see fragments. And this way of seeing leads us to make actual fragments of the world." [9]

I begin this section with the term *trauma* and with the phrase "the tyranny of the past." Both appear in Gabor Maté's *The Myth of Normal*, a book that unexpectedly shaped the theoretical foundation and became one of the central theoretical influences of this project. Although I believed I already understood trauma in a general sense, Maté's writing opened a different perspective, one that connected personal experience with collective inheritance, and my own family stories with the histories of the women I study.

The Greek root of the term *trauma* means "wound," a definition Maté strongly emphasizes. A wound, he explains, influences how we act, react, imagine and live our present and future, whether consciously or not. It's the past that shapes our present. The wound's shape, small or large, sharp or diffuse, matters far less than how it is received. We often describe trauma by retelling the event that caused it, but what stays with us is not the event itself; it is the internal response, the way the body and mind learned to survive it. In Maté's words:

"Trauma is not what happens *to* you but what happens *inside* you." [10]

[9] Gabor Maté, *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, and Healing in a Toxic Culture* (New York: Avery, 2022), 12.

[10] Ibid., 20.

Now to explain "the tyranny of the past" I'm going to quote Maté who cites trauma psychologist Peter Levine, describing "the tyranny of the past" as "the memory of one particular event comes to taint, and dominate, all other experiences, spoiling an appreciation of the present moment." [11] This formulation captured precisely what I needed and am addressing in this thesis. It reflects the mechanisms at work in the histories of women in the Balkans, how past wounds, whether personal or collective, continue to structure the present long after the original moment has passed. This understanding is central to my project, where the focus is not on singular events but on what remains afterward: on the residues, echoes, and repetitions that shape generations.

From the beginning, I knew I was not interested in a purely individual or subjective view of trauma. What concerned me more was the collective dimension: how trauma is transmitted across generations, even from people we have never met. Maté insistently reminds us that what we call "abnormalities" in our societies like violence, inequality, war, emotional neglect are "not a *glitch*" [12] but a "consequence of how we live, not a mysterious aberration." [13] Trauma does not remain fixed in one person; it moves through families, cultures, and social structures. This is deeply relevant in the context of Serbian and Balkan history, where war, patriarchy, displacement, and systemic silencing have shaped generations, particularly women.

In Chapter IV of his book, Maté introduces molecular scientist Michael Kobor's phrase "from society to cell." This term describes how trauma travels in an outside-in direction: "from parents to children; from one person to another; from social, political, and economic conditions to individual bodies." [14] The chapter argues that collective trauma requires collective responsibility. As a society, we function through an unwritten agreement of trust. In the morning, when we go to the bakery and buy bread, we do not question whether it is poisoned. We assume care, responsibility, and mutual accountability. Each of us occupies only a small part of society, knowing our own role, and we rely on others to fulfill theirs. This trust is what allows us to function collectively. When that trust begins to erode, everything starts to fracture. At times, it feels as though our society is already in that state of fragmentation. Feminist perspective point to this same crisis, but from the perspective of women. If men and women cannot function together, if trust, respect, and care are absent, then the social fabric weakens. The consequences are not isolated; they affect everyone.

We have lived with unaddressed trauma for generations, carrying wounds that were never properly acknowledged or healed. This raises a question I return to often: can we truly function together under these conditions? And more importantly, can we learn to heal these wounds collectively, rather than continuing to pass them on?

Maté also highlights how trauma becomes biologically embedded, especially through systems of inequality: "two major social determinants of health – race and economic status – become biologically embedded."[15] He then turns specifically to gendered experience, showing how women and marginalized groups carry disproportionate emotional and physical burdens: "the health impacts of being a woman in a patriarchal system and at the same time a person of color in a racialized climate, of being poor in a culture that worships wealth, or living as a gay or lesbian person in a society where homophobia is still endemic." [16] He describes a pattern he calls *self-silencing*: "the tendency to silence one's thoughts and feelings to maintain safe relationships, particularly intimate relationships." [17] This struck me directly because it reflected the very lives of the women whose stories I explore. Their silence, often necessary for survival, became intergenerational. Through my double-sided textile portraits, I aim to transform that silence into visibility. Their stories, thoughts, and contributions deserve to be heard, not buried within inherited trauma.

Maté further writes: "Arguably to an even greater degree than housework and child-birth, this is the proverbial "women's work" that "is never done." Women often serve as the emotional glue – the connective tissue, if you like – that keeps nuclear and extended families and communities together." [18] This recognition helped clarify the core of my project. I am not only preserving stories; I am acknowledging the invisible labor, emotional endurance, and sustaining force of women whose work shaped our society without recognition.

At the same time, Maté warns against simplifying patriarchy into a binary of victims and perpetrators. He insists that patriarchy is a system in which both sides "in their own ways, are powerless."[19] Mate reflects on his own behavior by saying: "When I reduce my wife to an object whose purpose is to keep me satisfied, what role am I casting myself in? An impotent, dependent child whose emotional welfare hinges on Mommy's willingness to comply with my perceived needs."[20] He illustrates how systems of domination also diminish those who appear to benefit from them. This is important for my thesis, especially given the backlash feminism faces today. The problems we address are not "women's problems"; they are human problems. We live interdependently or as Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "*we inter-are.*"[21] Our experiences shape one another, and none of us exists outside the web of relations that sustains society.

[11] Ibid., 45.
[12] Ibid., 2
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 278
[15] Ibid., 313.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid., 333.
[18] Ibid., 337.
[19] Ibid., 341.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 58.

Returning to the concept of trauma and the tyranny of the past, it becomes clear that every action has a ripple effect. Emotions travel, between mother and child, between partners, between communities. They shape memory, and memory shapes identity. This brings me to Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, which is central to understanding the contemporary female experience. Postmemory describes how descendants inherit stories, wounds, and silences so deeply that they feel like memories of their own. In this thesis, trauma theory, memory studies, and postmemory offer tools for understanding how the past functions in the present, both in society and within my artistic process.

3.2. Postmemory as Inherited Experience

It feels necessary to begin this section by defining the term *postmemory* and explaining why it holds such importance for my project. Marianne Hirsch notes that "postmemory" belongs to a broader family of "post-" concepts like postmodernism, posthumanism, postfeminism which are terms that do not signal the end of the original idea but rather its evolution. In the same way, postfeminism does not mean that feminism has died; it marks a new wave shaped by new conditions. Postmemory functions similarly: not as a replacement for memory, but as a continuation of it, reshaped at a generational distance.

Hirsch defines postmemory as "a *structure* of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove."[22] Her understanding of trauma parallels Maté's: both describe how experiences that did not happen to us directly can nevertheless shape our emotional, psychological, and even physical lives. This connection resonated with me immediately. While researching these women, Mileva Marić, Nadežda Petrović, and Milunka Savić, I realized that I was not receiving their stories from the source. I encountered them through books, archives, retellings, and cultural memory. Their identity was already transformed through these written words by the time they become the subject of my work. And yet, the emotional imprint they carried still felt powerful.

Every story changes once it leaves the person who lived it. It shifts slightly through an interpretation, a gesture, a missing detail, a silence. What remains is the wound's echo: the emotional residue of generations of women who endured, survived, and continued. Their stories do not only describe trauma; they transmit it. This is the essence of collective or cultural trauma, which lies at the center of my project. Even if we never lived the events these women experienced, we inherit the consequences.

Hirsch articulates this process when she writes: "To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the experience of postmemory and the process of its generation."[23] In the words of Hirsch, and through the thinking of Maté, this understanding of inherited trauma forms the core of my project and explains why postmemory is essential to grasp before moving further into theory.

Frequently, Hirsch refers to the Holocaust as a foundation to illustrate postmemory. Drawing from Helen Epstein's Children of the Holocaust, she describes how children of survivors processed a history that preceded them, a suffering they never personally lived through. I see a similar dynamic in the history of Balkan womanhood. Feminism did not appear suddenly or accidentally; it emerged from generations of women living within conditions of silence, limitation, unrecognized labor, and repeated sacrifice. Trauma accumulated slowly until it demanded expression.

Ernst van Alphen, responding to Epstein, argues that memory usually implies continuity: "the event is the beginning, the memory is the result...."[24] In his view, children of survivors do not possess memories because they did not live the events. What they inherit instead is a form of knowledge created through proximity, living near the stories, in the shadow of suffering, inside the emotional atmosphere left behind. A symbolic way to think of this is the metaphor of fire: one generation experiences the flames; the next grows up with the smoke. Both are real, but they are not the same. Hirsch responds by emphasizing that postmemory is not identical to memory, yet it "approximates memory in its affective force."[25] This is crucial for my work. I am not trying to recreate the direct lives of these women; I am working with the emotional smoke, the stories that reach us in fragments, images, gestures, and silences. They feel intimate even though they did not originate within us.

Hirsch writes: "These "not memories" communicated in "flashes of imagery" and "broken refrains," transmitted through "the language of the body," are precisely the stuff of postmemory."[26] These incomplete forms mirror how trauma is often transmitted, not in neat narratives but in sensations, reactions, inherited fears, and unexplained emotions.

[22] Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," Poetics Today 29, no. 1 (2008): 106.

[23] Ibid., 107.

[24] Ibid., 109.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

In the Serbian and Balkan context, women inherit not only family trauma but also the weight of collective cultural narratives: wars, displacement, losses, gender expectations, and long histories of emotional endurance. These stories rarely appear in official archives; instead, they pass "from generation to generation," in everyday life, through warnings, gestures, tone of voice, or the subject's families avoid because they hurt too much. Much of this transmission happens unconsciously. Children grow into symbols of their parents' experiences without even realizing it.

Historically, women in the Balkans have served as emotional carriers: they held the family together, protected children, preserved cultural continuity, and sustained domestic life through instability. Yet their own stories were often silenced or dismissed. This creates a double inheritance which means women receive the trauma and the silence surrounding it. This dual burden is precisely what drew me to Marić, Petrović, and Savić. Their stories have not disappeared; the smoke remains. We breathe it, feel it, and react to it, even when the fire itself is no longer visible.

This inherited atmosphere continues to shape how contemporary women negotiate fear, responsibility, ambition, and resilience. It also shaped my own emotional experience while creating the double-sided portraits. Postmemory became not just a theory but an intuitive method of working: stitching the past into the present, allowing inherited silence to become visible.

This theoretical foundation naturally leads into my exploration of textile as a form of memory-keeping and resistance, a connection developed further through Rozsika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch*, where materiality, gendered experience, and historical transmission intersect.

3.3. The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery, Materiality, and Feminist Memory

"The child sees in the mother's face a reflection of him or herself, mediated by the mother's feeling of love and acceptance. The embroiderer sees a positive reflection of herself in her work and, importantly, in the reception of her work by others."[27]

Parker's words describe the moment where embroidery becomes more than a technique. It becomes a psychological mirror, a way of seeing oneself, and of being seen. For me, this is where the theories of trauma, memory, and postmemory meet the material reality of textile.

Before beginning this project, I understood embroidery only intuitively, as something familiar and domestic. But the more I read, especially Rozsika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch* and Julia Bryan-Wilson's *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*, the more I realized how deeply embroidery is embedded in women's history, emotion, and generational transmission. The medium itself carries the kinds of non-verbal, embodied knowledge that postmemory describes. Through repetition of stitches, I am repeating inherited stories. Through tension in the thread, I mimic emotional tension. Every rupture, mistake, or repair becomes a visual analogy for trauma, a wound, a scar, a healing.

When I stitch these portraits, I am assembling more than just the images. I am piecing together fragments of erased histories, acknowledging the silences surrounding these women without trying to "correct" them. The textile portraits do not simply represent Marić, Petrović, and Savić; they become sites of postmemorial engagement, spaces where inherited feelings, distortions, and gaps can be felt rather than explained. Their lives were often ignored, not dramatically silenced, just quietly overlooked. Textile allows me to make absence visible.

Both Parker and Bryan-Wilson argue that embroidery occupies a complicated place within the history of art. Bryan-Wilson writes that "fine art and amateur practices are mutually constitutive,"[28] yet the distinction between them is shaped by context rather than quality. Textile work, associated with domestic labor, is often dismissed as hobby or craft, rarely given full artistic legitimacy. Parker notes that valuing women's textile skills is double-edged: it acknowledges pleasure and creativity while also revealing: "On one level the use of craft validates women's traditional skills and emphasizes how much pleasure there is in, for example, crocheting. On another level it draws attention to the way our time and energy has been absorbed by our massive contribution to the domestic economy: knitting, sewing, and furnishing the home." [29] In other words, what women made was essential, but rarely recognized as art.

This echoes a broader pattern of sexism in art history. As Griselda Pollock famously pointed out, male artists are remembered by surname — Picasso, Pollock — while female artists are called by their first names: Frida, Marina. As Griselda Pollock has noted, feminist practices are often tolerated rather than truly heard; a condition that mirrors the status of textile work, which is permitted to exist but rarely taken seriously. [30]

"Women's studies are not just about women — but about the social systems and ideological schemas which sustain the domination of men over women within the other mutually inflecting regimes of power in the world, namely those of class and those of race." [31]

This is why Parker's statement that "embroidering the personal as political"[32] was meant to challenge women's

[27] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xx

[28] Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 5.

[29] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 109.

[30] Griselda Pollock, YouTube video, accessed August 10, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FbX-D2W7gP4w, 33:30-34:09.

[31] Griselda Pollock, *Feminist Interventions in Arts Histories* (London: Routledge, 2007), 5.

[32] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xv.

oppression and feels so important to my project. Bryan-Wilson pushes this further, asking:

"What does it mean to imagine the sewing needle as a dangerous tool... capable of upending conventions or threatening structures?"[33]

While stitching, I tried not to see myself simply as another link in a chain of domestic female labor, repeating what my mother, grandmother, or aunt once did. Instead, I tried to understand the needle as a tool of articulation, a megaphone for each woman I study, that never had it. I am not rewriting their history as a historian; I am giving form to the emotional residue they left behind.

In this sense, the needle becomes a metaphor. As Melanie Klein writes, "the needle is used to repair damage. It is a claim to forgiveness."[34] Unlike a pin, it is not aggressive; it mends rather than pierces. Trauma, too, is a wound, not always made with force, but always leaving a mark that requires care. Parker adds that "the embroiderer holds in her hands a coherent object which exists both outside in the world and inside her head."[35] This duality mirrors exactly what I experienced: stitching became a way of holding past and present together, seeing the trauma both as material and memory.

Textile is one of humanity's oldest forms of storytelling. We learn the world through touch long before language. Certain fabrics, sensations, and textures become tied to memory. Textile carries history not only in how it looks but in how it feels. As Bryan-Wilson notes, "the physical and intimate qualities of fabric allow it to embody memory and sensation and become a quintessential metaphor for the human condition."[36] Women historically worked in silence, bent over cloth, losing hours and days to a labor that demanded care but offered little recognition. Simone de Beauvoir captured this poignantly:

"With the needle or the crochet hook, woman sadly weaves the very nothingness of her days." [37]

When I found myself bent over my own stitching, working alone and absorbed in thought, I understood this line with new clarity. The repetitive motion, the solitude, the feeling of stitching thoughts into fabric, all of it connected me to generations of women who used textile as their emotional outlet, their space of resistance, or simply their survival mechanism.

In this way, embroidery becomes much more than a technique. It becomes a way of processing inherited histories and of engaging physically with trauma, silence, memory, and resilience. Through it, I make visible what has been passed down, consciously or unconsciously, and create space for these women to finally be seen.

[33] Bryan-Wilson, *Fray*, 1.

[34] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, xix..

[35] Ibid., xx.

[36] Bryan-Wilson, *Fray*, 22.

[37] Ibid., 20.

3.4. Collage, Assemblage, and Fragmentation in the Construction of HERstory

If trauma and postmemory shape the emotional ground of this project, and textile provides the material language, then collage and assemblage form the visual grammar through which these inherited histories become visible. At the beginning of my project, I was not consciously planning to work with collage. It was not a clear decision but rather an intuitive pull, a feeling that guided me toward it. Only later did I begin to question why collage appeared so naturally in my process and why it made sense for the stories I was working with.

Collage has always been closely tied to rupture, reconstruction, and the bringing together of elements that do not naturally belong to the same world. It is, by nature, a practice built from fragments. Because of this, it mirrors women's histories: stories that were often left incomplete, interrupted, or preserved only in pieces. Much like how women have had to gather what remains of their experiences and memories, collage gathers what survives and reshapes it into something that can be seen again.

Collage has existed for a long time and has been used across many artistic movements such as Dadaism, Cubism, Fluxus, and others. While it would be possible to define collage historically, I am more interested in what it represents and how stories and meanings are communicated through it, especially in my artwork. Collage is often understood as a practice shaped by early experiences of play and image-making in childhood, and I strongly relate to this idea. Sitting in front of the work, cutting images and arranging them, I often felt like I was playing, experimenting intuitively, without fully verbalizing the story I was telling. The narrative emerged through images and composition rather than through language.

In *Collage: Assembling Contemporary Art*, John Stezaker writes that for him "collage is not about successful application of an idea or strategy but, rather, is a way of living with available images by a process of making them one's own."[38] This sentence captures the core of how I understand my own collaging process. At first, collage frightened me. I have always struggled with letting go of control, and collage demands surrender. There is always a part of the work that cannot be fully controlled, including how viewers interpret it. This fear intensified when I realized how little visual material existed about the women I was researching. Their stories are poorly documented, fragmented, and unevenly preserved. Initially, this made me want to step back. However, through reading and working, I came to understand that this lack of material was not a limitation, but precisely the reason

[38] John Stezaker, in conversation with David Lillington, in *Collage: Assembling Contemporary Art*, ed. Blanche Craig (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2008), 22.

collage was the right approach.

Historically, collage emerged in modernist art as a way of breaking apart the illusion of wholeness. Feminist artists later embraced fragmentation because it aligned with their need to challenge dominant narratives and to create space for voices excluded from the patriarchal archive. Through my double-sided collaged portraits, I make it visible that parts of these women's stories are missing, while also leaving space for contemporary viewers to engage with them from today's perspective.

In the context of HERstory, the feminist rewriting of history from women's perspectives, collage becomes more than a medium; it becomes a methodology. It acknowledges that women's histories do not arrive intact. They must be gathered, assembled, and reimagined from the pieces that survive. For the women at the center of this project, Marić, Petrović, and Savić, the available narratives are marked by absences, distortions, and selective retelling. Their lives were documented unevenly: sometimes celebrated, sometimes dismissed, often overshadowed by national narratives, one-sided stories or male figures. Working with collage is therefore not a stylistic choice but a conceptual response to the archival condition of their histories.

Assemblage extends this logic even further. While collage operates primarily on the surface of paper or fabric, assemblage incorporates objects, textures, and materials that carry their own histories. In my portraits, the use of dried flowers, stitched wounds, archival images, and embroidered text creates layered structures that echo the layered transmission of memory. Each element carries emotional weight: the thread pulling through cloth like a scar or vein, images acting as fragments of visual inheritance, and flowers serving as symbolic carriers of meaning tied to each woman.

There is also a specific importance in my use of found photographs. This is not the first project in which I have worked with found photography, and my fascination with it continues. Marianne Hirsch's reflection resonated strongly with me: "More than oral or written narratives, photographic images that survive massive devastation and outlive their subjects and owners function as ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world. They enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch that past but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic 'take.'"[39] This describes precisely how I experience working with archival images, as a way of touching a past that is gone, yet still emotionally present.

Fragmentation within these collages does not simply illustrate brokenness. Instead, it reveals the complexity of what has been inherited. Trauma rarely appears as a single, coherent narrative; it emerges through flashes, contradictions, and repetitions shaped by time. "Cutting or tearing the essential verbs of collage, connotes violation and trauma, like a guttural, visceral rupture." [40] Collage embraces this instability. It allows gaps, interruptions, and unresolved tensions to remain visible, which aligns closely with how postmemory operates. These fractures do not weaken the work; they allow it to speak honestly about how women's stories are preserved, misremembered, or lost.

HERstory enters here as both a challenge and a generative framework. Unlike traditional history, which prioritizes linear narratives and public achievements, HERstory foregrounds the personal, domestic, emotional, and embodied. It insists that women's lived experiences, including their silences, are historically significant. Collage becomes a visual enactment of HERstory because it reconstructs the past without pretending to fill every gap. It respects the fragment as a form of truth.

The double-sided portraits function within this logic of fragmentation and reconstruction. Each side presents a different aspect of the woman's life, the public and the private, the documented and the imagined, the visible and the suppressed. The viewer must physically move around the work to grasp its meaning, reflecting the way women's histories are scattered across time and sources. There is no single authoritative version; meaning emerges through navigating between fragments.

Through collage and assemblage, I position myself not only as an artist but as a mediator between past and present. I work with what remains, understanding that absence carries meaning. By cutting, stitching, layering, and arranging, I engage in a feminist form of archival recovery, one that acknowledges the limits of what can be known while still honoring the emotional and cultural legacies of these women. In this way, the collage-based portraits function as counter-archives. They reconstruct HERstory not by claiming objectivity, but by foregrounding affect, fragmentation, and embodied experience. Through the act of assembling fragments, the works assert that these women existed fully, even if history recorded them incompletely.

