

<https://doi.org/10.7577/formakademisk.5414>

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# Preserving the past to serve the future

## Lilli Zickerman's inventory of textile handicrafts 1914–1931

### **ABSTRACT**

*Lilli Zickerman (1858–1949) was an entrepreneur who took part in organising the Swedish handicraft associations in the late 19th century. She was also a pioneer in the archives and active in the feminine sphere of textile handicraft. From 1914–1931 she conducted a huge inventory called Swedish Folk Textile Art that consists of more than 24,000 photographs and descriptions of vernacular textiles and manuscripts for a planned series of books and films. By mapping textile handicrafts, she aimed to preserve traditional textile craft techniques to inspire their continued production. Her intention was to create an archive for the inspiration and education of future textile artists. The inventory has had effects that are still apparent today; this paper illuminates the ways in which Zickerman's ideas about textile handicrafts have contributed to the continuation of Swedish cultural heritage and how it has become an authorised heritage discourse that continues to guide the scholars and practitioners involved in the history of textiles and their production. Here, we will present the first article within an ongoing project on Swedish Folk Textile Art and how it was conducted. We will contextualise the ideas and knowledge that it contains by focusing on Zickerman's intention to preserve the past to serve the future. From a critical craft perspective, we will discuss geographical mapping as a method for investigating the inventory; the inclusion and exclusion of geographical areas, textile techniques, materials and people; the ideas and the knowledge that are expressed in the inventory; and the networks that it created. By doing so, we aim to highlight the connections between people, between people and materials, and between history and the current day.*

*Keywords:*

Critical craft studies, craft archive, cultural historical inventories, craft history, craft knowledge.

## INTRODUCTION

Lilli Zickerman (1858–1949) was an entrepreneur who took part in organising the Swedish handicraft associations in the late 19th century (Lundahl, 1999; Zickerman, 1999; Stavenow Hidemark, 2005; Meister, 2012; Palmsköld, 2018). This article will focus on one of her accomplishments: an inventory called Swedish Folk Textile Art (Sveriges folkliga textilkonst) that consists of more than 24,000 photographs and descriptions of vernacular textiles and manuscripts for a planned series of books and films. The following article is the first published presentation within an ongoing research project on Lilli Zickerman's inventory work. It is a brief introduction providing an outline for the project rather than a deep analysis. Her work is a comprehensive inventory project that was supported by the National Association of Swedish Handicraft Societies (Föreningen för svensk hemslöjd) and the Nordic Museum (Nordiska Museet) (Lundahl, 2001). From 1914–1931, Zickerman travelled across Sweden documenting textiles by describing them and photographing them, using an expanding network of people involved in textiles and handicraft. The material that was created is now part of the archive at the Nordic Museum in Stockholm.

The aim of Zickerman's project was to create an archive to inspire future textile artists and to give them opportunities to learn more from their forerunners. She wanted to preserve traditional techniques by inspiring their continued production and to preserve the past to serve the future. At the same time, the project illuminates the knowledge regarding vernacular textiles. Although Lilli Zickerman is well-known among those interested in textiles and handicraft, there is less knowledge about the ways in which her ideas have had a decisive influence on how we still talk discursively about folk textiles in a Swedish context. Our interest in Zickerman's project began in the idea that despite the fact that Swedish Folk Textile Art has been used as a source and inspiration to this day, the inventory has not been subjected to a contemporary critical analysis or thorough academic research (Palmsköld, 2021).

The primary focus of the article is to show how the inventory itself, the ideas and knowledge it contains and geographical mapping as a method, can be analysed from a critical craft perspective. This is accomplished by first describing how the Swedish Folk Textile Art project was conducted. We will describe geographical mapping as a method, the practical work that was done and the different networks involved. These networks were between people, between people and materials, and, between then and now. Second, we will delve into the ideas and knowledge expressed in the inventory, such as the inclusion and exclusion of geographical areas, textile techniques, materials and people. Third, we will apply a critical craft perspective to the inventory and its contexts.

We will explore how Zickerman's ideas and knowledge have become an authorised heritage discourse (Smith, 2009), and in which ways the Swedish Folk Textile Art inventory has contributed to cultural heritage in Sweden. We will also look into what it means to preserve the past to serve the future.

The Zickerman Swedish Folk Textile Art inventory can be contextualised in two ways: first, in the context of the large cultural heritage inventories of rural Sweden in the early 20th century – works that also had parallels in many other European countries – and second, in the context of a modern working handicraft society, performing heritage-making in textiles with feminine connotations. These are contexts with which we are familiar and that we have researched before, noticing, for example, an imbalance in the representation regarding class and gender (Gustavsson, 2014; Palmsköld & Rosenqvist, 2018) that we are now investigating further.

