

## New Museum School Podcast Transcript– 2019/2020

**PODCAST TITLE:** *Learning through remaking: embroidery in medieval England*

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**HOST INSTITUTION:** *The Museum of London*

### SCRIPT

#### NMS INTRO STING

### LINK

I'm Anna Laviniere, Collections Management Trainee at the Museum of London, and you're listening to my New Museum School Podcast, '*Learning through remaking*'.

In this podcast, I will be speaking about my experience exploring the Museum's embroidery collection and my attempt to remake elements from the 1577 embroidered Bible that is presumed to have been crafted by Queen Elizabeth the 1st's own hand. I will explore how the design and technique of this 1577 piece can be seen as a microcosm of 16<sup>th</sup> century embroidery work and discuss how the embroidery industry was evolving at the time. This will then take us to present day embroidery and how the craft has modernised via social media.

My interest in the Museum's embroidery collection has stemmed from my own hobbies outside of work and academia. I am very into crafts and textile art. I am a self-taught embroidery artist. I sell my art via *etsy* and market events. I also share pieces on my Instagram named '*LavyStitch*' where I connect with fellow artists and those that admire embroidered work. Being self-taught, I learnt a lot through trial and error which, I believe, is evident through the increase in quality of work that you can see over time on my designs. The thing I find with embroidery is that it is extremely time consuming

and, like anything, you improve with much practice. Knowing the hardship of this craft first-hand, I have immense respect for fellow embroiderers and those into crafting as it isn't for the impatient, which I can be at times!

This interest and experience has fuelled my fascination with the Museum's embroidery collection, as I have been able to closely view and appreciate large intricate designs from hundreds of years ago. Not only to view the complex stitching techniques of past times, but to also note what they were stitching back then. The collection is almost split between two common themes: religious themes and secular imagery of nature, plants and animals. From my experience, tapestries, canvases, panels and chasubles tend to be embroidered with religious motifs whereas dresses, purses, gloves and hats carry more imagery from nature and the animal world.

An example of where religious and secular design are combined can be found in various funeral palls with *opus anglicanum*, a term used for English medieval embroidery. A pall is the cloth that covers the casket or coffin at a funeral. This word is also used for those that carry the coffin - pallbearers. For some, a pall is an essential part of every Christian funeral and contains much meaning and symbolism that can reflect the grief of those affected by the death or represent the Christian dignity of the deceased.

However, a pall does not have to be a religious symbol as seen in the Fishmongers' Pall. Livery companies, including the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers, would each have owned two palls, one for each of their two grades of membership - freemen and liverymen. The Fishmongers' Pall includes four panels completely covered in embroidery. Imagery embroidered onto the pall includes Christ and Saint Peter, with mythical creatures holding up the Company's coat of arms. Although the Fishmonger's Pall is not known to be a major religious symbol, the religious characters included in the Pall are very important in the dating of the item. As noted by curators of the *opus anglicanum* exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, Saint Peter is embroidered wearing the papal tiara in this Pall and this imagery is unlikely to

have been produced post-Reformation. This supports the presumed production date of the Fishmonger's Pall as 1512.

The techniques used in creating this piece not only add to the history of this particular funeral pall, but also reflect the lives of embroiderers at the time. The Fishmongers Pall is a highly detailed piece, created with silver-gilt, silver thread and coloured silk in satin and split stitch on linen, which was then applied to the panel of woven velvet cloth of gold tissue. The figures are attached to the velvet cloth using a couching technique that essentially fastens patterns to a grounding fabric. The use of these techniques suggests that multiple broiderers made different figures and combined them for this funeral pall. Groups, or houses, of broiderers coming together to make one piece shows labour and time-saving techniques that were adapted during the 16<sup>th</sup> century to appeal to the wider market and keep up with the growth of a consumer society. The type of materials used and thread count also changed with the times – for example, not all broiderers and buyers had access to silver and gold thread.

Keeping this in mind, my first interaction with the 1577 embroidered Bible at the Museum of London was particularly interesting as the materials used were thought to be gold and silver-gilt. This was supported by the further presumption of the Bible cover having been made by Queen Elizabeth the First herself, who could have afforded these types of materials. The assumption of this piece being embroidered by the Queen herself stems from a letter found at the back of the Bible that reads:

*“This Bible was in possession of the late Duchess of Portland. At her Death it was sold and came into my hands, the covers being worked by Queen Elizabeth’s own hand, whose real Bible it was”.*

I had come into contact with this item while assisting with a tour of the Museum of London’s library where a selection of books is presented for viewing. The vegetal scrollwork of the Bible cover made this piece stand out to me as this design is very detailed and complex. It urges viewers to lean in for a magnified view. On closer inspection, the difference in stitches, thread colour and even thread count are evident.

I was in awe of the sheer time-consuming detail of the cover and was inspired to have a go at Renaissance interlaced rose designs myself.

With the help of Glyn Davies, Head of Curatorial at the Museum of London, and Lucie Whitmore, its Fashion Curator, I was able to conduct further research into traditional stages in medieval embroidery and the similarities with those of the modern day. For example, the first stage in traditional preparation would be termed 'pouncing', which is when the design is drawn onto paper, pricked along the lines and placed onto grounding fabric. The pounce, which would be a fine powder such as charcoal, would be applied on top of the paper. This then leaves the design in dotted lines on the grounded fabric to stitch onto. Essentially, a dotted outline of a design. For the first stage of design in modern day embroidery, we have access to water and air erasable pens that allow embroiderers to draw designs straight onto the fabric. To trace designs, stitchers may use lightboxes under-fabric and paper to better view outlines. Although the process of imprinting onto fabric is definitely very similar, achieving this has become a lot quicker in the modern day.

I found the embroidered Bible was a realistic project to achieve over the course of a week. The small scale of the piece and the cover without couched figures or motifs suggests that it was produced by one individual. In terms of materials, I substituted gold metallic thread for the silver and gold-gilt thread. I believe this worked just as well in the look of the final piece. As my piece would be a few hundred years newer than the original piece, the colours were bound to stand out more than the former gold and silver. The original piece has red velvet as the grounding fabric – I used red cotton fabric so I could employ the modern tracing process of using a water erasable pen. In terms of the stitches, I replicated the stitches that I identified on the Bible cover – mainly stem stitch, split stitch and, I think, a rope stitch.

I found my time remaking the Bible cover very peaceful and mindful. I'd argue this to be a privilege of embroidering as a hobby. Current and medieval embroidery designs with their complex designs and techniques can be breath-taking to look at, but I can only imagine the stress and pressure medieval broiderers may have felt when they had to complete grand designs under tight deadlines in difficult working conditions.

Glyn Davies has an example of this in his section on the wealth of the embroiderer in the book, *'English Medieval Embroidery, Opus Anglicanum'*, where he mentions the broiderer, Robert Coxhale. Curators pieced together Coxhale's story from letters they had found: he had made three sets of embroidered pieces for £241 - at the time, a lot of money - but had not received payment. There were letters from him, pleading with the arranged buyer for payment as soon as possible as he had already put masses of time and effort into the pieces. This shows the risk of this type of craft and how exposed embroiderers were in their commissioned work.

This experience at the Museum of London of learning through remaking has made me reflect on the history of my craft and the people it has involved. So, what about the embroidery of today? Embroiderers are still found throughout England and around the world. But whereas the craft was seen in medieval England as primarily religious, today a lot of embroidered pieces are emerging as vehicles to carry revolutionary messages and to empower individuals.

Have a browse through crafters social media and be inspired and moved by what embroiderers have to say via thread!

**NMS OUTRO STING**

**SCRIPT ENDS**