The theoretical frameworks discussed in this chapter, feminist historiography, trauma studies, postmemory, feminist materiality, and HERstory, do not function in this project as purely analytical tools. Rather than aiming to reconstruct historical narratives or establish archival completeness, this research activates theory through artistic practice. The work does not seek to replace feminist historiography, but to

[39] Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory," 115.

[40] Craig, ed., *Collage: Assembling Contemporary Art*, 20.

engage with its limits by addressing dimensions that often remain inaccessible to written history, such as silence, affect, embodiment, and inherited emotional experience. Textile, collage, and assemblage operate here as methodological instruments through which these theories are translated into material form. By working with fragmentation, repetition, and repair, the project approaches women's histories not as fixed accounts, but as living processes shaped by memory, absence, and transmission. This shift from theoretical analysis to material practice forms the basis for the artistic references and the description of the artwork that follow.

Figure 9.

ARTISTIC REFERENCES

Chapter Four

This chapter explains how my artistic practice fits into the larger picture of modern art that deals with things like memory, trauma, embodiment, and the reconstruction of marginalized narratives. The artists discussed here do not serve as direct influences in a stylistic sense; rather, they form a conceptual framework through which I understand my own position as an artist working with female histories, material memory, and fragmentation. Each of these practices addresses questions that are central to my project: how histories are constructed, how absence can be made visible, and how the body, literal or symbolic, can function as an archive.

4.1. **CINDY SHERMAN:**

Portraiture, Construction, and the Instability of Identity

Figure 10.

Cindy Sherman is one of the first artistic references I gathered when I started opening up this project. I knew that one of her works stood out to me, and I felt it was relevant to this project. My final project did steer into another place, but still, the story and the message I want to share really connects to Cindy Sherman and her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) (see Figures 10, 15, 16, 17) in which Sherman stages herself in the roles of women who appear familiar, yet remain unnamed and undefined.

Photographic practice is foundational for any discussion of portraiture that challenges authenticity and identity, but rather than documenting individuals, Sherman constructs images that expose how identity, especially female identity, is shaped through representation, stereotypes, and cultural expectations. These figures resemble characters from mid-20th-century cinema, but they are not tied to any specific film. Instead, they exist in a space between recognition and uncertainty, where the viewer projects narrative, character, and meaning onto the image. Her work consistently undermines the idea of the portrait as a transparent or truthful record, instead revealing it as a site of performance and projection.

At the beginning of the project, I tried to recreate portraits of these women through photography by posing as them myself (see Figures 11–14). Over

Figure 11.

Figure 12.

Figure 13.

Figure 14.

time, I realized that this approach closely reflected the way the project had started and how my understanding of portraiture gradually shifted. It made me question what a portrait is meant to do, and what it can be beyond resemblance. The textile portraits of Mileva Marić, Nadežda Petrović, and Milunka Savić are not intended as true resemblance or historical reconstructions. Instead, they are assembled images shaped by fragments, symbols, and absences. Like Sherman's photographs, they question who controls representation and how women are seen through cultural narratives rather than presenting a stable identity.

In *Untitled Film Stills*, Sherman reveals that the image of a woman is never neutral; it is always already coded by expectation, stereotype, and narrative. Similarly, my collaged portraits expose how historical images of women function as projections rather than truths. By working with archival photographs, fragments, and symbolic materials, I emphasize that these women's identities cannot be reduced to a single, authoritative representation. As in Sherman's work, the portrait becomes a site of construction rather than revelation, inviting the viewer to question not only what they see, but how and why they recognize it.

While Sherman uses her own body to perform multiple fictional identities, I work through material and historical distance. The connection lies in the shared refusal of authenticity as a stable category. Both practices treat identity as layered, performed, and mediated, shaped by cultural context rather than natural essence. In this way, *Untitled Film Stills* provides an important reference for understanding my portraits not as illustrations of history, but as critical reconstructions that make visible the mechanisms through which women's identities are produced, remembered, and misremembered.

Figure 15.

Figure 16.

Figure 17.

4.2. **MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ:**

The Body as Archive and the Transmission of Trauma

Figure 18.

Marina Abramović's work offers an important reference for understanding how personal experience, collective trauma, and cultural memory can be embodied within artistic practice. Including her in this project feels especially relevant given her Balkan background, specifically her upbringing in former Yugoslavia, which she has often described as deeply influential to her work. My connection to Abramović's practice is also personal. When I first encountered her work in person in Belgrade in 2019 and later heard her speak about her history, roots, and upbringing, I became acutely aware of how closely her themes resonated with my own. Hearing her articulate the impact of her cultural and historical background helped me recognize similar patterns within my own work and thinking. Working from the Balkan context, Abramović repeatedly addresses themes of endurance, pain, and inherited violence, using her own body as a site where personal memory and collective history intersect. This approach strongly aligns with my interest in how trauma is carried across generations and how artistic practice can become a space for confronting histories that remain unresolved.

There are many artworks that I can point out here, but the one that always specifically stood out to me and made me really connect it to our roots is the *Balkan Baroque* (1997) (see Figures 18. 19) which is a particularly important reference because it confronts collective trauma, cultural inheritance, and the persistence of the past within the Balkan context. In this performance, Abramović sits among a pile of bloodied animal bones, attempting to clean them while singing folk songs from her childhood and speaking about her family. The act of washing becomes useless; the bones cannot be cleansed. From learning about trauma, I actually noticed that for me the most traumatic events are related to the sense of touch, but also the sense of smell. And actually, from this artwork, I really remember the smell and of course how much I was taken back. The performance exposes the impossibility of purifying history and the way unresolved violence continues to haunt the present, and it has haunted me just like the most influential art does.

While Abramović's practice is grounded in performance and direct bodily presence, her work is relevant to my project in a conceptual sense. What resonates most strongly with my work is Abramović's treatment of trauma as something that is inherited rather than chosen. *Balkan Baroque* does not represent a single historical event, but a collective condition shaped by war, guilt, memory, and silence. The body becomes an archive, bearing traces of a past that cannot be erased through rational explanation or moral distancing.

Abramović works directly with her own body and endurance, while my project approaches inherited trauma through textile and material labor. Stitching, mending, and repetition function as quieter but equally persistent acts. Where Abramović scrubs bones that remain stained, I stitch wounds that cannot be fully closed. Both practices acknowledge that the past cannot be undone, only carried, processed, and confronted. In this sense, *Balkan Baroque* informs my understanding of artistic practice as a space where historical pain is not resolved, but made visible and held.

The connection between our practices also lies in the use of tradition. Abramović incorporates Balkan folk songs and references to family history, grounding the work in cultural memory. Similarly, my use of embroidery, a traditionally feminine, domestic practice, draws from cultural traditions passed through female generations. In both cases, tradition becomes a site of tension: a place where care, endurance, and inherited suffering intersect. Through different materials and tempos, both works explore how history continues to live within the body and within cultural forms, long after the events themselves have passed.

Figure 19.

4.3. **LOUIS BOURGEOIS:**

Textile, Memory, and Psychological Space

Figure 20.

Louise Bourgeois is a crucial reference for my work due to her use of textile as a medium through which memory, trauma, and emotional experience are articulated. Her later works, particularly those involving fabric, clothing, and stitching, transform domestic materials into carriers of psychological and autobiographical meaning. That's why I need to mention her work *Cells* (1989–1991). In these works, Bourgeois frequently used fabric, clothing, and stitched forms drawn from her own past, transforming domestic materials into carriers of emotional and bodily memory. Textile becomes a language through which childhood experiences, family relationships, and unresolved trauma are revisited and reworked.

What is especially relevant for my practice is Bourgeois' understanding of fabric as something that holds memory through touch, repetition, and use. Clothing and stitched forms in her work function almost like a second skin, bearing traces of time, care, and vulnerability. This resonates strongly with my use of embroidery as a method of engaging with inherited female histories. Like Bourgeois, I do not treat textile as decorative, but as a medium capable of holding emotional weight and psychological complexity.

The *Cells* series (see Figures 20–22) further expands this logic by transforming memory into spatial form. Each cell operates as a contained yet permeable environment, where fragments of objects, fabric, and bodily references coexist. These spaces evoke the feeling of being inside a memory rather than observing it from a distance. This approach informs my understanding of how artworks can function as emotional containers, where trauma is not explained or resolved, but held and confronted through material presence.

Bourgeois often described her work as a form of repair rather than resolution. Stitching, repetition, and reconstruction become acts of care that acknowledge damage without attempting to erase it. This perspective closely aligns with my own approach to trauma. In my portraits, wounds are stitched but remain visible; cuts are repaired but not hidden. The process mirrors how inherited trauma operates, persisting even as attempts are made to tend to it.

What I find particularly important in Bourgeois' practice is her refusal to separate personal memory from broader structures of gender and power. Her work demonstrates how domestic materials, traditionally associated with femininity and care, can articulate experiences of fear, loss, and endurance. This understanding deeply informs my decision to work with embroidery as both a personal and political act, using textile as a medium through which female memory, trauma, and resilience are materially inscribed.

Figure 21.

Figure 22.

4.4. **CHIHARU SHIOTA:**

Thread, Absence, and Spatial Memory

Figure 23.

Chiharu Shiota's installation practice offers an important reference for my project through her use of thread as a material that visualizes memory, absence, and emotional connection. Her large-scale installations, often composed of dense networks of red or black thread, create spatial environments that evoke entanglement, loss, and the persistence of memory beyond physical presence (see Figures 23–26). Rather than representing specific events or individuals, Shiota's work gives form to what cannot be fully articulated: longing, displacement, and the invisible ties between people and their pasts.

What resonates most strongly with my practice is Shiota's treatment of absence as a generative force as opposed to lack of it. Her installations frequently include empty objects, beds, dresses, shoes, keys, suggesting bodies and lives that are no longer present (see Figure 26). Thread does not replace what is missing; instead, it marks the space where something once existed. This approach closely aligns with my engagement with women's histories that survive only in fragments. In my portraits, absence is not corrected or filled in, but acknowledged and made visible through material gaps, cuts, and layered surfaces.

Shiota's use of thread as a connective medium also informs my understanding of stitching as a metaphor for inherited experience. Thread functions

Figure 24.

Figure 25.

simultaneously as a line, a bond, and a trace of movement. In her work, it connects objects, spaces, and memories into a single, immersive structure. In my project, embroidery operates on a more intimate scale, yet carries a similar logic: each stitch connects past and present, personal and collective memory, lived experience and historical narrative. Both practices treat thread as a material that records emotional intensity rather than visual representation.

Color plays a significant role in Shiota's work, particularly her repeated use of red thread, which often evokes associations with blood, life, lineage, and emotional intensity. While my own use of color is tied to specific symbolic and cultural meanings within the portraits, Shiota's work reinforces the idea that thread itself can function as a carrier of affect and memory, not merely as a formal element. The accumulation of thread becomes a visual expression of time, repetition, and persistence.

Although Shiota's installations operate on an architectural scale and my work takes the form of textile portraits, both practices share an interest in how memory inhabits space and material. Shiota creates environments that the viewer enters physically, while my works invite close, tactile engagement. In both cases, the viewer encounters memory not as a linear narrative, but as a layered, emotional field shaped by absence, repetition, and connection.
Shiota's practice supports my understanding of textile and thread as tools for making the intangible visible. Her work demonstrates how material can carry memory without relying on explanation or documentation. This perspective strengthens my own approach to using embroidery and collage as methods for engaging with postmemory, allowing inherited histories to be felt rather than fully known.

Figure 26.

4.5. **CHICKS ON SPEED & KATHI GLAS:**

Goddess Full Speed Ahead

Figure 27.

Goddess Full Speed Ahead operates within the feminist artistic context of Chicks on Speed, with Kathi Glas contributing through a material and symbolic textile practice. The work takes the form of a layered patchwork composition sewn primarily on tulle, allowing transparency, accumulation, and movement. It brings together mythological and contemporary feminist figures, beginning with Lilith as a central icon of autonomy and resistance, accompanied by symbols such as the black moon, owl, and snake.

The use of textile and embroidery situates the work within practices traditionally associated with feminine labor, while its scale, layering, and visual density refuse notions of delicacy or passivity. Sewing functions not as ornament, but as an assertive method of image-making, allowing historical, mythical, and contemporary references to coexist within a single, continuously unfolding surface. The transparency of tulle further emphasizes multiplicity and simultaneity, suggesting that feminist histories are layered rather than linear.

References to other goddesses, including Kali and Hekate, appear through symbolic elements such as the sword, torch, and key, which signify knowledge, transformation, and guidance. A contemporary political dimension is introduced through the embroidered portrait of Francesca Paola Albanese, while the background textile features the stitched toroidal field of the heart, symbolizing unity and energetic circulation. Additional motifs, including the third eye, butterfly, sun, and shell, reinforce themes of transformation, continuity, and feminine power.

I was introduced to this work through my advisor, Professor Tina Frank, and it became an important contemporary reference for this project due to its articulation of feminism as action rather than representation. Within Chicks on Speed's interdisciplinary practice, which combines performance, music, fashion, and visual art, *Goddess Full Speed Ahead* foregrounds speed and forward movement as feminist strategies.

The goddess figure is not presented as a distant mythological ideal, but as an active and contemporary presence. Speed functions as a political tactic, resisting stagnation and the expectation that women remain bound to static historical narratives. In relation to *Tyranny of the Past*, this work represents a counter-movement to my own slower, reparative engagement with inherited histories. Rather than opposing one another, these approaches articulate complementary feminist strategies for engaging with the past without being immobilized by it.

Within this chapter, *Goddess Full Speed Ahead* functions as a supporting reference that situates my project within contemporary feminist practices concerned with resilience, continuity, and transformation.

ARTISTIC PROJECT

Chapter Five

This chapter focuses on the development, structure, material process and thinking of the artistic project *Tyranny of the Past: Unveiling Hidden Female Legacies through Threads of Tradition*. While the previous chapters established the theoretical and artistic frameworks informing this research, the following sections examine how these ideas are translated into material form. These artworks are not made to explain theory. They are created through practice, where making the work helps generate ideas, memories, and connections.

The project consists of three double-sided textile portraits (70x120cm), executed on ivory Aida cloth, of Mileva Marić, Nadežda Petrović, and Milunka Savić. Each portrait is constructed through embroidery, collage, perforation, and the incorporation of symbolic materials, such as dried flowers, red and blue thread. Together, the works form a triptych that addresses female history not as a linear narrative, but as a layered and fragmented constellation of experiences shaped by visibility, silence, and inheritance.

Instead of trying to reconstruct the women's lives in a documentary way, the artworks approach their histories through material interpretation. Historical research, archival images, and cultural memory act as starting points, while the final works develop through touch, intuition, and repetition. Stitching, cutting, and assembling become ways of working through experiences and histories that cannot be fully expressed through words. In this way, the artistic process reflects the central themes of the thesis: trauma, postmemory, and how the past continues to shape the present.

The double-sided structure of each portrait is central to the concept of the project. One side focuses on the public and visible aspects of each woman's life, how she is remembered, represented, or turned into a symbol, while the other side addresses more private, emotional, and often hidden experiences and the suffering she had to endure. I believe that we, as people, are never just one thing. Our identity can never be defined as a single, fixed image. To some, we are friends; to others, colleagues, sisters, brothers, parents, or even strangers who once made them laugh. We carry many different aspects within us. To be seen in our full existence is incredibly difficult, and perhaps even impossible. Because of this, I did not want to acknowledge these women only through their "warrior" side, their strength, or their fight against the system. I was aware that they lived full, complex lives. They were much more than their brave public stories. Some were mothers, some were married, some lived quiet domestic lives, and this, too, is part of what made them women, and what made them special. I think that in many feminist narratives, the feminine is sometimes suppressed out of fear that it will

be reduced to that alone. We fight so strongly, sometimes to extremes, that we end up showing only the struggle, the toughness, or what is often defined as the “masculine” side of strength. However, I believe that both sides are valid, and that women should be able to speak about both. These women carried delicacy alongside resilience, tenderness alongside fight, and personal interests alongside public sacrifice. Acknowledging this complexity felt essential to my work. This is why I require the viewer to physically move around the portraits to see both sides. The movement emphasizes that these lives cannot be understood from a single point of view. Meaning emerges through movement, closeness, and careful looking, rather than from a fixed or frontal perspective.

Material choices are central to this process. Embroidery is used not only because of its cultural and gendered associations, but also for its sense of time, its slowness, repetition, and care. Collage makes it possible to bring together fragmented visual histories, allowing gaps and absences in the archive to remain visible rather than smoothing them over. Perforations, stitched wounds, and visible repairs mark moments of trauma, absence, or silence, turning damage into something that is acknowledged and made visible instead of hidden.

This chapter begins by explaining more of the methodology behind this artwork, then outlining the overall structure of the triptych and the shared visual language of the three works. It then turns to a closer reading of each portrait, focusing on the specific material choices, symbolic elements, and conceptual decisions behind them. Through this examination, the artworks are understood not only as finished pieces, but as traces of an ongoing process that works through memory, history, and female experience through material practice.

Figure 28.

5.1. THE BEGINNING

Before the artistic project *Tyranny of the Past: Unveiling Hidden Female Legacies through Threads of Tradition* took its material form, I carried out an initial research phase during the third semester of my studies. This phase was presented as a scientific and conceptual research poster and marked the first moment in which the central themes of the thesis began to take shape (see Figure 33).

At this early stage, my focus lay primarily on theoretical research, cultural analysis, and the development of a conceptual framework addressing generational trauma, female lineage, and patriarchal structures within Serbian and broader Balkan contexts. The poster brought together influences from trauma theory, feminist discourse, and cultural symbolism, particularly drawing on Gabor Maté's concept of "the tyranny of the past." The aim was not to define a final artistic outcome, but to understand how inherited trauma, silence, and tradition continue to shape women's lives and identities in the present.

One of the most significant outcomes of this phase was the emergence of the project's title. *Tyranny of the Past* crystallized my thinking around the persistence of historical patterns and the way they continue to impose themselves on contemporary experience. At the same time, the subtitle *Unveiling Hidden Female Legacies through Threads of Tradition* introduced two central metaphors that would later remain fundamental to the project: unveiling and thread. In the poster, these ideas appeared primarily through the symbolic use of cloth or veils and red thread, referencing cultural practices connected to purity, protection, and silence within Balkan traditions.

At this point, the red thread had already taken on a strong conceptual role, symbolizing connection, lineage, protection, and the possibility of mending. However, many aspects of the project were still unresolved. I did not yet know that blue thread would later become equally important, nor had I determined that the final works would take the form of double-sided textile portraits. The poster proposed photography as the main medium, combined with textile intervention, but the exact relationship between image, fabric, and embroidery remained open and exploratory.

Importantly, this early research phase did not aim for precision or completeness. Many ideas presented in the poster later shifted, transformed, or were abandoned altogether. Rather than viewing these changes as inconsistencies, I understand them as a necessary part of practice-based artistic research. The poster functioned as a testing ground, allowing intuition, theory, and cultural memory to interact before material decisions were fixed.

Figure 33.


GELATIN ATLAS
KLAUS RINKE
NONCONFORMERS
PAULA REGO
BANKSY
77.263

Figure 34.

5.2. METHODOLOGY

Figure 35.

This thesis is grounded in a practice-based artistic research methodology, in which knowledge is generated through making, observing, reflecting, and material engagement rather than through purely theoretical analysis. Meaning, insight, and understanding emerge through the processes of making, material experimentation, and embodied engagement, rather than being applied to the work from theory alone. The research does not aim to produce fixed historical truths or complete narratives, but instead investigates how women's histories are remembered, fragmented, silenced, and reassembled through artistic practice.

My position within this research is both that of an artist and a researcher. I approach the subject from within, acknowledging my personal and cultural proximity to the histories I engage with, while remaining attentive to the broader social and political frameworks that shape them. Rather than separating theory and practice into distinct phases, this project unfolds through an ongoing dialogue between historical research, theoretical reflection, and material experimentation. These modes continuously informed and reshaped one another throughout the process.

Practice-Based Artistic Research

The methodology of this work is based on artistic research that combines theoretical analysis, work with archival materials, and the practical artistic process. The starting point was not the search for "accurate" or complete historical truths, but an understanding of how women's stories are remembered, forgotten, fragmented and transformed over time. In other words, rather than applying theory to practice in a linear way, the research and practical work I have embarked up on, unfolded through an ongoing dialogue between theoretical reflection, historical research, and material experimentation. Knowledge is generated through the act of making, observing adjusting, reflecting and essentially, intuition. Personal affect and careful listening to what archives, text and materials keep silent as much as what they explicitly show. Decisions regarding form, color, material, structure and layering were shaped through repetition, trial, and responsiveness to the material rather than predetermined outcomes. In other words, my main focus was overlapping and layering of the methodological modes that informed and reshaped one another throughout the process.

Theoretical and Archival Research

The theoretical part of this artwork includes readings of feminist theory, memory and trauma studies, that I have already mentioned in the previous chapters. This theoretical background was not used as a strict analytical tool, but as a framework of thought that shaped the way I approached visual and material work.

Figure 36.

These texts have influenced the questions I ask, but not the final answers, which remain open and multi-layered. Archives were approached critically, not as neutral container of truth, but as systems shaped by power and selection. Special attention was given to absences, silences, and contradictions, which became active components of the artistic process rather than gaps to be resolved. For example, HERstory operates in this project not only as a conceptual framework, but as a methodological approach.