### Conducting the inventory

Starting in the 1910s, Lilli Zickerman mapped the textiles produced in the homes of rural Sweden. She could lean on the previous inventories done by organisations, such as local handicraft associations or The Rural Economy and Agricultural Societies (Hushållningssällskapen), borrowing textiles from private homes to exhibit them as a way of responding to the contemporary interest in the vernacular and original. Zickerman had the opportunity to photograph the exhibited objects and to pick out threads

from the back sides as models for colouring the black and white photographs. The photographs were mounted on sheets of cardboard with the aim of creating a collection that contemporary crafters could study to gain inspiration for continued craftsmanship. Soon after, the idea to also publish the inventory in a series of books was raised. Zickerman's book manuscripts consist of 28 volumes, but only one book was published (Zickerman, 1937). Today, both the inventory and the manuscripts for the unfinished publication project are stored in the Nordic Museum.

The material in the inventory is structured according to idea that crafts are typically local. The archive capsules are organised primarily in a geographical order and thereafter according to textile techniques. Zickerman's conception became an important point of departure for the governmental inquiry about craft of which she became the main author (Hemslöjdskommittén, 1918). In the inquiry, she developed her ideas on the typical local handicraft or *sloyd* further, mapping the different craft techniques within a national framework (Hemslöjdskommittén, 1918). She was also a very popular speaker, travelling in Sweden to give talks on her ideas of *sloyd* (Zickerman, 1999, Palmsköld 2018). In her time, Zickerman medialisised heritage through modern techniques that today has been disseminated by using the modern techniques of our time (Johannesson, 2007). The Zickerman inventory is now accessible through a digital archive (Hemslöjdens samlingar, 2023).

Researchers, textile artists, authors in the field, members of the homecraft movement and museum curators have used the results of Zickerman's efforts, especially the inventory and the manuscripts in their work, just as Zickerman wished; however, the references to her work have been taken for granted and understated. They have also become a model of how to conduct inventories and collect for archives in the Handicraft Societies in Sweden (Nylén, 1969).

The analysis of the materiality and changing contexts of the archival records that have emerged from Zickerman's work and her surrounding network contributes to knowledge production and deepens the textual findings. This is in line with the findings of Aleida Assman, who recognises the potentiality of the archive as being in a dormant state until someone engages with it (Assman, 2008, p. 103). Although Zickerman worked alone most of the time, it would not have been possible for her to carry out her inventory work without the financial and practical support from several different sources. The Rural Economy and Agricultural Societies have been mentioned above. Also of great importance in her network was the board of the Association for Swedish Handicrafts, which consisted of members from the elite of society, with Prince Eugen as chairman. The royal presence in the association was important in the annual applications for state subsidies for the activities of which Zickerman's inventory work was a major item. In the association's archive, it is possible to follow her work on a micro level, which reveals more actors in her network. Examples include individuals such as the governor of Kristianstad County, who supported her work, and her brothers, who assisted in the practical work with the photographs. By combining the study of the inventory and the collection of manuscripts – the finished result of Zickerman's work – with the association minutes, letters and other documents in which the creation and implementation of the inventory can be followed, the understanding and knowledge of Zickerman's work process is deepened.

The structure of her networks had an impact on how her inventory work was carried out and what is represented in the material in the archive. There is significantly less material from Northern Sweden than from Skåne, the southernmost landscape where she was living. Dependent on the networks, what is included in the inventory reflects not only Zickerman's travel routes but also the local interest in various places to make textiles available to her.

The Swedish Folk Textile Art inventory is a document archive – it does not contain textile material objects. Instead, Zickerman created representations of materiality in her photographs and reproductions (Figure 1). During her fieldwork, she worked mainly with the same methods as the explorers of traditional buildings, folk music and the like, who strived to preserve and present the knowledge about lifestyles of the past in the countryside (Gustavsson, 2014, see also, for example, Metslaid 2015). In all the projects, two factors were fundamental in organising the fieldwork as well as the archival records: geographical origin and techniques. The context and aims in Zickerman's work were similar to others but, in contrast to many other inventory projects, she worked alone. When

compared with other investigations conducted in the same context, it strikes us how consistent Zickerman's material is. This enables comparability.