Intuitive and Affective Approach

In addition to theoretical research, the project relied heavily on intuitive and emotional approaches. Personal reflection, affective reactions, and embodied memory played a crucial role in shaping artistic decisions. uncertainty, resisting simplified or heroic representations of the women portrayed. Emotional responsiveness was not understood as subjective excess, but as a necessary mode of engagement when working with inherited trauma, silence, and fragmented histories.

Research Through Materials

Research through materials served as the central methodological tool. Textiles, embroideries, and fabrics were selected for their historical, cultural and gendered associations, as well as their capacity to convey time, labor, and vulnerability. Embroidery as well as collage as a methodological tool help to explore more deeper fragmentation, repair and inheritance. Stitching operates as a slow, repetitive practice that mirrors the physical nature of memory and trauma, while collage enables the assembly of incomplete visual histories without resolving their gaps. Materials were approached as active agents within the research, shaping meaning through their texture, resistance, fragility, and responsiveness.

During the making of these portraits, I worked with embroidery and perforation for the first time. Initially, these techniques entered the project intuitively, without a fixed outcome in mind. Through direct engagement with the materials, I began to understand how piercing the image and stitching through it could function not only as a visual gesture, but as a way of thinking about trauma, interruption, and repair. The act of perforating photographs and fabric introduced vulnerability into the surface, while stitching allowed for a slow, careful response to that damage. This process marked a turning point in the project. It was through these experiments that I realized how deeply I connected to embroidery as both a craft and a contemporary artistic tool, and how effectively it could carry the emotional and conceptual weight of the work.

Figure 37.

Visual Structure and Duality

The double-sided structure of these portraits emerged as a methodological response to the complexity of female identity and historical representation. This format allows public and private, visible and hidden, symbolic and ordinary aspects of each woman's life to coexist. Rather than presenting a unified or resolved narrative, the structure integrates multiplicity and incompleteness as deliberate methodological strategies. Meaning emerges through physical movement around the work, emphasizing that women's histories cannot be grasped from a single perspective.

The Making Process

The production of the three portraits was more of a repetitive process. Throughout, I navigated and searched for the ways, not a final realisation of predetermined ideas. Decisions regarding image selection, assembling, covering and fragmenting evolved through continuous testing, reflection, stitching and unstitching as well as adaptation. The collages in this work were created using found images sourced from the internet, which were fragmented and transformed in the artistic process. Over a period of several months, the works were repeatedly reworked, with images, stitches, and organic elements shifting in response to material and conceptual developments. The making process itself became a form of thinking, through which knowledge was generated as much through hands-on engagement as through reading or writing.

Reflection, Feedback & Presentation

Feedback from colleagues, my mentors and viewers formed an important level of reflection within the methodology. Presentation and installation were understood not as endpoints, but as extensions of the research process. The encounter between viewer and artwork constitutes an active space in which meaning continues to unfold. In this sense, the methodology remains open-ended, allowing the project to generate further insight through exhibition, dialogue, and future engagement.


Beuys ▲ Duchamp
Jasper Johns Mind/Mirror
TOTEN
KLAUS RINKE
NONCONFORMERS
PAULA REGO
ÁKUVB

Figure 38.

5.3. STRUCTURE OF THE ARTISTIC PROJECT:

The Triptych

Figure 39.

The artistic project *Tyranny of the Past: Unveiling Hidden Female Legacies through Threads of Tradition* takes the form of a triptych composed of three double-sided textile portraits representing Mileva Marić, Nadežda Petrović, and Milunka Savić. The decision to work with three figures emerged both through the practical development of the project and through the symbolic resonance of the number three within Balkan and Orthodox cultural contexts, where it is associated with balance, continuity, and collective structure. Rather than functioning as a closed or hierarchical system, the triptych allows for plurality while maintaining a sense of cohesion.

As I first started going into this direction and theme, I came upon many different female names and while working on these projects I understood why three would be a perfect balance. I needed to present more than one woman in order to resist a single, isolated narrative of female history. At the same time, the triptych structure provided a balanced framework in which individual stories could exist in relation to one another, functioning both independently and collectively.

Together, the three portraits form a constellation of experiences that reflect different yet related positions of women within Serbian and Balkan history. Each portrait focuses on a specific woman and her unique life story, while the presence of the other two situates that story within a broader context of shared historical conditions such as patriarchy, war, invisibility, and inherited trauma. This structure resists the idea of a singular representative figure and instead emphasizes plurality, difference, and relationality.

The choice of Mileva Marić, Nadežda Petrović, and Milunka Savić reflects three distinct but overlapping forms of female contribution that have been unevenly recognized by history: intellectual labor, artistic and cultural production, and physical endurance in times of war. I wanted them to represent different professions for this reason. Mileva as a scientist, Nadezda as a painter, and Milunka as a soldier. While their lives unfolded in different domains, each woman experienced forms of marginalization, misrepresentation, or erasure shaped by gendered expectations and historical circumstances. Bringing them together within one project makes the shared mechanisms through which women's contributions are minimized, simplified, or remembered selectively visible.

The triptych also operates temporally rather than chronologically. The works do not follow a linear historical timeline; instead, they are arranged to encourage associative reading. Viewers are invited to move between the portraits, drawing connections across time, experience, and symbolism.

This approach reflects the project's engagement with postmemory, inherited experience and also trauma, where the past does not appear as a closed chapter but as something that continues to shape the present.

Each portrait is double-sided, a structural choice that reinforces the conceptual framework of the project. One side addresses the public dimension of each woman's life, how she is documented, represented, or mythologized, while the reverse side engages with what remains unseen: emotional experience, domestic life, bodily endurance, and silence. The need to physically move around the work to encounter both sides underscores the impossibility of a single, authoritative perspective and mirrors the fragmented ways in which women's histories are accessed and understood.

Through the triptych structure, *Tyranny of the Past: Unveiling Hidden Female Legacies through Threads of Tradition* positions female history not as a series of isolated biographies, but as an interconnected field of experiences shaped by repetition, inheritance, and resilience. The works do not aim to resolve these histories, but to hold them together in material form, allowing their tensions, gaps, and continuities to remain visible.

Figure 40.

5.4. SYMBOLIC SYSTEM & LANGUAGE:

Cyrillic, Naming, Inscription

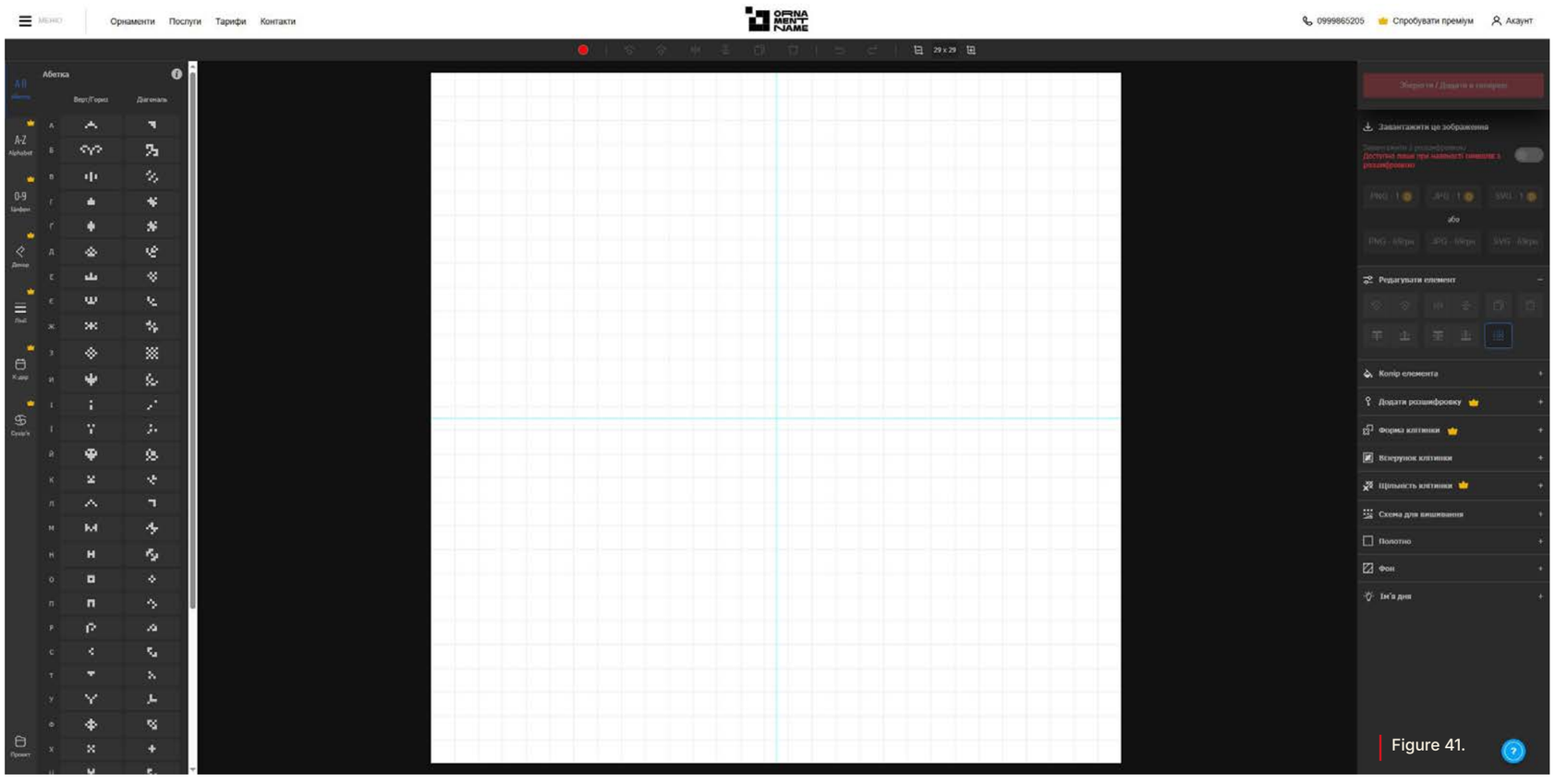


Figure 41.

Symbols and language play a central role in this project, functioning as carriers of memory, identity, and cultural continuity. Rather than serving as decorative elements, the embroidered symbols and use of Cyrillic operate as a visual system through which each woman's presence is marked, remembered, and differentiated. They form a connective layer across the triptych, linking the three portraits while allowing each to retain a distinct identity.

Each portrait in *Tyranny of the Past* is marked by a unique embroidered symbol derived from the woman's name. These symbols were created using a digital archive of ornamental patterns based on Cyrillic letterforms (www.ornament.name). Although the platform originates from a Bulgarian context, the shared Cyrillic alphabet and ornamental traditions across the Balkan region made it an appropriate source. The minor differences between Bulgarian and Serbian Cyrillic do not diminish the symbolic function of the letters; instead, they emphasize the shared cultural and historical ground from which these women emerge.

I selected the first letter of each woman's name and translated it into an ornamental form that could be cross-stitched. For each vowel I made the thread blue, and for each consonant I made the thread red. This process allowed language to become image, and identity to be embedded directly

into the material surface of the work. The symbols do not function as readable text in a conventional sense; rather, they operate as visual signatures, markers of presence that resist full linguistic translation. In this way, the symbol becomes both a name and a pattern, both personal and abstract.

The symbols serve multiple functions within the portraits. Visually, they interrupt archival materials such as documents, photographs, and certificates, disrupting the authority of official records. Conceptually, they assert the woman's presence within spaces where she has historically been marginalized or overshadowed. The act of stitching the symbol through these materials becomes a gesture of inscription — placing the woman back into narratives from which she has been partially erased.

The symbols also function as anchors within the composition. While collage and textile layers introduce fragmentation and instability, the symbol provides a recurring point of orientation. Each symbol is unique, yet their shared method of creation reinforces the idea of collective experience and inherited structures.

The decision to use Cyrillic throughout the project is both cultural and political. Cyrillic is not simply a writing system; it is deeply tied to identity, history, and memory in the Serbian and broader Balkan context. Using Cyrillic allowed the language of the work to remain rooted in the cultural space from which these women emerged, rather than translating their stories into a more globally dominant visual language.

Cyrillic also carries historical weight. It has been shaped by shifting borders, ideologies, and power structures, much like the histories of the women represented in this project. By embedding Cyrillic text into the fabric, I treat language as material, something that can be stitched, fragmented, reversed, and partially concealed. This reflects the way women's histories are often preserved: not through clear narratives, but through traces, repetitions, and disruptions.

In addition to using existing ornamental letterforms, I also created my own cross-stitch alphabet specifically for this project. Using the same digital platform, I designed both uppercase and lowercase Cyrillic letters adapted for embroidery. This allowed the written text within the portraits to function consistently as image and material, rather than as standard typography transferred onto fabric. Designing my own stitched letters gave me control over scale, rhythm, and spacing, and reinforced the idea of language as something constructed, carried, and transmitted through labor. The act of stitching text letter by letter slowed down language itself, transforming words into physical gestures rather than neutral carriers of information.

The material and visual language of Tyranny of the Past is central to how the project communicates memory, trauma, and inherited experience. Rather than functioning as neutral carriers of meaning, materials in this work operate as active participants in the storytelling process. Embroidery, fabric, thread, collage, and organic elements are used deliberately to reflect slowness, repetition, vulnerability, and repair.

As I have mentioned before, the tactile quality of embroidery was especially important to me, as was its traditional and cultural dimension. From the very beginning of the project, my research naturally gravitated toward embroidery as both a material and a method. This early connection can already be seen in my initial visual explorations, where stitching began to emerge as a central language of the work.

Within the methodology of this project, symbols and Cyrillic function as tools rather than outcomes. They allow identity, memory, and cultural specificity to be embedded directly into the making process. Stitching the symbols became a repetitive, bodily act — an embodied form of naming that aligns with the project's engagement with trauma, postmemory, and feminist material practice.

In this sense, the symbols do not stand apart from the portraits; they structure them. They form a quiet but persistent language that runs through the triptych, reinforcing the project's commitment to honoring women's histories not through reconstruction, but through presence, repetition, and care.

Through these material and visual decisions, Tyranny of the Past transforms historical research into embodied form. The language of embroidery, color, collage, and repair allows the project to speak through sensation and presence rather than explanation alone. In this way, material becomes a site where memory is not illustrated, but lived and transmitted.

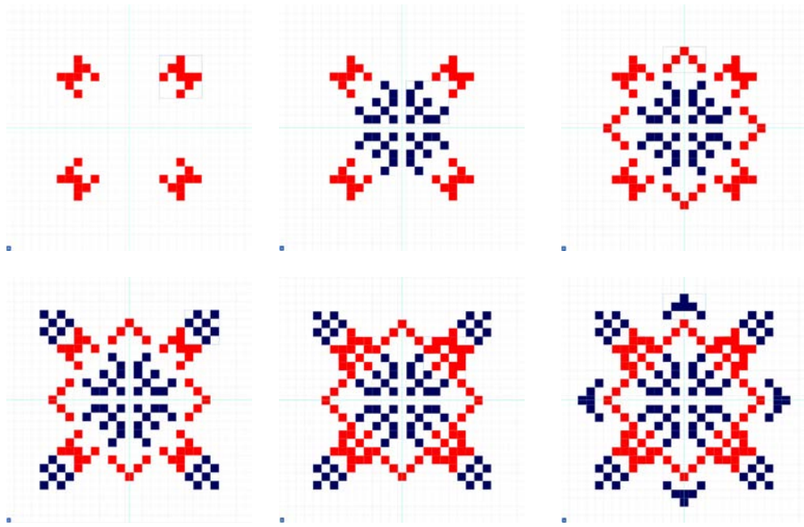


Figure 42.

Figure 43.

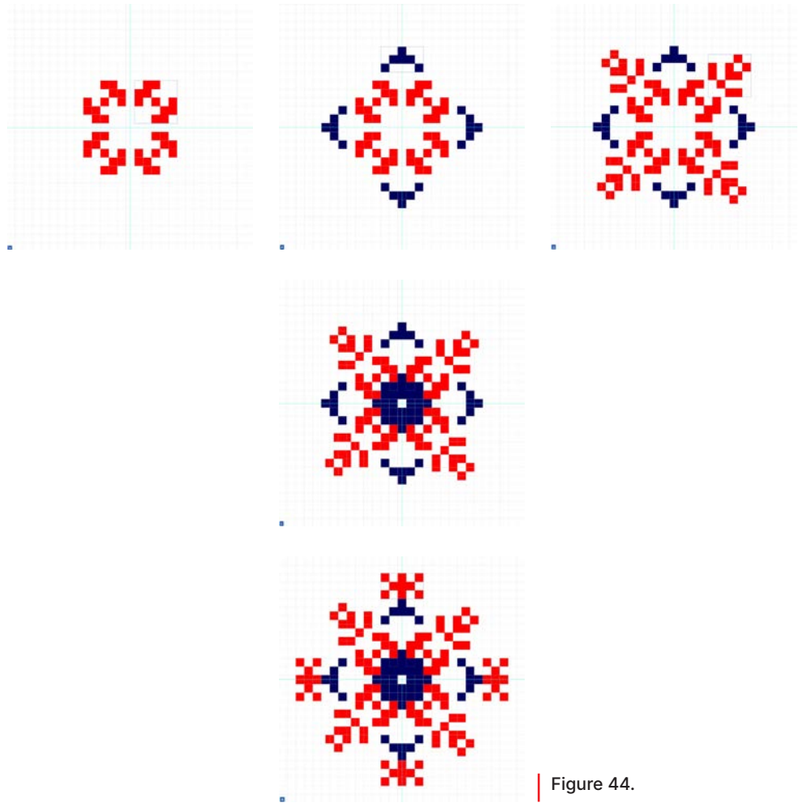


Figure 44.

Figure 45.

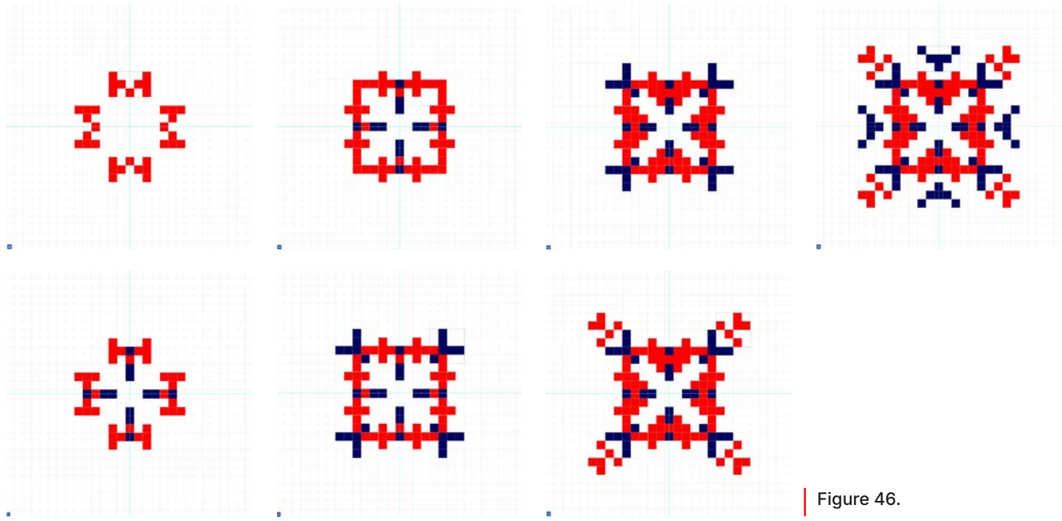


Figure 46.

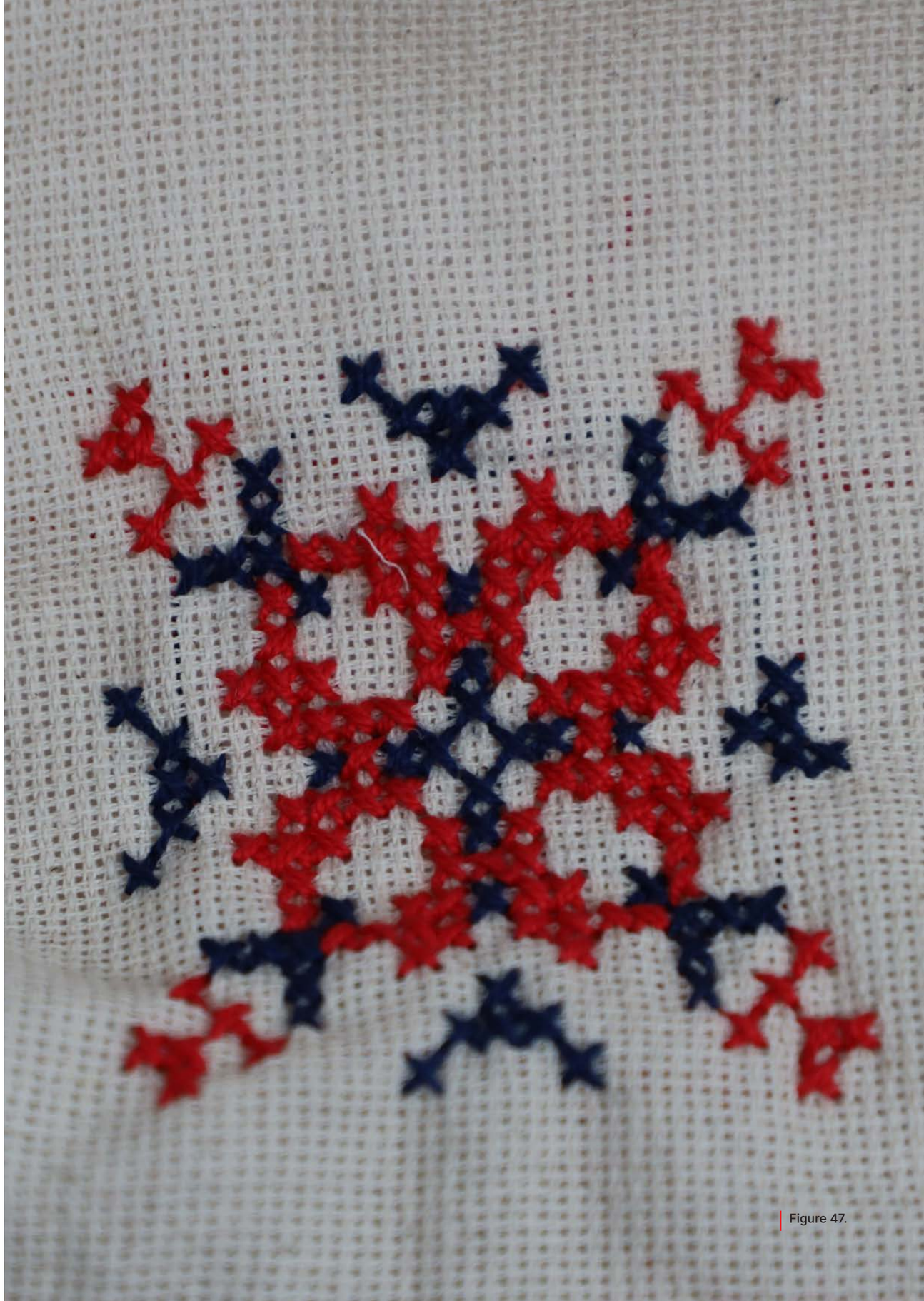


Figure 47.

Figure 48.

Figure 49.

Figure 50.

Figure 51.

5.4. MATERIAL & VISUAL LANGUAGE

Figure 52.

Embroidery forms the core material practice of the project. Historically associated with women's domestic labor, embroidery carries strong cultural and gendered connotations that align with the themes of this work. The act of stitching is slow and repetitive, requiring sustained attention and physical engagement. This temporality mirrors the way memory and trauma operate: gradually, persistently, and often outside conscious control. Stitching becomes a method of thinking through the past, allowing time for reflection while physically inscribing experience into fabric. Before moving fully into the final portraits, I carried out extensive research into different embroidery techniques, considering both their symbolic meaning and their suitability for my own working process. I was drawn to cross-stitching, which felt natural and intuitive for me to learn. I was also drawn to its simplicity. When I began experimenting with color, I realized that cross-stitching allowed the colors to remain clear and legible on the fabric, giving them a strong visual presence while still maintaining a sense of restraint.

Thread color plays an important symbolic role across the three portraits. Red and blue are used as dominant colors, each carrying layered meanings. Red, blue, and white hold strong cultural significance across many Balkan countries, including Serbia, and they are among the most commonly used colors in traditional embroidery.

Red thread references blood, injury, sacrifice, and vitality, but also lineage and emotional intensity. It appears in moments that address physical or emotional wounds, as well as in places where trauma is made visible rather than concealed. The symbolism of red thread also connects to a widespread belief in Balkan culture: the red thread worn around the wrist as protection against harm. Often placed on babies and worn throughout life, this thread is believed to shield the wearer from negative forces. This association strongly informed my use of red as both a protective and vulnerable element within the work.

Blue thread, by contrast, evokes distance, restraint, intellect, and emotional containment. Its presence reflects moments of suppression, discipline, or social expectation, creating a visual counterbalance to the intensity of red. Blue introduces a sense of control and quietness, holding emotion in check rather than allowing it to spill outward.

Figure 53.

Together, these colors form a recurring visual language that moves across the triptych, linking the three portraits while still allowing for individual variation. Through their interaction, red and blue articulate tension between exposure and containment, vulnerability and control, which mirrors the emotional dynamics explored throughout the project.

Fabric functions as both surface and metaphor. The cloth used in the portraits acts as a skin-like layer, vulnerable to piercing, tearing, and repair. Cuts, holes, and perforations are intentionally left visible and later stitched, emphasizing damage rather than hiding it. These gestures reference trauma as a wound that does not disappear, but is carried forward through acts of care and mending. The visibility of repair rejects the idea of restoration as erasure; instead, it acknowledges survival alongside injury.
It is also important for me to address the use of the word unveiling and its symbolic role within the project. I intentionally included this word in the title because of its cultural and emotional significance. In traditional wedding rituals, a woman wears a white veil that symbolizes purity. When the veil is lifted, the act of unveiling carries the meaning that the man is the first to truly see her, the first to claim access to her full being. This gesture is deeply embedded in patriarchal symbolism.

In a symbolic sense, I see my work as performing a different kind of unveiling. Through these portraits, I am unveiling women's stories to the systems that have historically obscured or controlled them within patriarchal systems, but also to women themselves, and to men who may still struggle to fully recognize the structures we are accustomed to living within. The act of unveiling here is not about possession, but about visibility, acknowledgment, and presence.

This word first appeared in my initial scientific research poster, and as the project continued to develop over the following months, it remained central to my thinking. Unveiling became a guiding concept throughout the process, shaping how I approached material, form, and meaning within the work.

Collage introduces another layer of fragmentation into the works. Archival and found images are cut, rearranged, and partially obscured, reflecting the incomplete and mediated nature of historical records. Rather than presenting images as authoritative evidence, collage highlights their instability and the gaps surrounding them. The fragmented visual field mirrors the ways women's histories are accessed through partial documentation, repetition, and reinterpretation.

In addition to textile and collage, organic elements such as dried flowers

Figure 54.

are incorporated into the portraits. These materials introduce associations with time, decay, memory, and ritual. Flowers carry strong cultural and symbolic meanings connected to femininity, care, mourning, and remembrance. In the Balkan context especially, flowers are closely tied to feminine identity and healing. They appear frequently in songs, traditions, and even in women's names, many of which are derived from flowers. This makes them a deeply feminine symbol of care, continuity, and emotional connection.

The fragile and transient nature of dried flowers contrasts with the durability of thread and fabric, reinforcing the tension between permanence and loss that runs throughout the project. While the textile elements suggest endurance and labor, the flowers point toward vulnerability, impermanence, and the passage of time.

The visual composition of each portrait is intentionally layered and dense, encouraging slow and attentive viewing. Meaning is not immediately legible; it unfolds through close observation of detail, texture, and the interaction of materials. This approach resists quick consumption and reflects the project's refusal to simplify complex histories. The artworks ask the viewer to slow down, to look carefully, and to sit with what remains unresolved.

Because of this, and due to the use of Serbian language within the portraits, I created an accompanying card for each work. These cards are not considered part of the thesis itself, but function as optional supplementary material when the works are exhibited or presented. Each card includes an embroidered symbol unique to the woman portrayed, along with a small infographic map that translates key elements and provides additional context. These cards function as a bridge between the visual language of the work and the viewer's understanding, allowing for deeper immersion into the stories without reducing their complexity.

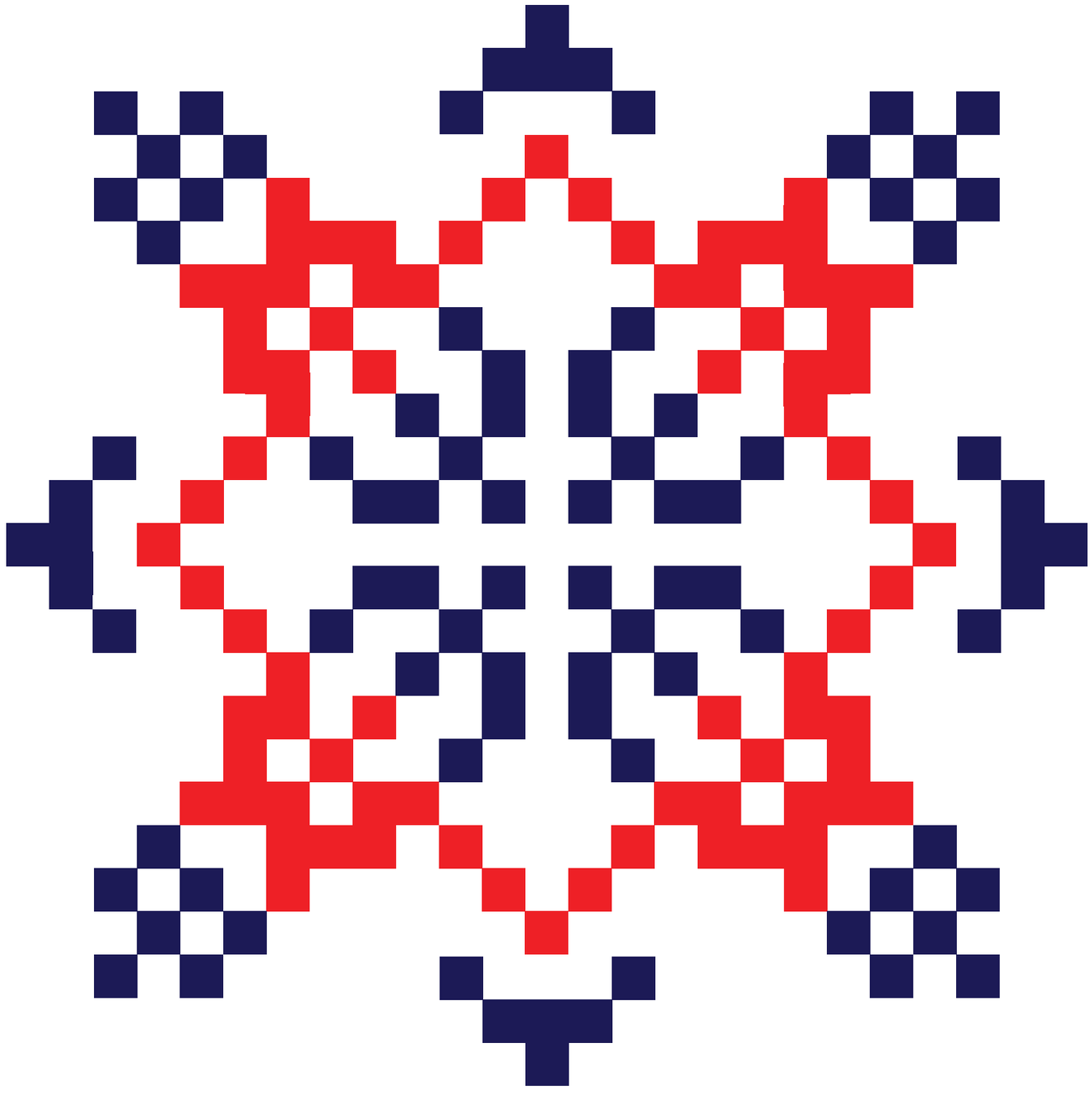


Figure 55.

5.5. MILEVA MARIĆ

The textile portrait of Mileva Marić, the first portrait I began working on, addresses themes of intellectual labor, invisibility, and the quiet erasure of women's contributions within scientific and historical narratives. Marić's life and work are most often discussed in relation to others rather than recognized on their own terms. Her relationship with Albert Einstein had overshadowed her intellectual presence to such an extent that she frequently appeared only as his shadow. She is remembered primarily as the bearer of his children, but rarely as his equal within the field of physics.

While we may never know the full extent of Marić's contribution to Einstein's work, surviving correspondence confirms that they actively discussed physics and theory together. Letters exchanged between them reveal intellectual engagement rather than passive support. At the same time, Marić endured profound personal tragedy as a mother, experiencing the loss and suffering of all three of her children. This imbalance, between intellectual capability, emotional labor, and historical recognition shaped the material and symbolic decisions within the portrait, which seeks to make both presence and absence visible.

Figure 56.

Figure 57.

THE PROCESS

Figure 58.


Figure 60.

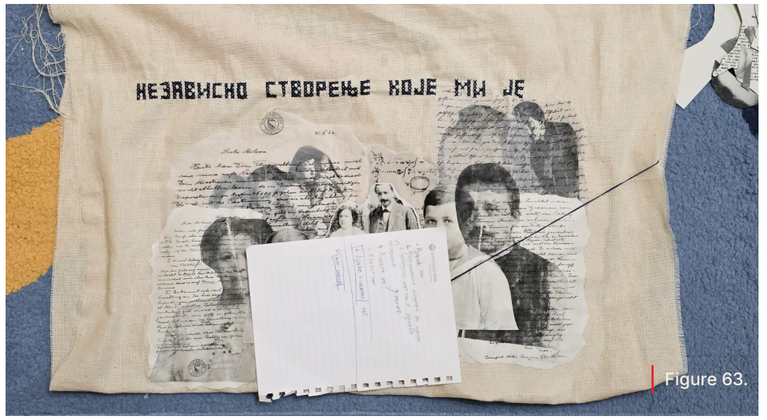


Figure 63.

Figure 66.


Figure 59.


Figure 61.

Figure 64.

Figure 62.


Figure 65.


Figure 67.

Figure 68.

Figure 69.

STRUCTURE & PUBLIC NARRATIVE

The portrait is constructed as a double-sided textile work. One side engages with Marić's public and historical identity, how she appears within official narratives, archival imagery, and collective memory. On this side, I chose to foreground her role as both a wife and a mother, not to reduce her to these positions, but to acknowledge how strongly they shaped the way she was seen and remembered.

This side incorporates archival images of Mileva and Albert Einstein, photographs of their two sons, excerpts from their correspondence, mathematical formulas found within their letters, and their marriage certificate. The marriage certificate is placed at the center of the composition and is visually interrupted by an embroidered symbol, cutting through the document rather than sitting quietly on top of it. As I have mentioned above, using the Cyrillic letter of each woman's name, I created a symbol that could be cross-stitched and integrated into the textile surface. In Marić's portrait, the symbol visually divides her marriage certificate: on the left side, her and his first names; on the right, her and his last names. The symbol disrupts the document, suggesting both union and imbalance.

Above the central composition, embroidered in blue thread, a color associated here with distance, rationality, and restraint, is the sentence "*Независно створење које ми је једнако*" ("An independent creature who is equal to me"). This statement is attributed to Albert Einstein during a period when their marriage was still functional and affectionate. The sentence appears calm and affirming, yet beneath it, the reverse side of the red thread used on the other side of the work is visible. This exposure of the thread's back is intentional: it reveals the hidden tension and emotional cost beneath the surface of idealized partnership.

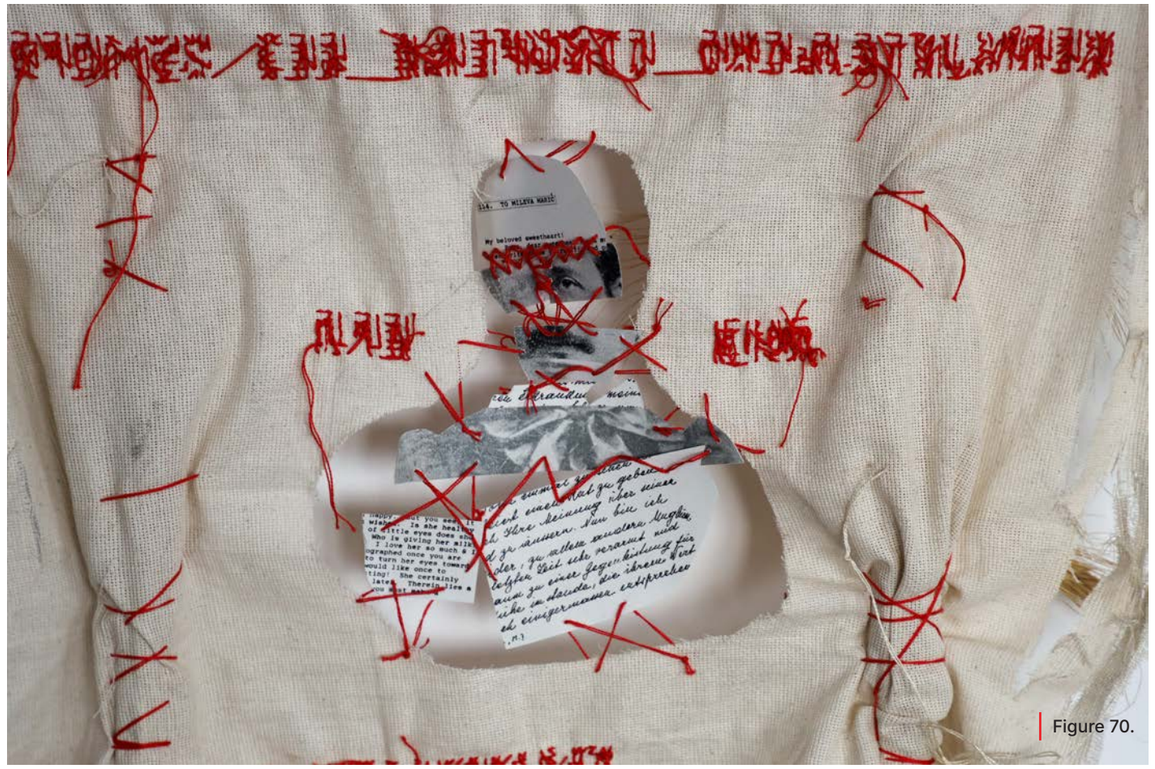


Figure 70.

Figure 71.

Below this text, a cut-out silhouette in the shape of Mileva's head and torso opens the surface of the fabric. Inside this void, I assembled fragments of letters written by Albert Einstein after their first child, Liserl, was born along with cut-out facial fragments of both Mileva and Albert and a letter Mileva later sent to a doctor when her son Eduard began showing severe symptoms of schizophrenia. These fragments are stitched together inside the void, forming a dense, unresolved interior.

The cut-out refers directly to the disappearance of Liserl, their first child, who was born out of wedlock in Serbia and later abandoned. Historical records provide no clear account of her fate; some suggest she died shortly after birth, others that she lived until the age of two. Albert Einstein's letters express emotional distance even in the moment when his first child was born. The abandonment of a female child, followed by the birth of two sons, felt symbolically significant to me, a moment where gendered trauma appears to echo forward.

Both sons later died under tragic circumstances. Hans Albert Einstein achieved professional success as an engineer but remained emotionally distant from his father and later died from a heart attack. Eduard Einstein, although gifted, spent much of his life institutionalized due to schizophrenia, cared for almost exclusively by Mileva after the divorce. This layered loss is condensed within the cut-out form, which functions as both absence and containment.

Below the cut-out, the names *Милева Марић* (Mileva Marić) and *Ајнштајн* (Einstein) are embroidered in Cyrillic. Mileva's name is stitched in red thread and Einstein's in blue. The color distinction reinforces emotional labor versus intellectual authority, intimacy versus distance. The red thread marks Mileva's maiden name, the identity she carried before and beyond her marriage, inherited through her own family lineage rather than through her husband. In contrast, Albert Einstein's surname appears in blue, standing in for the patriarchal structure that surrounded and ultimately absorbed her public identity, representing institutional authority, masculine legacy, and the historical dominance of male authorship over shared intellectual labor.

Figure 72.

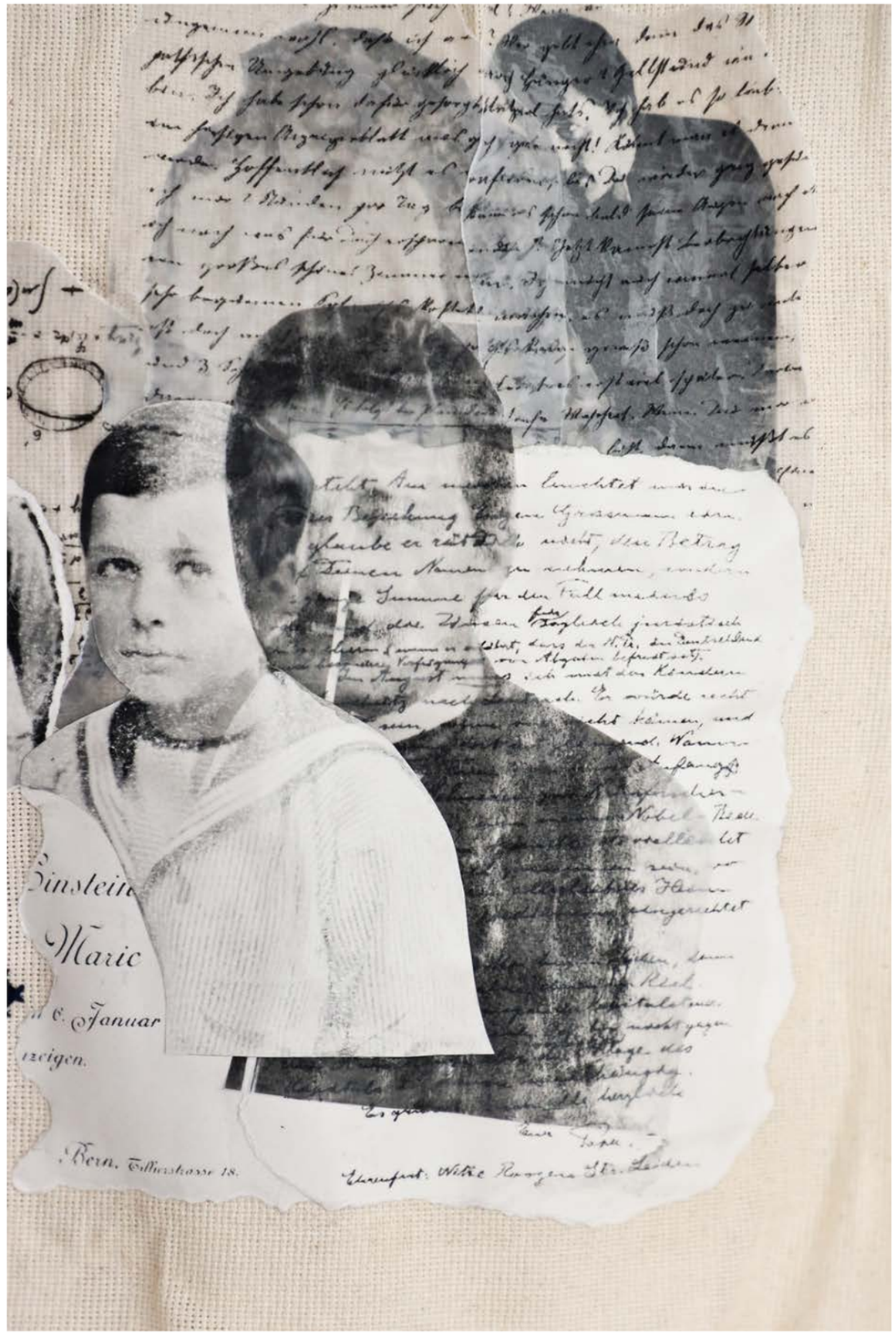


Figure 73.