**FIGURE 1.** An example from Zickerman's inventory. A partly coloured picture of a cushion from the province of Scania. Picture from Hemsöjdens samlingar <https://digitaltmuseum.org/021017517893/vagnsdyna-i-rollakan>

## Ideas and knowledge

One decisive difference between Zickerman's project and, for example, the documentation of vernacular architecture and building techniques that the ethnologist Sigurd Erixon carried out is the overall aim. Erixon's aim was not to stimulate building conservation but to preserve knowledge about building techniques using photographs and descriptions and to enable scholars to study the archival records and, with them, to conduct research. (Gustavsson, 2014). In comparison, Zickerman's aim was to enable crafters to continue to produce textile works inspired by her inventory. This similarity in context also concerns Zickerman's background as a representative from the prosperous parts of society. It was, with few exceptions, people of the bourgeoisie from an urban context who cared about and wanted to preserve vernacular culture (Gustavsson, 2020, 2022).

The inventory can be seen as a response to the institutionalisation of the material manifestations of nations entailed by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century national museum movement (Fallan & Lees-Maffei, 2016). To a large extent, people of the countryside and their traditional ways of living represented the nation in this context. Zickerman's geographical mapping of the local rural crafts in Sweden is part of a national project studying the differences between regional practices to form a unity in this context. From this unity, some crafts are ruled out by Zickerman – for example the too commonplace, such as crocheting, or the too particular, such as the Sami (Hemslöjdskommitténs betänkande, p. 230; Hyltén-Cavallius, 2007, 2015). Ethnicity is an aspect that is taken for granted rather than represented in a visible way and understated in the actual text or photographs in the inventory. What is well known to Zickerman (e.g. those crafts from the south of Sweden) is minutely covered over several pages, whereas those from the north are more vaguely sketched out on a few pages.

The inventory also demonstrated an interest in the typical local style and traditional craft of its time. The individuals who produced textile handicraft objects (almost always women) were not supposed to seem like individual innovators but rather as representatives of a tradition. In the prevailing complementary gender order the female-dominated handicraft sphere was organised separately from the male-dominated professional art (Rosenqvist, 2007). These aspects of inclusion and exclusion are of interest when addressing large inventories, such as that of the Swedish Folk Textile Art. How gender, ethnicity and class is being produced and reproduced in the material gathered by Zickerman is then disseminated by the handicraft societies to the present day. Within the craft community, her ideas have been reproduced in courses, craft educations, handbooks and in communication about textiles and textile techniques. The Swedish Folk Textile Art inventory has had a major impact on how craft has been understood in Sweden (Rosenqvist & Palmsköld, 2015; Palmsköld & Rosenqvist, 2018). Zickerman's work is also well known in the craft history of Sweden and has been described in popular history texts.

Apart from what has been said above about the contextualisation of the Zickerman inventory in the academic setting, we see the inventory not only as an empirical source, but also as an important scientific contribution in the field – first, in Zickerman's own contributions and second, in the continued use of them. For example, for a long time it was used as an internal source of knowledge about vernacular textiles for the curatorial work of the academic staff at the Nordic Museum. Currently, the manuscripts are part of the archives, and accessible for the public. Part of the inventory has now been digitised and published online by the National Association of Swedish Handicraft Societies as the *Zickerman's Study Collection* (Hemslöjdens samlingar, 2023). Within the ongoing research project, this digital archive will be studied as one of the contemporary sources contextualising the material in a new way and making it accessible and useful to a new and larger public. In fact, in 1940, a copy of 12,000 of the batch of hand-coloured photographs was placed at the Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design (Konstfack, 2023).

## A critical craft perspective

The question of 'what heritage is' has been discussed by Laurajane Smith, who, by using the concept of the authorised heritage discourse (AHD) in her seminal text from 2006, raised questions regarding 'who has the ability to speak for and about the nature and meaning of heritage' (Smith, 2006, p. 29). Zickerman's inventory has tentatively worked as, and been regarded by its users as, an AHD; how-

ever, in the main discourse of large cultural heritage inventories of the ‘the old rural Sweden’ conducted in the early 20th century, it has not been included.

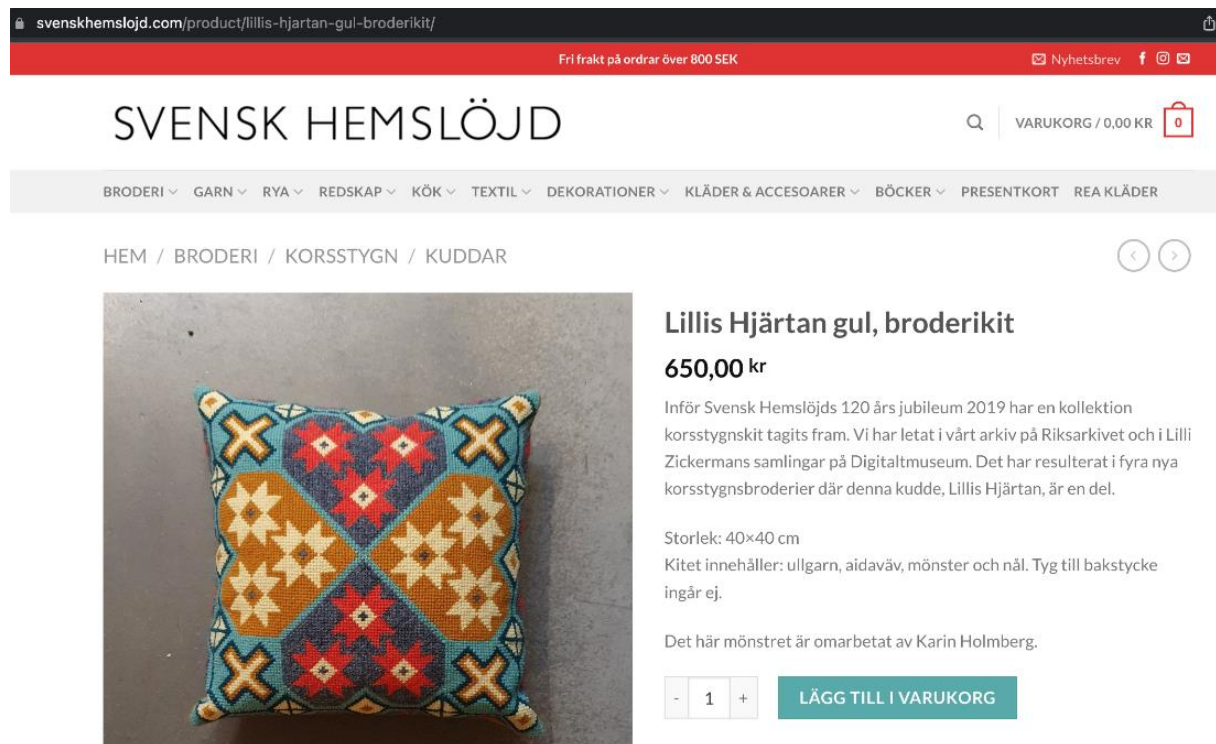
The inventory and its impact are examples of how the authorised heritage discourse (AHD) has worked outside of academia, as well (Smith, 2006, see also Gentry & Smith, 2019). When addressing questions on textile history in a Swedish framework, it is impossible to surpass Zickerman’s work and the multiple traces of it. One example is how textile techniques are still categorised geographically, whereas her exclusion of modern techniques, such as crocheting (Palmsköld, 2016) and *sloyd*, has been contested by its inclusion in other handicrafts associations historically and more recently (Hyltén-Cavallius, 2015).

In this example, the authorisation is connected to an individual person and to the Swedish Handicraft Association that Zickerman founded in 1899, rather than to institutions. The fact that she was the main author in the Swedish governmental inquiry about crafts from 1918 points to her in forming an authorised heritage discourse and working as an individual to establish a specific craft history.

The questions regarding how the Swedish Folk Textile Art inventory earned its authority and in what ways it has contributed to the making of cultural heritage in Sweden are worth exploring further. From this point in our study, it became clear that Zickerman herself was a well-known authority when she started her inventory. She brought a network within textile handicraft into her work and expanded it. Both Zickerman and the inventory are still regarded as normative in both crafting and heritage-making. As stated above, the Swedish Folk Textile Art inventory has been used as a source and inspiration to this day. It has been an inspiration for creative ideas and fantasies for crafters aiming to develop their skills and learn more about textile techniques and design. It has also been used as a reliable empirical and scientific source for learning more about vernacular textiles in a national framework.

From a critical craft perspective (Torell & Palmsköld, 2020), the active use of the inventory does not challenge the reliability but adds to its canonical and normative status by continuously making bodily knowledge through crafting. Through this inclusion, crafting has become an active part of this heritage-making. For example, two embroidery kits called ‘Lilli’s Hearts’ and ‘Lilli’s Stars’ made today and sold by the Swedish Handicraft Association in Stockholm were created using some of the most common representations of vernacular textile patterns (Figure 1). These patterns are apparent in the inventory in many of the techniques and geographical areas. Zickerman wanted to show how patterns and techniques were different depending on local use and tradition, but this example shows that the similarities also abound.