Figure 74.

Figure 75.

Figure 76.

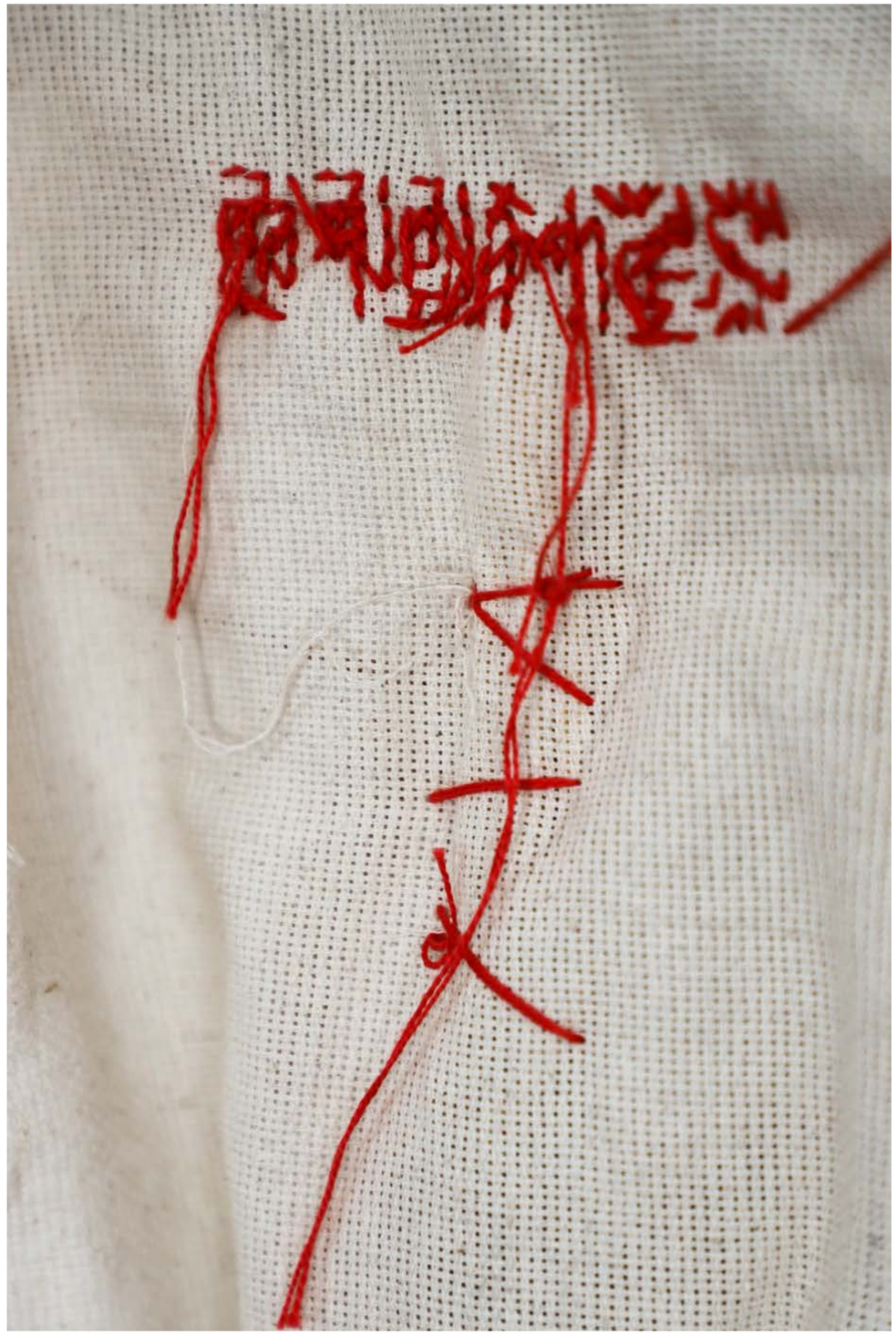


Figure 77.

Figure 78.

Figure 79.

HIDDEN NARRATIV & REVERSAL

The reverse side of the portrait shifts attention toward what remains unseen: emotional labor, sacrifice, and erasure. This side represents Mileva's life after the divorce, as well as the hidden dimension of her intellectual contributions.

Red thread dominates this surface, marking emotional strain, loss, and unacknowledged wounds. Perforations, visible repairs, and irregular stitching appear more openly here. Rather than concealing damage, the surface emphasizes it, framing endurance as an ongoing condition rather than a resolved past.

Where the blue thread on the front side reads *"Independent creature who is equal to me,"* the reverse side carries a sentence embroidered in red: *"Непријатељско створење без хумора"* ("An unfriendly creature without humor"), a phrase historians have attributed to Einstein after the divorce. The shift in language and color reflects the transformation of perception, from intellectual partner to emotional burden.

Images of her neglected grave in Switzerland appear on this side, emphasizing her isolation in death. Without close family members to maintain it, her grave was reduced to a modest site marked only by a pot of flowers.

Surrounding this text is a collage of newspaper clippings, archival fragments, and commentary reflecting the delayed and conflicted recognition of Marić's legacy. Phrases such as *"Милевино време тек долази"* ("Mileva's time is yet to come"), *"Исправити неправду"* ("To correct an injustice"), *"Србија заборавила"* ("Serbia has forgotten"), and *"Кога је брига за Милеву Ајнштајн?"* ("Who cares about Mileva Einstein?") highlight the instability of her historical position. German-language fragments such as *"In den falschen Mann verliebt"* ("Fell in love with the wrong man") introduce judgment and reduction. Excerpts from Albert Einstein's written conditions for their marriage are also there and partially obscured. These texts introduce a direct confrontation with the private dynamics that shaped Mileva's lived reality, complicating the public narrative of Einstein as a singular intellectual genius.

In The Myth of Normal, Gabor Maté cites therapist Terry Real, who observes: "The guys that I treat are all captains of industry who've done beautifully in the world and are horror stories in their personal lives." [41] This reflection resonates strongly with Einstein's dual legacy. While his contributions to physics reshaped modern science, his intimate relationships reveal patterns of emotional distance, control, and imbalance. This contrast does not seek to diminish Einstein's intellectual achievements, but to hold them alongside the personal cost at which they were produced.

[41] Maté, *The Myth of Normal*, 342.

Figure 80.

Figure 81.

The work resists the separation of genius from responsibility, asking instead how cultural reverence for male brilliance has historically allowed private harm to remain unseen, unnamed, or excused. In this sense, the portrait acknowledges Einstein as a great physicist, while questioning the ethical framework that has allowed greatness in the public sphere to coexist with failure in the private one.

The cut-out area representing Liserl is left blank on this side. The images are no longer visible — only paper and stitching remain. This decision reflects how little is known about her, and how easily female histories disappear. Her name, *ЛИЗЕРЛ* (Liserl), is embroidered in red thread and split into two parts: *LIZ* on the left, *ERL* on the right, suggesting fragmentation and incompletion.

Around her name, I embroidered wheat, a symbol deeply rooted in Balkan culture. Wheat represents fertility, continuity, and survival, questions often asked of women through phrases like “did she bear fruit?” or “did the wheat grow?” It is a symbol tied to motherhood, lineage, and expectation. Here, it becomes both tribute and burden.

Below the wheat, I embroidered the surname *РУЖИЋ* (Ružić) in red thread, the name Mileva used after her divorce. Sources differ on its origin; some claim it was her mother’s maiden name, others suggest it was connected to a later relationship. Regardless of its origin, I found the name symbolically significant as a marker of identity beyond Einstein, a name that existed outside his shadow.

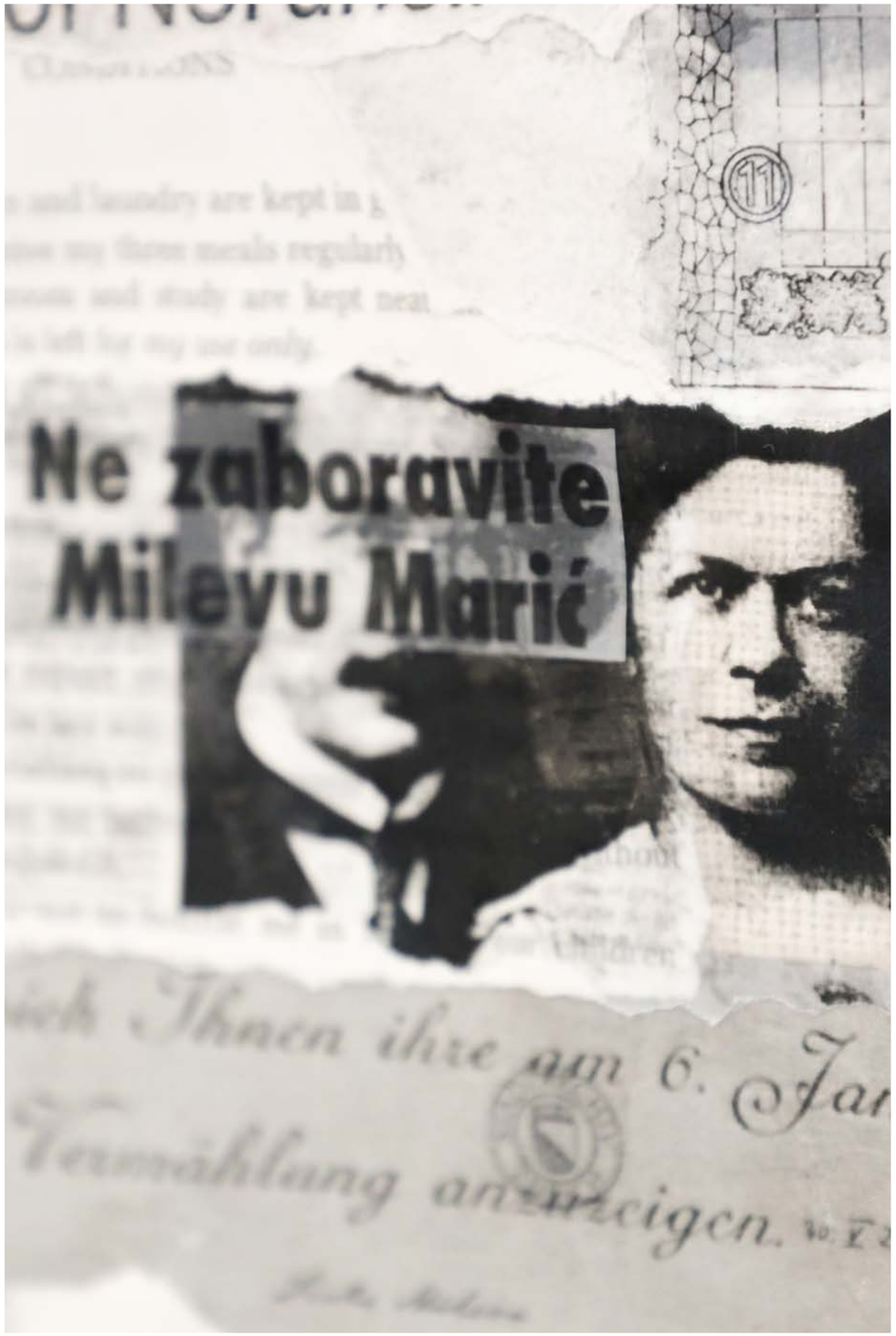


Figure 82.

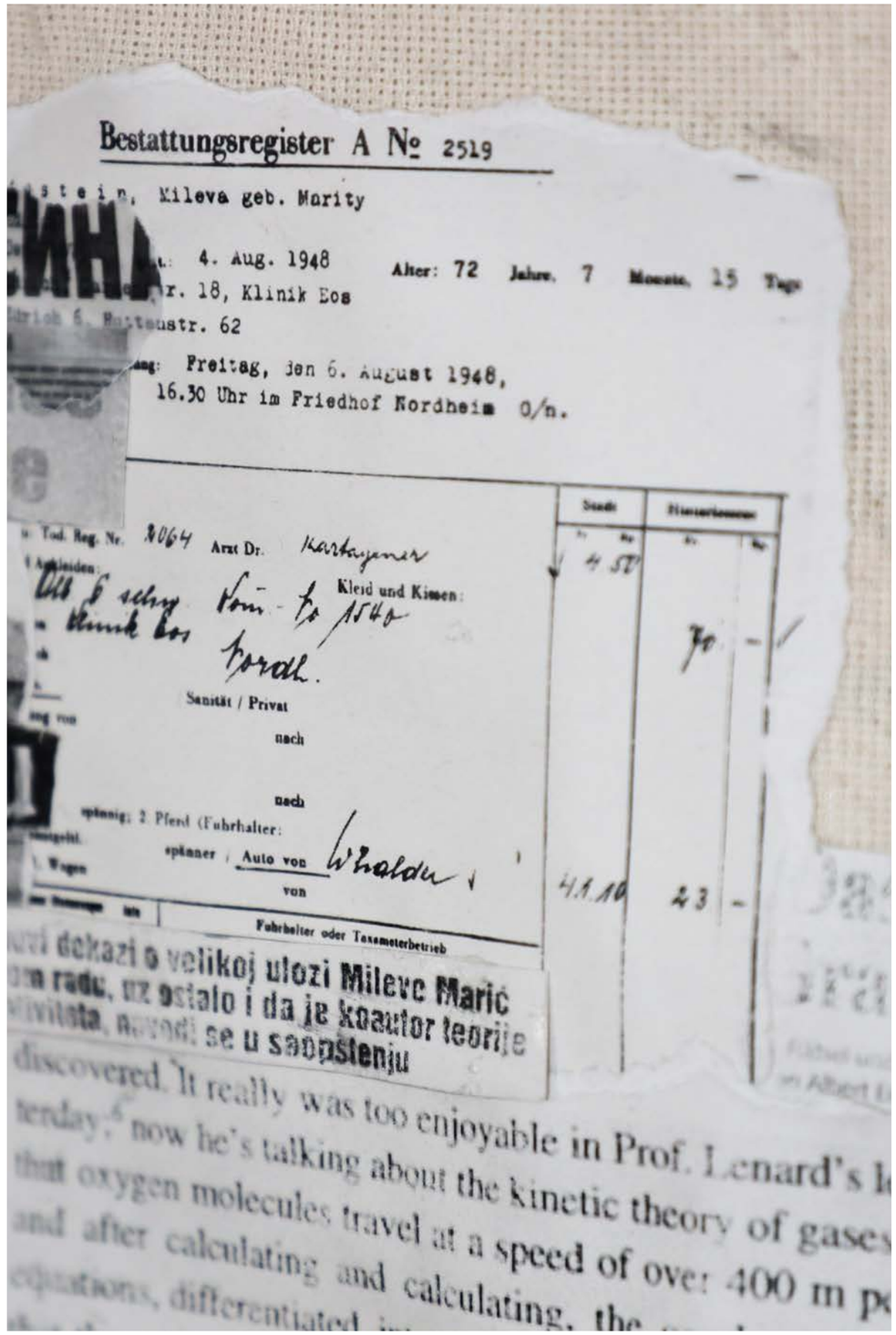


Figure 83.

Figure 84.

Figure 85.

Figure 86.

MATERIAL, LANGUAGE & LEGACY

Text functions in this portrait as interruption rather than explanation. Embroidered phrases appear as fragments, reflecting the incomplete ways Marić's story survives. Language does not narrate her life fully; it signals moments of recognition, distortion, and silence. This approach resists the impulse to correct history and instead acknowledges the limits of recovery.

The layered material structure mirrors how Marić's legacy is accessed today, through fragments, secondary sources, and interpretation. Collage assembles what remains without claiming authority over what is missing. Stitching becomes an act of care rather than restitution.

Through this work, Mileva Marić is presented not as a footnote, but as a complex presence shaped by intellectual strength and systemic invisibility. The portrait does not resolve historical debate. Instead, it holds contradiction, endurance, and absence together within the same material field.

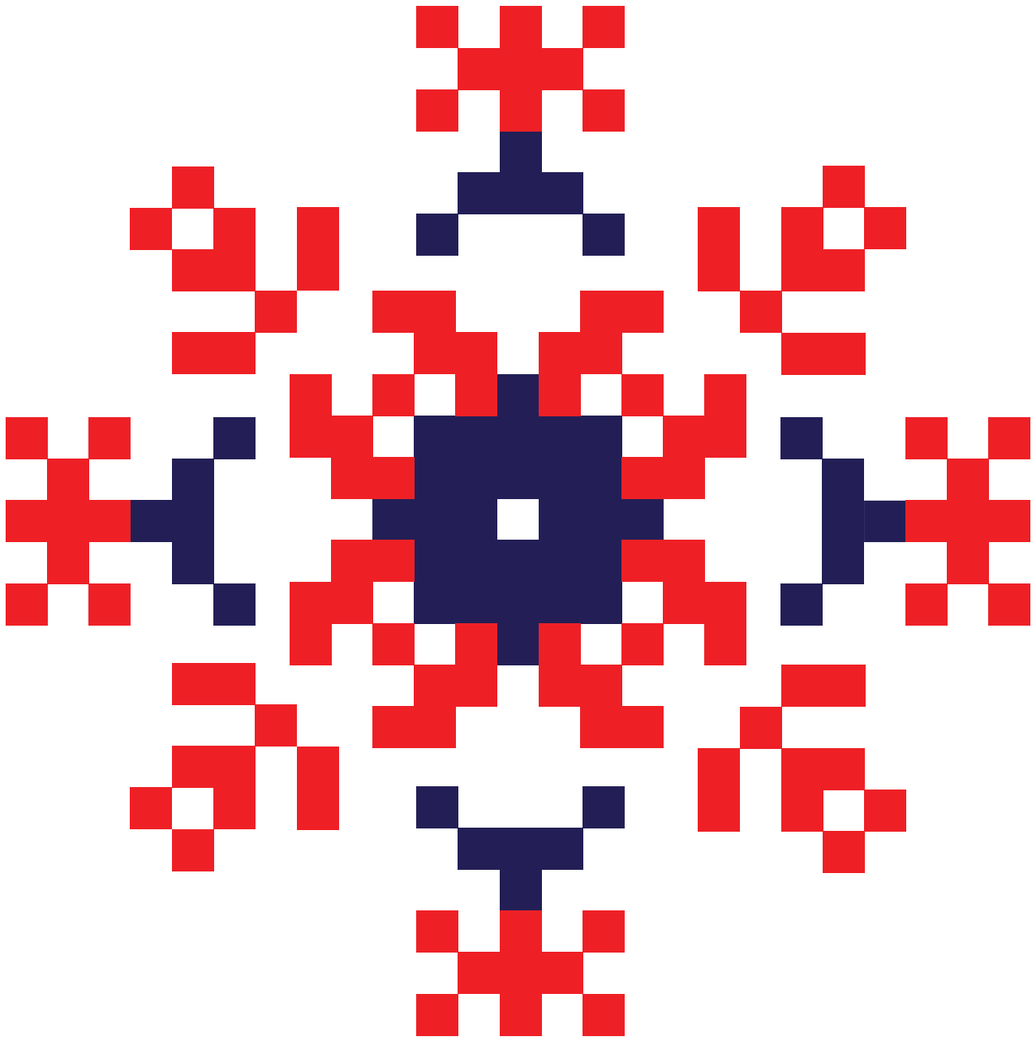


Figure 87.

5.6. NADEŽDA PETROVIĆ

The textile portrait of Nadežda Petrović engages with visibility, sacrifice, and the intertwining of artistic production and bodily exposure to history. Unlike Mileva Marić, whose legacy is marked by intellectual erasure and silence, Petrović occupies a more visible position within Serbian cultural history. Yet this visibility is inseparable from narratives of sacrifice, nationalism, and self-effacement, which often overshadow the complexity of her artistic and personal life.

Petrović is frequently remembered as a painter and a war nurse, a woman whose body was placed directly in the space of collective crisis. This proximity to war, illness, and death informed the material logic of her portrait. The work addresses the tension between public recognition and personal cost, between the heroic framing of her life and the physical and emotional toll such a life entailed.

THE PROCESS

Figure 88.

Figure 89.


Figure 90.

Figure 91.

Figure 92.


Figure 93.

Figure 94.

Figure 95.

Figure 96.

Figure 97.

PUBLIC IMAGE, COLOR & ARTISTIC PRESENCE

One side of the double-sided portrait is constructed as a vibrant collage composed of fragments from Petrović's paintings. Before assembling the collage, I gathered and studied a wide selection of her work. I was struck by the intensity of her color palette and by her frequent depiction of female figures. This attention to women's faces and bodies felt particularly significant, and I chose to cut and integrate these painted figures into the textile surface.

At the center of this composition is a 200-dinar banknote bearing Petrović's image. I placed it centrally because, despite its circulation, many people in the Balkans no longer consciously register that she appears on this bill. The banknote itself is double-sided, allowing it to be seen from both sides of the portrait, reinforcing her official recognition while questioning how deeply that recognition is internalized.

The surface is marked by perforations and stitched repairs that remain deliberately visible. These gestures reference both the wounded body and the act of care associated with nursing. Stitching here functions as an act of tending rather than concealment. Damage is not erased; it is acknowledged and held. The cloth shows signs of stress and repair, mirroring how Petrović's body and artistic practice were shaped by historical pressure.
Through my research, I encountered a statement attributed to Petrović: *„Ja хоћу да сам сликар, а не жена, жена има доста“* ("I want to be a painter, not a woman, there are plenty of women"). I found this sentence remarkably bold for her time. Petrović never married, and this refusal of prescribed gender roles resonates strongly within the context of her life. For this reason, the sentence is embroidered in red thread beneath the painted fragments. Red thread plays a dominant role in this portrait. It references blood, urgency, care, and vulnerability, but also labor, both artistic and bodily. Petrović's engagement with war was not symbolic or distant; it was lived through exhaustion, exposure, and physical presence. The red stitching introduces a visual rhythm that suggests movement, strain, and immediacy.

Beneath this layer, her name, *Надежда Петровић* (Nadežda Petrović), is embroidered in red Cyrillic. Unlike the portrait of Mileva Marić, Petrović's name appears without reference to a marital surname, reflecting her independence and her refusal to define herself through marriage.

Figure 98.

Figure 99.

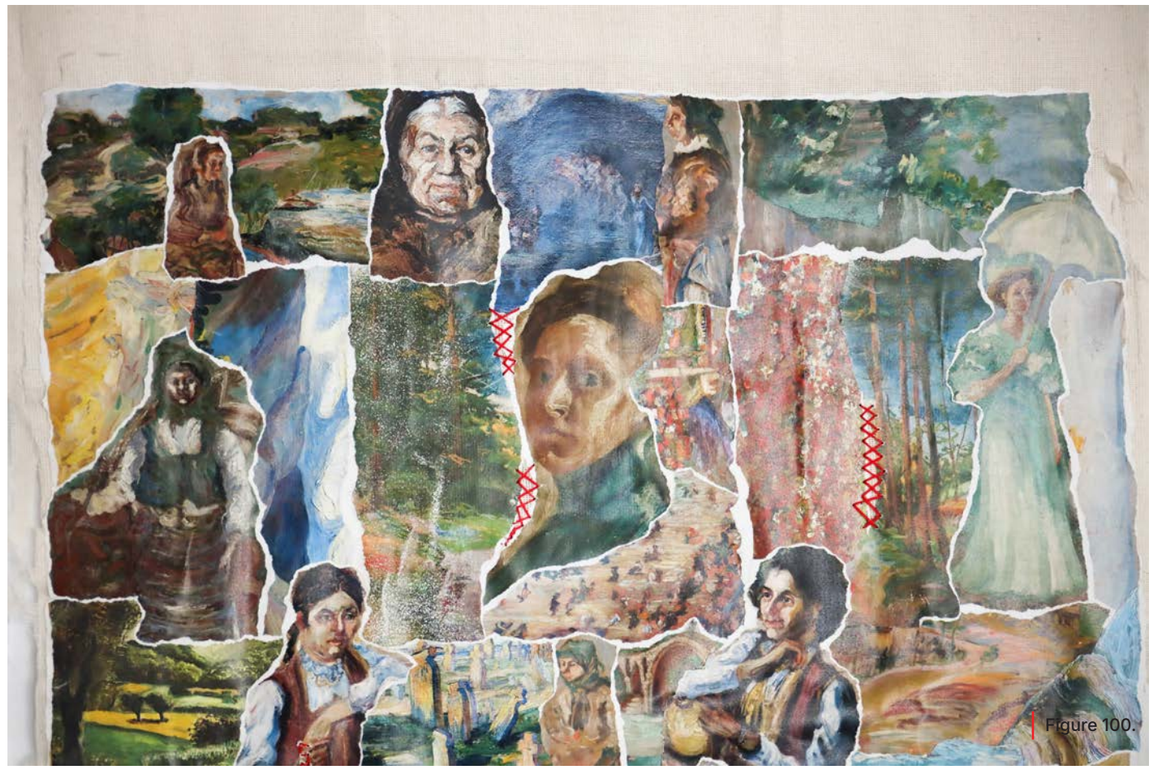


Figure 100.

Figure 101.

Figure 102.

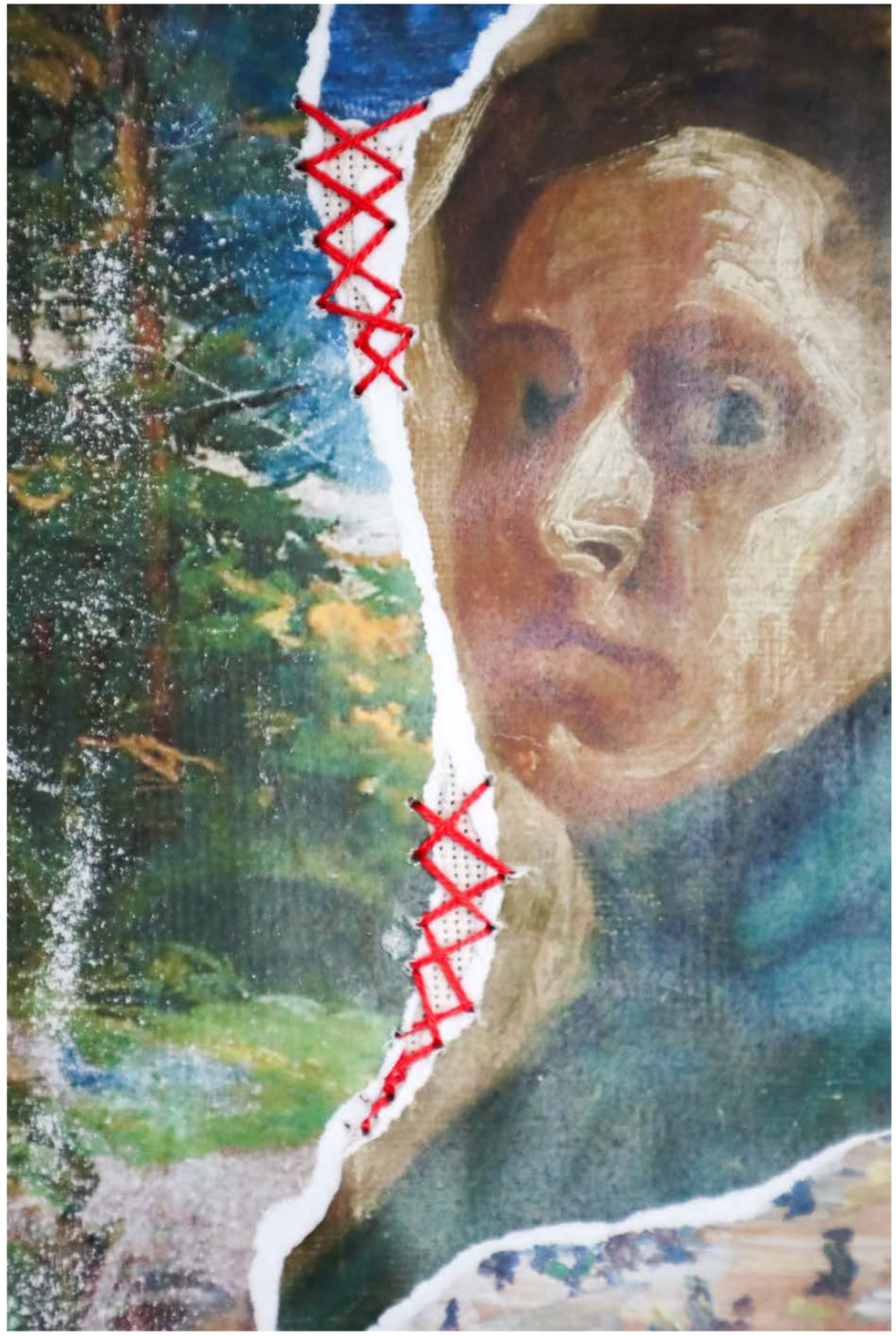


Figure 103.

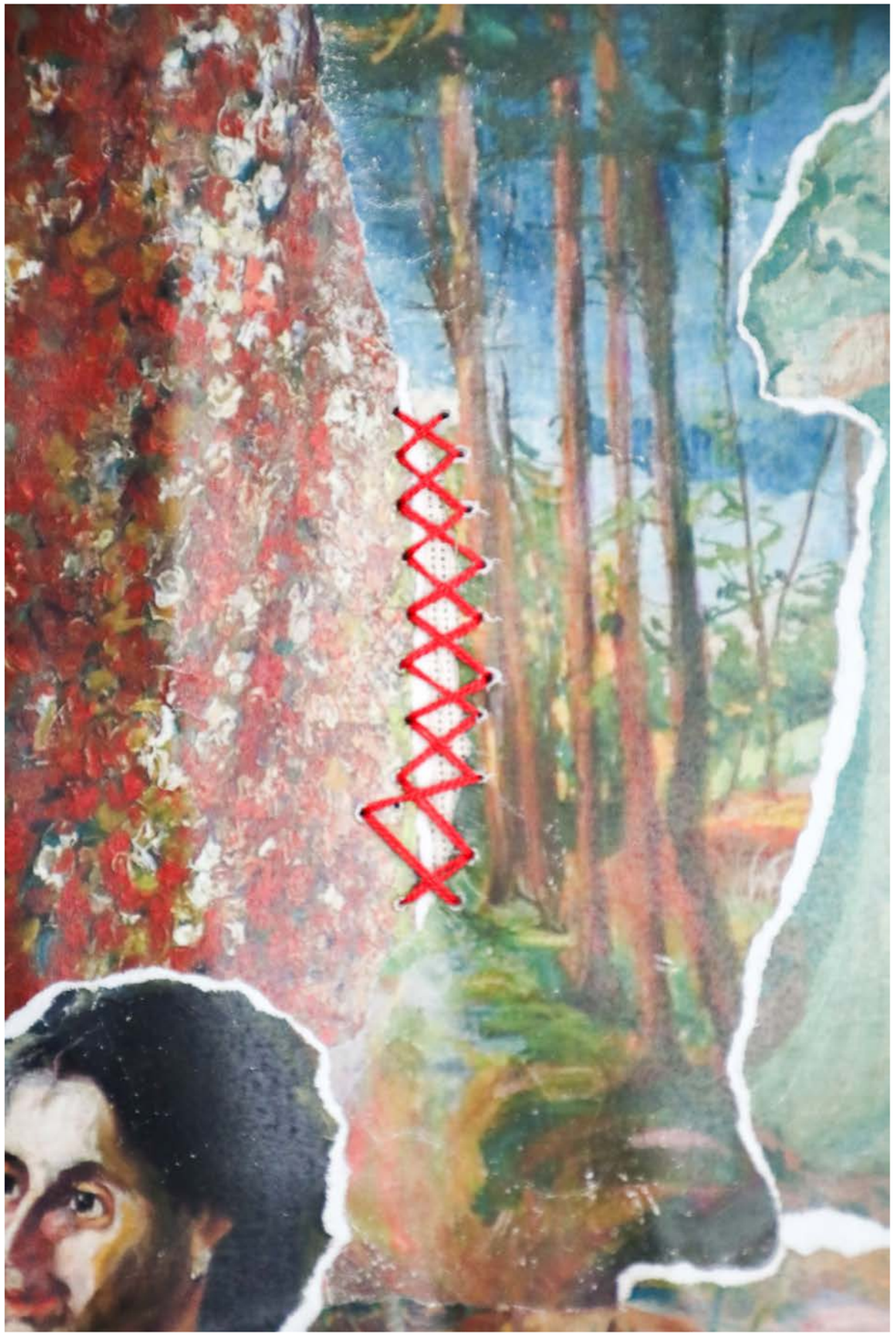


Figure 104.

Figure 105.

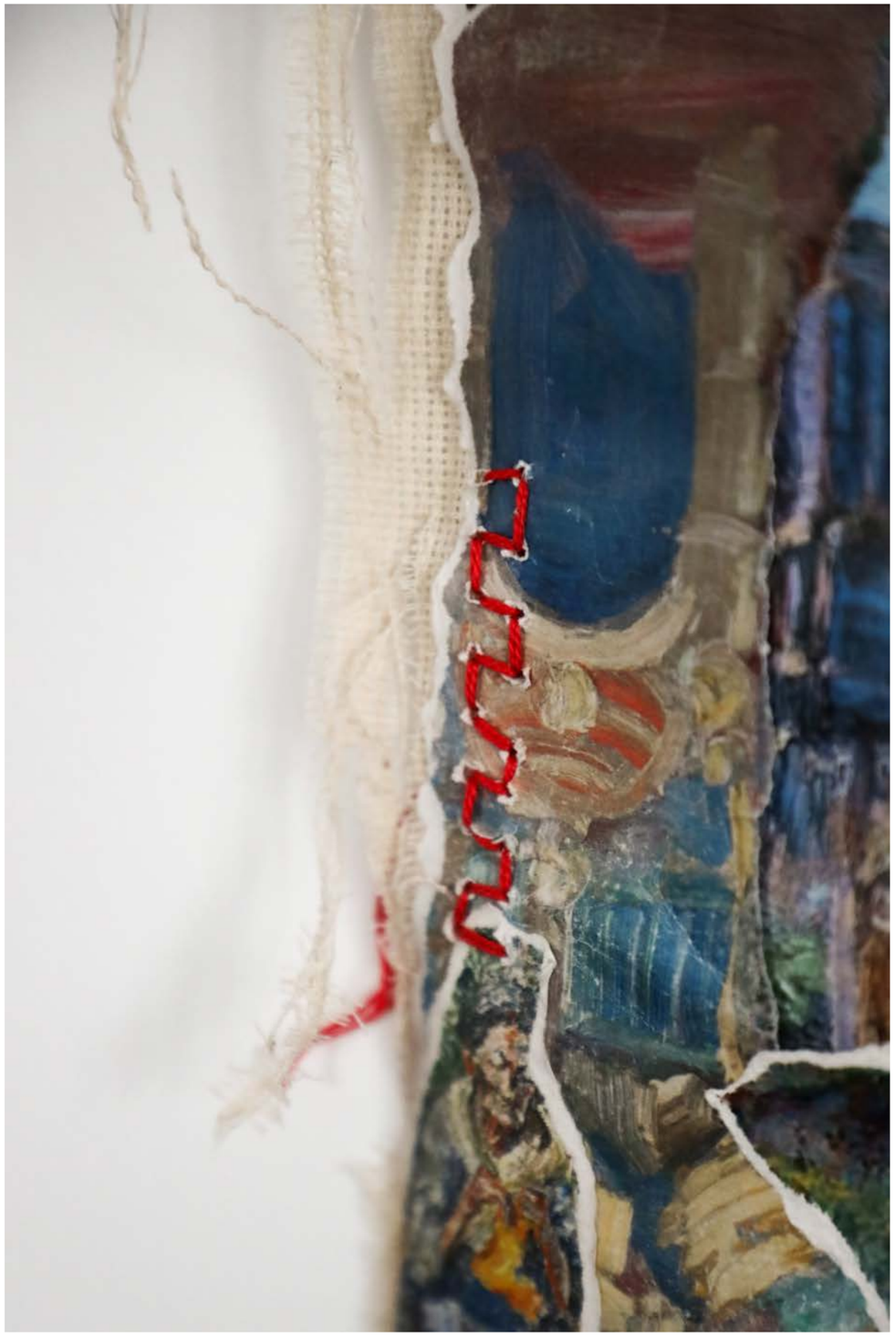


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Figure 109.

WAR, LOSS & THE WEIGHT OF RECOGNITION

The reverse side of the portrait shifts focus toward Petrović's wartime experience. This side incorporates archival images of her as a nurse and photographs from wartime contexts. Although it is documented that Petrović attempted to continue painting during the war and also took photographs, many of these materials remain inaccessible. The absence of these images becomes part of the work itself.

This side of the portrait is visually restrained, composed primarily in black and white. I found this contrast important: while Petrović's paintings are rich with color and vitality, her wartime reality was marked by deprivation, illness, and death. The lack of color here reflects the stripping away of vibrancy under the conditions of war.

Embedded within this side, embroidered in blue thread, is the phrase *„Југословенска Нада“* ("Yugoslav Hope"). This was a name often used to describe Petrović, playing on both her national significance and the meaning of her first name, Nada, which translates to "hope." Blue thread here introduces a sense of distance, discipline, and ideological framing, how her life was absorbed into larger national narratives.

Below this phrase appears her unique embroidered symbol, constructed from the Cyrillic letters of her name, following the same symbolic system established across the triptych. The symbol anchors her identity within the composition while remaining abstract and non-narrative.

On this reverse side, dried lavender is embroidered directly into the textile surface. The choice of lavender is both symbolic and personal to Petrović's story. Lavender has long been associated with healing, care, and calming the body, and it has historically been used in medical and domestic contexts, spaces closely tied to Petrović's work as a nurse. At the same time, lavender carries connotations of femininity and tenderness, qualities that are often overlooked in heroic or national narratives of war.

In the Balkan context, lavender is also connected to memory and preservation. Its scent lingers long after it has dried, much like trauma and remembrance persist beyond the immediate event. By embedding dried lavender into the black-and-white surface, I wanted to introduce a fragile, organic element that speaks to Petrović's quiet endurance and the emotional labor she carried alongside physical care. Unlike the vivid colors of her paintings, the lavender exists here in a muted, restrained state, present, but subdued, mirroring how her personal tenderness is often overshadowed by the dominant narrative of sacrifice.