The image is a screenshot of the website [svenskhemslojd.com](http://svenskhemslojd.com). The page features a red navigation bar at the top with the text "svenskhemslojd.com/product/lillis-hjartan-gul-broderikit/" and "Fri frakt på ordrar över 800 SEK". Below the navigation bar is the main header "SVENSK HEMSLÖJD" with a search icon and a shopping cart icon showing "0". A secondary navigation bar lists categories: BRODERI, GARN, RYA, REDSKAP, KÖK, TEXTIL, DEKORATIONER, KLÄDER & ACCESSOARER, BÖCKER, PRESENTKORT, and REA KLÄDER. The main content area shows a breadcrumb trail: HEM / BRODERI / KORSSTYGN / KUDDAR. A large image of a square embroidery kit with a colorful geometric pattern is displayed. To the right of the image, the product title is "Lillis Hjärtan gul, broderikit" with a price of "650,00 kr". Below the title is a descriptive paragraph: "Inför Svensk Hemslojds 120 års jubileum 2019 har en kollektion korsstygnskit tagits fram. Vi har letat i vårt arkiv på Riksarkivet och i Lilli Zickermans samlingar på Digitaltmuseum. Det har resulterat i fyra nya korsstygnbroderier där denna kudde, Lillis Hjärtan, är en del." Below this is the size "Storlek: 40x40 cm" and the contents "Kitet innehåller: ullgarn, aidaväv, mönster och nål. Tyg till bakstycke ingår ej." A note states "Det här mönstret är omarbetat av Karin Holmberg." At the bottom right, there is a quantity selector showing "1" and a teal button labeled "LÄGG TILL I VARUKORG".

**FIGURE 2.** Embroidery kit made in 2019 and sold by the Swedish Handicraft Association (Föreningen för svensk hemslojd) in Stockholm as displayed on their webpage [www.svenskhemslojd.com](http://www.svenskhemslojd.com).

With the inspiration of the international critical heritage research field, an intersectional perspective helps us address aspects of gender, ethnicity and class (Grahn & Wilson, 2018; Lundstedt, 2005; Smith, 2006). For example, gender has played a key role in playing down the importance of Zickerman and other female heritage actors. Without properly addressing gender aspects, heritage-making processes will be incomplete (Grahn & Wilson, 2018). As a woman with connections to many key contributors to the cultural field, Zickerman made use of that position to bring the inventory into existence. In studying Zickerman's network, it becomes obvious that most of the people involved were women. The textile she documented were made by women and the exhibitions were mostly curated by women. In her article on Swedish women pioneers, Barbro Klein emphasised the agency made possible by Zickerman's position for single woman and entrepreneurs at this specific place in time (Klein, 2013, p. 123). As textile crafts were considered to be a feminine sphere, it was also a great possibility for women to become important actors (Waldén & Svensson, 2005; Palmsköld & Rosenqvist, 2018).

One possible inspiration for developing critical crafts studies further may be provided by international studies focusing on how traditions are created and challenged through private initiatives and without public interventions (Lind, 2020), the social aspects of crafts and how crafts can be used as a tool for well-being (Buchzyk, 2020) and how crafts can be created in different contexts and by various bodies, such as indigenous people moving from a rural to an urban context or crafts as an important part of industrial manufacturing (Osorio, 2020; Klekot, 2020).

## **CONCLUSION: TO PRESERVE THE PAST TO SERVE THE FUTURE**

Zickerman's intention was to preserve the past to serve the future by creating an archive for future textile artists for inspiration and learning. As we have shown, her intentions have been fulfilled and her legacy is still intact. However, we are interested in continuing the critical discussion of, for example, the inclusion and exclusion processes when it comes to crafts and heritage-making. There are some conclusions to be drawn when analysing Zickerman's manuscripts: for example, the interaction between

non-profit and commercial interests within the Swedish Homecraft movement and which techniques, materials and dyes are emphasised, and which are not.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work was completed within the research project The Soft Cultural Heritage financed by the Swedish Research Council (Dnr: P22-0608 <https://www.rj.se/anslag/2022/det-mjuka-kulturarvet/>) and by *Stiftelsen Thuréus forskarhem och naturminne för kultur, natur, litteratur och konst*. We would also like to thank the peer reviewers for their help in developing this article.



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