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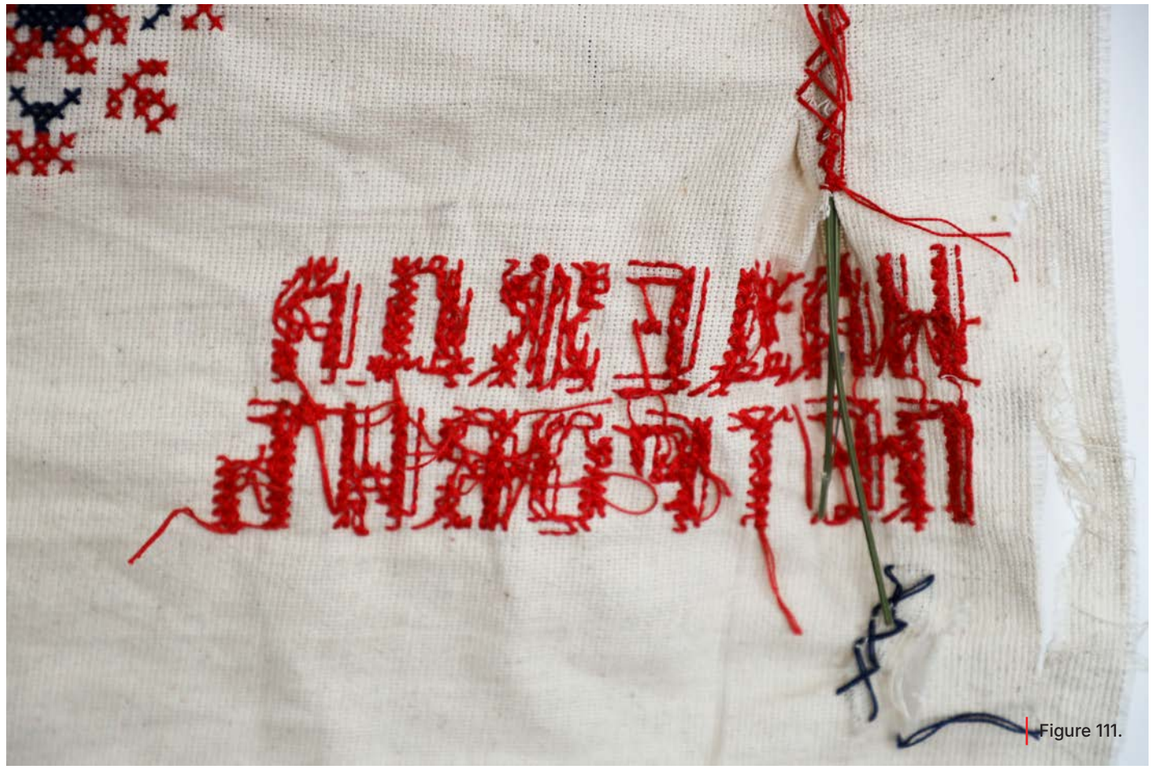

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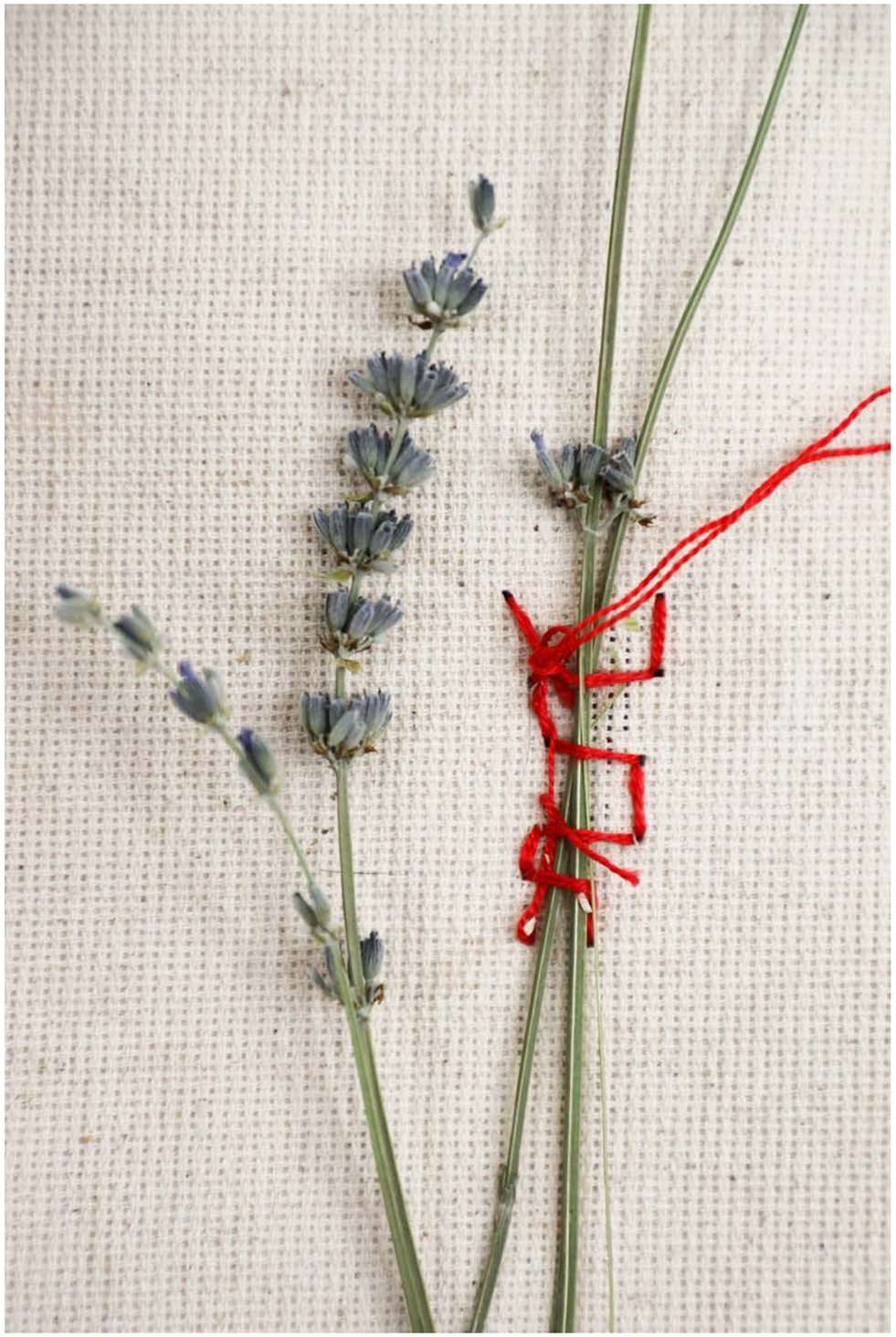

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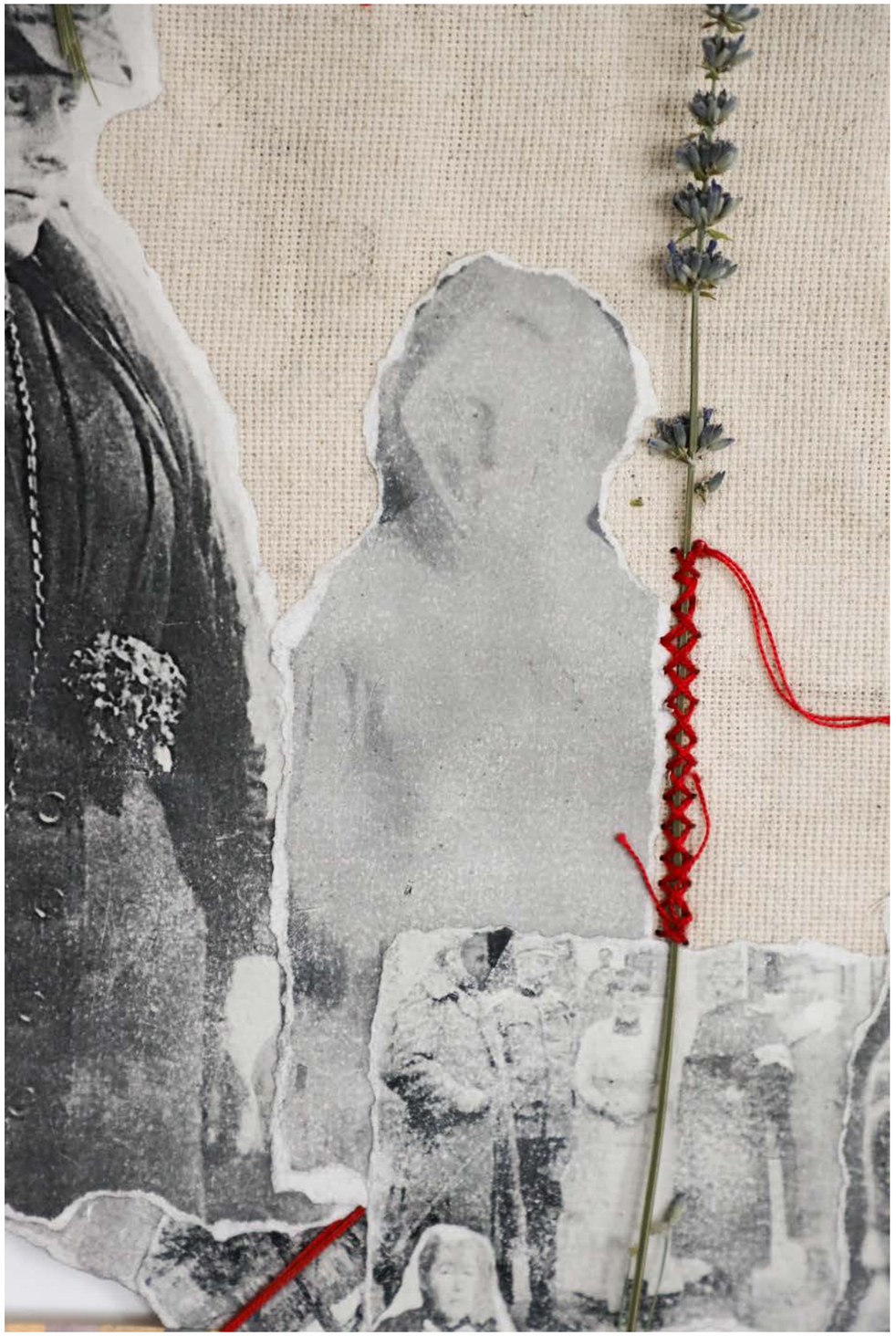

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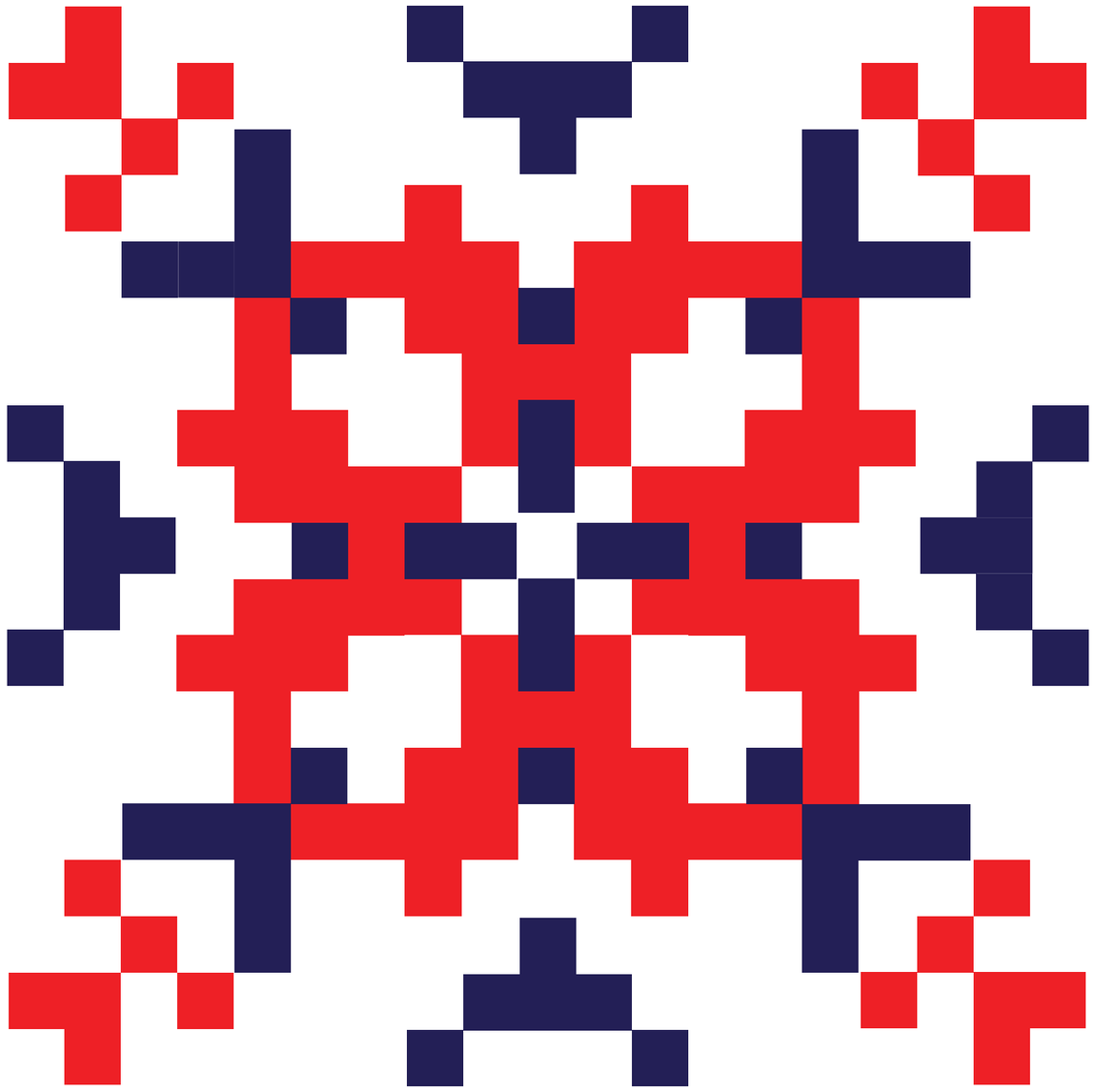
FRAGMENTATION & REFUSAL OF HEROIC SIMPLICITY

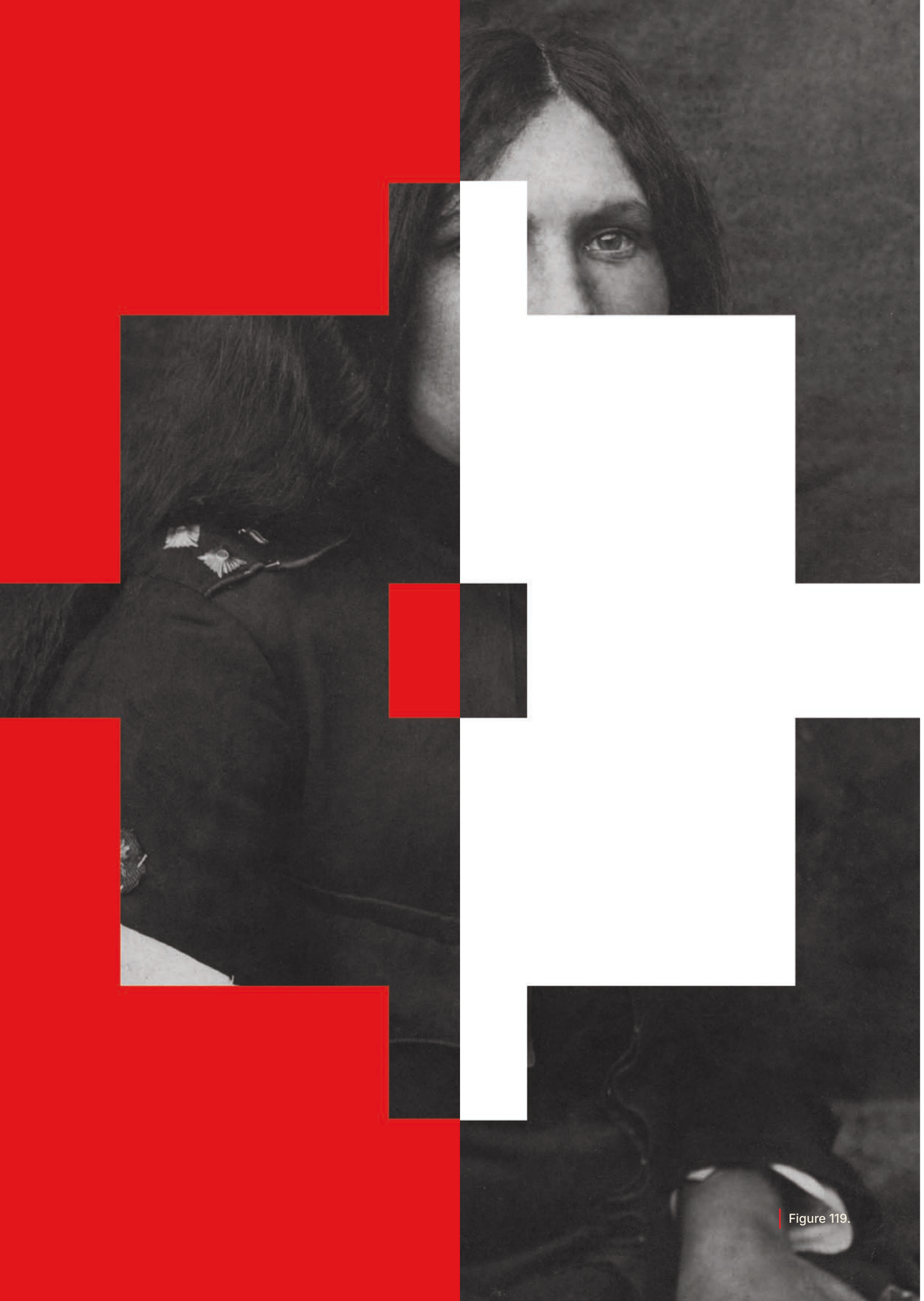
Collage functions in this portrait as a method of fragmentation, disrupting the singular heroic narrative often attached to Petrović. Archival images, painted figures, and symbolic elements are layered and partially obscured, emphasizing that even highly visible figures are subject to selective remembrance. Visibility, here, does not guarantee complexity.

Unlike the more restrained use of language, in the Marić portrait, text in this work appears more forcefully, yet remains incomplete. Embroidered phrases function as interruptions rather than declarations. Petrović's voice reaches us filtered through national symbolism and historical framing rather than through personal testimony. Silence in this context is not an absence of information, but an overload of imposed meaning that leaves little room for interior life.

The double-sided structure reinforces this tension. One side presents Petrović as an artist and national figure, while the other confronts the physical and emotional cost of that role. The viewer must move between these two dimensions, encountering the gap between recognition and endurance.

Through this portrait, Nadežda Petrović is presented as a figure whose life unfolded at the intersection of creativity and crisis. The work neither glorifies sacrifice nor diminishes her agency. Instead, it holds visibility and vulnerability together, insisting on the embodied realities that underpin historical recognition and challenging simplified readings of female heroism.





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5.7. MILUNKA SAVIĆ

The textile portrait of Milunka Savić engages with themes of gender performance, bodily endurance, recognition, and the instability of belonging. Unlike Mileva Marić and Nadežda Petrović, whose lives unfolded primarily within intellectual and artistic spheres, Savić's historical presence is inseparable from the physical realities of war. Her story disrupts fixed ideas of femininity, heroism, and national identity, making her an essential figure for examining how women's bodies are read, instrumentalized, and remembered within patriarchal and nationalist frameworks.

This portrait addresses the tension between visibility and concealment, belonging and exclusion, by engaging directly with the instability of gendered identity in historical narratives. Savić's public recognition remains conditional: she is celebrated as long as she fits a heroic framework that ultimately remains masculine.

Figure 120.

Figure 121.

THE PROCESS


Figure 122.


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Figure 128.

PASSING, NAMING & GENDER VISIBILITY

Savić is most often remembered for her military achievements, particularly for fighting disguised as a man. This act of passing is central to the conceptual structure of the portrait. During the First Balkan Wars, her younger brother was mobilized for military service. Instead of him, Milunka cut her hair, dressed in male clothing, and enlisted under the name *Milun Savić*. Because *Milun* is a male name, she fully presented herself as a man in order to enter the battlefield.

This split identity is embedded directly into the textile surface through embroidered text. On one side of the portrait, *МИЛУН* (MILUN) is stitched in blue thread, while the letters *KA* are stitched in red, completing her full name *МИЛУНКА* (MILUNKA). Her surname *Savić* appears in red thread, while *Gligorijević*, a surname associated with her male identity is stitched in blue. Through color and fragmentation, the work visualizes how her identity was divided and negotiated in order to survive and be accepted.

Above this text, a collage of images presents Savić with her family: her husband, her biological child, and the many children she adopted and supported throughout her life. It is known that she adopted numerous children and devoted herself to their education and care, a form of labor that stands in stark contrast to the heroic image through which she is most often remembered.

Above the collage, a phrase is embroidered in red thread that plays on a linguistic ambiguity in Serbian: *"Један од нас који је био једна од нас."* Literally translated, this means "One of us who was one of us." However, the sentence carries a deeper meaning because *један* is grammatically masculine ("one [man]"), while *једна* is grammatically feminine ("one [woman]"). The phrase therefore simultaneously suggests: "One of us (a man) who was one of us (a woman)." This wordplay captures the core tension of Savić's identity, belonging achieved through gendered concealment.

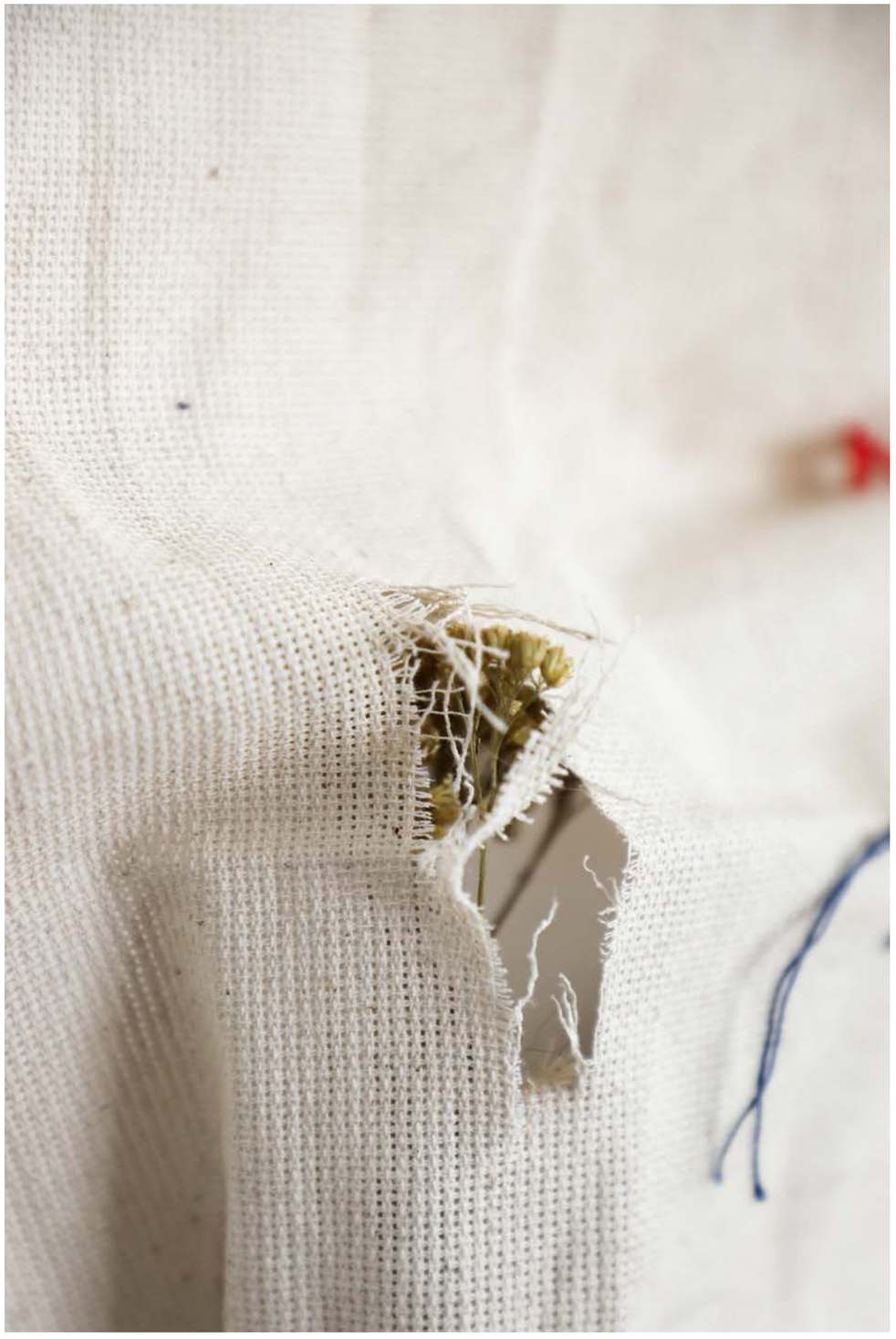
As in the other portraits, her unique embroidered symbol appears above the composition, created from the Cyrillic letters of her name. Red thread interrupts the structure throughout this side, marking physical injury, blood, and the cost of endurance. The interaction between red and blue creates visual tension, mirroring the conflict between assigned identity and lived experience.

Figure 129.

Figure 130.

Figure 131.

Figure 132



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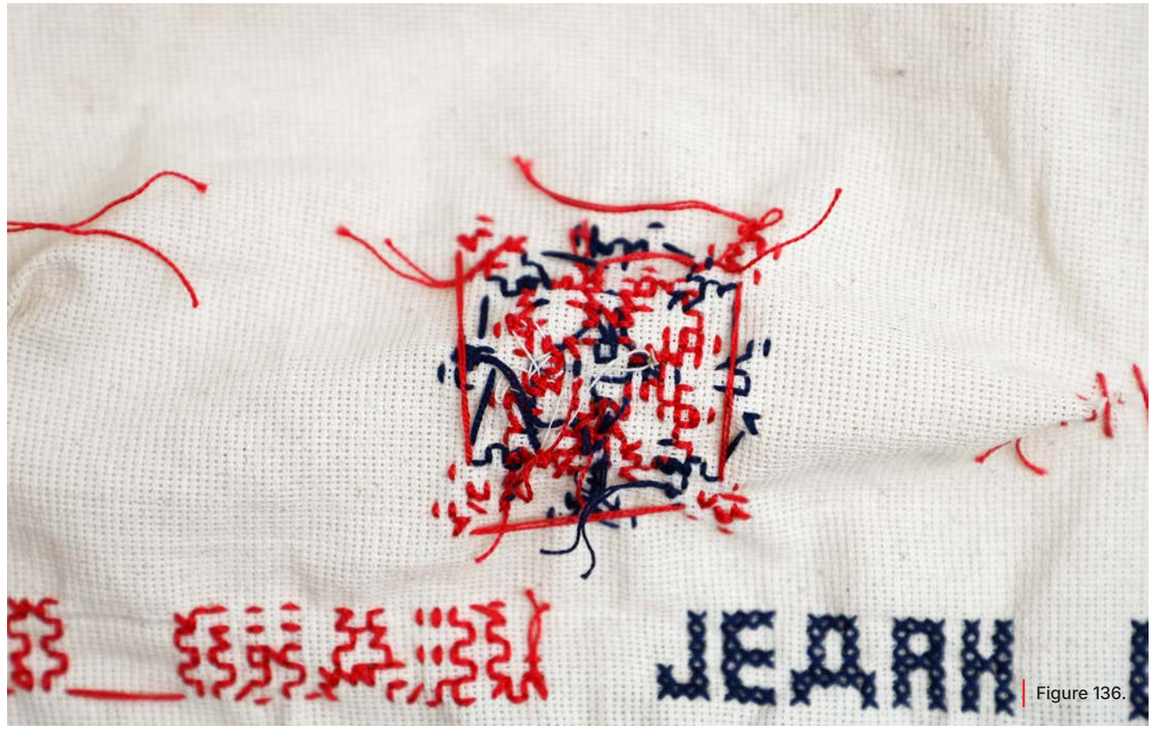


Figure 136.

WOUNDS, RECOGNITION & CONDITIONAL BELONGING

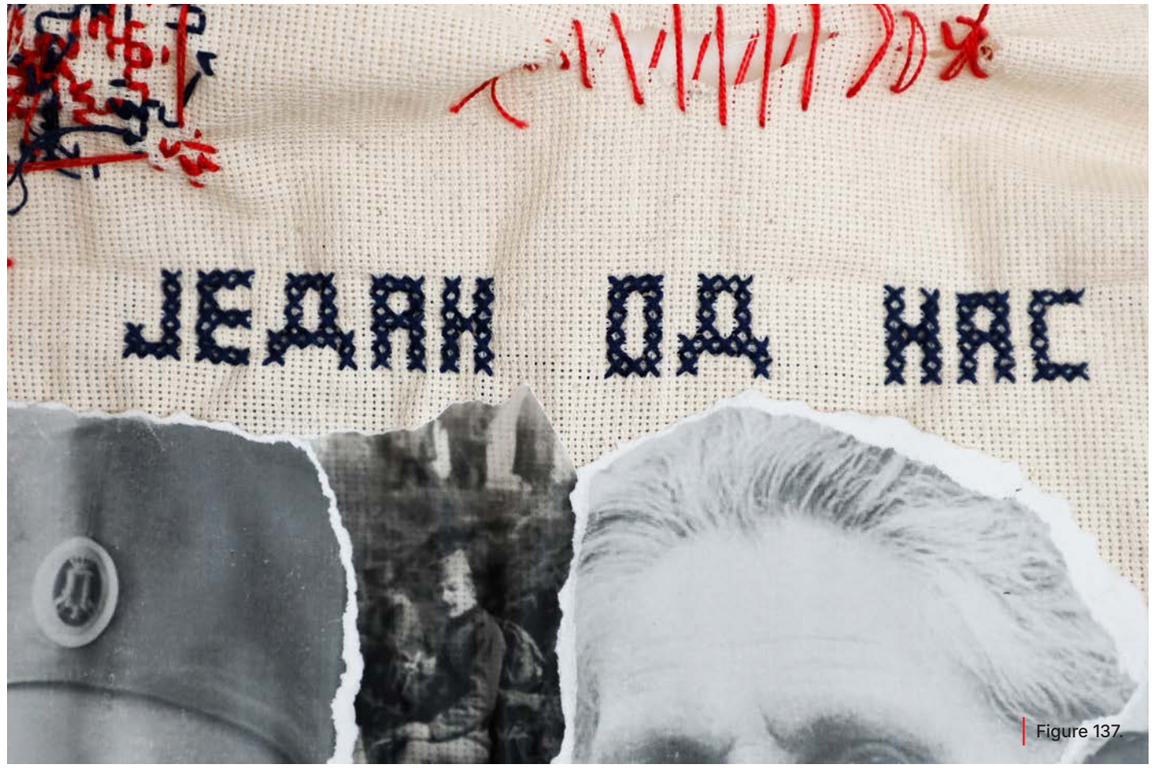
On the reverse side of the portrait, the phrase *„Један од нас”* (“One of us”) appears again, this time embroidered solely in blue thread, emphasizing the masculine framing through which Savić was accepted. Beneath it, a collage of wartime images shows her both in male military presentation and, later, with her hair uncovered, when her gender was no longer concealed.

Surrounding these images are nine stitched cut-out marks, each representing one of the nine times Savić was wounded during combat. The first of these injuries was the moment when her biological sex was discovered. These marks function not as abstract symbols, but as material traces of violence inscribed directly into the textile surface.

Embedded within the collage is the phrase *„Жена какве више нема”,* which can be translated as “A woman who no longer exists” or “A kind of woman that no longer exists.” The phrase reflects both admiration and erasure, celebrating her exceptionalism while simultaneously placing her outside the category of women altogether.

Below this layer, embroidered text provides her name, birth year, and references to the wars in which she fought. At the center of the composition, a cut-out reveals her image from a Serbian postage stamp issued in her honor, signaling delayed and symbolic recognition.

Around this central structure, I embroidered *hajdučka trava* (yarrow), a medicinal herb traditionally associated with wound healing, endurance, and protection in Balkan folk culture. The plant’s name derives from *hajduks,* fighters and rebels, linking it directly to histories of resistance and survival. By incorporating yarrow into the portrait, I wanted to reference both Savić’s physical wounds and the folk traditions through which women’s knowledge of healing was historically transmitted. The dried herb introduces an organic element that connects bodily trauma to care, resilience, and survival outside institutional recognition.



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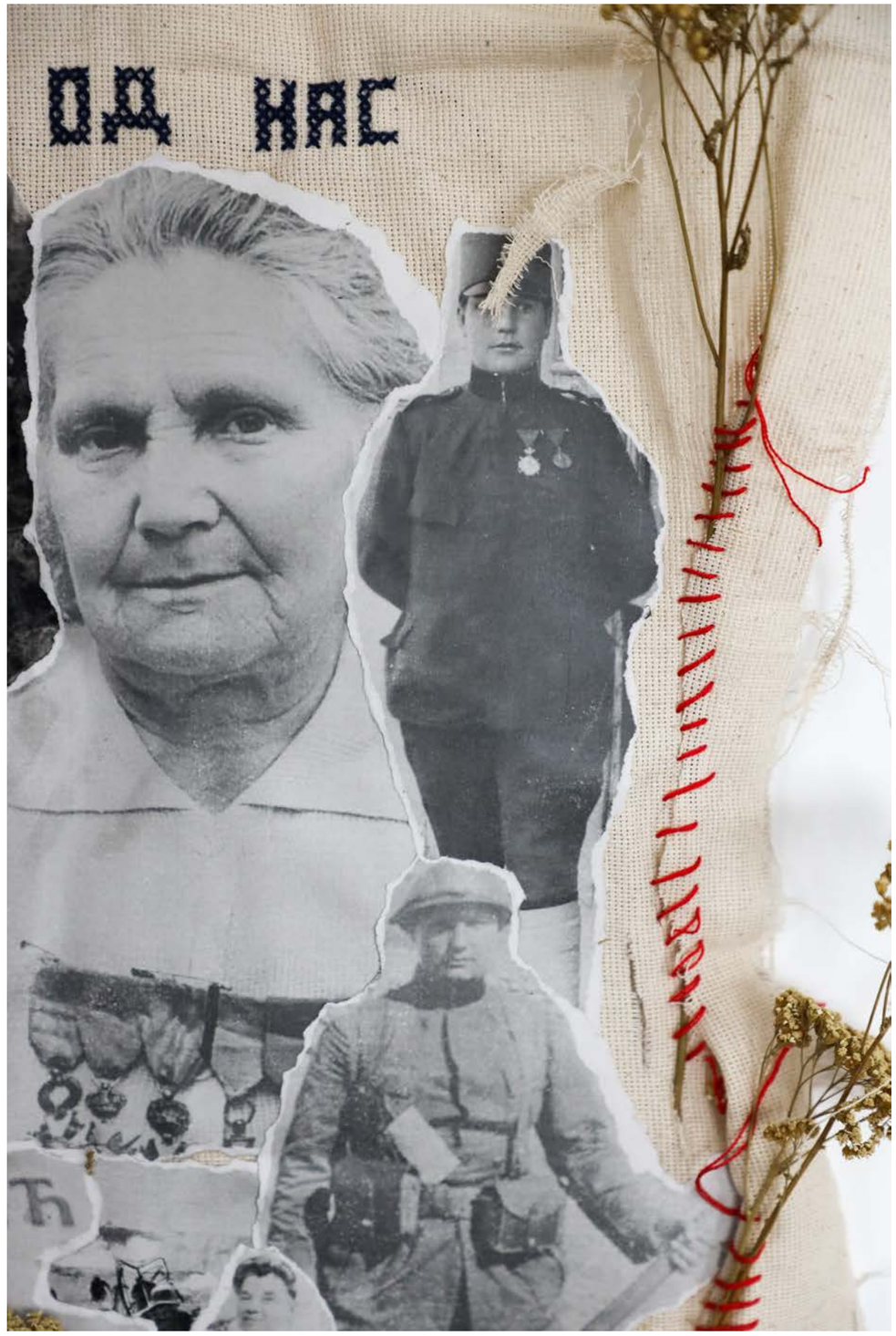

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Figure 145.

MATERIALIZING INJURY & AFTERMATH

Perforations and stitched repairs play a central role throughout the work. Savić's repeated injuries are translated into visible holes and mended areas within the fabric. Rather than representing wounds symbolically, the material bears their trace. Stitching becomes an act of acknowledgment rather than closure. The cloth does not return to an unbroken state; it carries its damage forward.

Collage functions here as a method of addressing the fragmented documentation of Savić's life. While her military achievements are often highlighted, other aspects, poverty, motherhood, care, and postwar neglect, remain less visible. The layered structure places celebrated imagery alongside absence, allowing imbalance to remain unresolved.

Text in this portrait functions as a site of tension rather than explanation. Embroidered words question who is considered "one of us," and under what conditions. Language does not stabilize identity; it reveals its dependence on context. Recognition appears not as a right, but as something granted temporarily, under specific terms.

The double-sided format reinforces this instability. One side foregrounds Savić's public identity as a soldier and national figure, while the reverse engages with the private cost of that identity, physical exhaustion, marginalization, and postwar silence. The viewer must move between these sides, confronting the gap between honor and abandonment.

Through this portrait, Milunka Savić is not presented as an anomaly or exception, but as a figure who reveals the limits of rigid gender roles and historical recognition. The work resists both glorification and reduction, holding endurance, contradiction, and vulnerability together. As the final piece of the triptych, this portrait completes the project's examination of how women navigate systems that demand adaptation while offering only conditional acknowledgment in return.

REFLECTION

Chapter Six

This chapter reflects on the artistic process of *Tyranny of the Past* and considers how theory, research, and material practice interacted throughout the development of the project. Rather than evaluating the work in terms of success or failure, this reflection focuses on what emerged through making: the challenges encountered, the shifts in understanding, and the insights gained through sustained engagement with material, memory, and female history.

One of the most significant realizations during the process was the extent to which making functioned as a form of thinking. At the beginning, I was more focused on the theoretical framework of the project. While theory provided an initial orientation, many conceptual decisions only became clear through direct physical engagement with materials. Stitching, cutting, and assembling were not illustrative actions, but moments in which questions of trauma, silence, and inheritance were negotiated intuitively. This experience confirmed the value of practice-based research as a mode of inquiry that generates knowledge through embodied experience, rather than through explanation alone.

Working with embroidery required a pace that contrasted sharply with academic research. The slowness of stitching created time for reflection, but also confronted me with emotional resistance and fatigue. Repetition brought both clarity and discomfort, mirroring the way inherited patterns persist across generations. At times, the process felt meditative; at others, it felt heavy. This oscillation reinforced my understanding of trauma as something that is not resolved through insight alone, but lived through repetition and endurance.

Another key challenge was working with incomplete historical material. The absence of comprehensive documentation, especially in relation to Mileva Marić and Milunka Savić, initially felt limiting. Over time, however, this lack became central to the project. Rather than attempting to compensate for missing information, I learned to work with absence as a meaningful element. Gaps, silences, and fragmentation were no longer problems to solve, but conditions to acknowledge. This shift altered how I understood both historical research and artistic responsibility.

The double-sided structure of the portraits emerged as a response to this realization. Allowing multiple perspectives to coexist without resolution felt more honest than presenting a singular narrative. This approach required surrendering control over interpretation, trusting the viewer to navigate ambiguity. While this was challenging, it ultimately aligned with the project's ethical stance: to avoid simplifying lives shaped by complex social and historical forces.

Figure 146.

Emotionally, the process was demanding. Engaging deeply with trauma, gendered violence, and historical neglect made it difficult to maintain distance. However, this closeness also clarified the necessity of care, both toward the subjects of the work and toward myself as an artist. The acts of stitching and repair became gestures of attention rather than correction, reinforcing the idea that acknowledging damage does not require resolving it.
Throughout the project, my understanding of feminist practice evolved. Initially focused on visibility and recognition, the work gradually shifted toward listening, holding space, and allowing silence to remain present. This shift was influenced not only by theoretical reading, but by the physical experience of working with fragile materials and time-intensive processes. Feminism, in this context, became less about assertion and more about endurance, responsibility, and relational awareness.

This project also reshaped my understanding of authorship. Rather than positioning myself as a narrator of women's histories, I came to see my role as a mediator between past and present. The artworks do not claim authority over the lives they reference; they operate as sites where memory, material, and interpretation intersect. Accepting this position required letting go of the desire for completeness or closure.

Ultimately, Tyranny of the Past revealed that artistic research does not produce answers in a linear or definitive way. Instead, it creates conditions for encounter, between material and memory, between history and the present, between viewer and subject. This reflection confirms the value of artistic practice as a method capable of engaging with complexity, contradiction, and inherited experience in ways that extend beyond written discourse.

CONCLUSION

Chapter Seven

This thesis set out to explore how women's histories are shaped, fragmented, silenced, and inherited, and how these processes can be addressed through artistic practice. Beginning from the concept of trauma and "the tyranny of the past," the research examined how personal, cultural, and collective histories continue to act upon the present, particularly in relation to female experience in the Serbian and Balkan context. Rather than approaching these histories through factual reconstruction or archival completeness, the project sought to engage with what remains: fragments, absences, emotions, and embodied memory.

Through feminist historiography, trauma theory, postmemory, and feminist materiality, the theoretical framework established that women's histories are often preserved unevenly, mediated through patriarchal structures, and transmitted through silence as much as through narration. These frameworks did not function as abstract references, but as tools that informed the artistic process itself. Concepts such as HERstory, fragmentation, and inherited experience shaped both the conceptual direction and the material decisions within the work.

The artistic project *Tyranny of the Past* translated these ideas into material form through a triptych of double-sided textile portraits of Mileva Marić, Nadežda Petrović, and Milunka Savić. Each portrait addressed a different position of female experience, intellectual labor, artistic and bodily exposure, and gendered endurance, while collectively revealing shared mechanisms of erasure, recognition, and survival. Embroidery, collage, perforation, and repair were not used illustratively, but as methods of inquiry through which memory and trauma could be approached bodily and materially.

Central to the project was the refusal of closure, because this work does not seek to resolve historical injustice, correct the archive, or offer definitive narratives. Instead, it holds contradictions in place: visibility alongside silence, repair alongside damage, recognition alongside neglect. The double-sided structure of the portraits reinforces this position, requiring movement and attention from the viewer and emphasizing that women's histories cannot be contained within a single perspective.

This thesis set out to explore how artistic practice can engage with female histories shaped by trauma, silence, and inherited memory in ways that extend beyond feminist historiography. Rather than seeking to reconstruct historical truth or correct archival omissions, the project approached these histories through material, embodied, and affective processes.

Through textile, embroidery, collage, and assemblage, the work demon-

Figure 147.

strates how artistic practice can operate as a site of postmemory, one that makes absence visible, allows contradiction to remain unresolved, and acknowledges emotional inheritance as a form of knowledge. By working with fragmentation, repetition, and repair, the project responds to its research question not by providing definitive answers, but by creating conditions in which women's histories can be encountered as layered, partial, and ongoing.

In this way, the research question remains open. The project does not claim closure, but instead proposes artistic practice as a mode of engagement capable of holding complexity, vulnerability, and silence alongside historical presence.

This research confirms that artistic practice offers a distinct and necessary way of engaging with history. While feminist historiography provides critical tools for analyzing power, erasure, and representation, artistic practice allows for the exploration of affect, embodiment, and inherited emotional experience, dimensions that often exceed language. By working with textile and collage, the project approached history as something lived, carried, and felt, rather than solely known.

Reflecting on the process, the value of *Tyranny of the Past* lies not in the answers it provides, but in the space it creates for encounter. The project invites viewers to slow down, to look closely, and to remain with discomfort and ambiguity. In doing so, it resists the pressure to simplify women's histories and instead acknowledges their complexity, endurance, and ongoing presence.

For me, this project opened a path for continued research and artistic exploration. Engaging deeply with both theory and material practice revealed how much remains to be questioned, examined, and felt. Rather than closing a line of inquiry, the work generated new questions and directions for future practice. Embroidery became an essential tool within this process, both as a craft and as a contemporary artistic medium capable of carrying complex narratives. The project focused on three women, yet it gestures toward many others whose stories remain fragmented, overlooked, or waiting to be approached.

Ultimately, this thesis contributes to contemporary feminist artistic discourse by demonstrating how material practice can function as a form of historical engagement and care. It argues for an understanding of memory not as something fixed in the past, but as an active force shaping the present. By stitching together fragments of erased female histories, *Tyranny of the Past* insists that what has been silenced continues to matter, and that attending to it, even without resolution, is a meaningful and necessary act.

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