

jan/13/cabinet-curiosities-taxidermy-retro-museums
(accessed 4 April 2017), para. 4 of 15.

4 Bennett, *op. cit.*, pp. 32, 99 and 156.

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‘Opus Anglicanum: Masterpieces of English Medieval Embroidery’, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1 October 2016 – 5 February 2017. Catalogue: Eds. Clare Browne, Glyn Davies and M. A. Michael, with the assistance of Michaela Zöschg, Yale University Press in association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, New Haven and London, 2016, 310 pages, hardback, ISBN 9780300222005, £40.00.

The magnificent linen Bologna Cope (cat. 38), made of silver and cream coloured threads, portrays biblical and passion narratives inside Gothic arches. Bathed in light, this cope was the first object to welcome visitors to the Victoria and Albert Museum’s (V&A) retrospective of English embroidery from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries: ‘Opus Anglicanum: Masterpieces of English Medieval Embroidery’. The exhibition’s Latin title translates as ‘English work’, but in continental medieval records it referred to luxurious embroidered textiles produced in England, characterized by underside couching and fine split stitch. London, especially the area around Saint Paul’s Cathedral, was the centre of this trade, which reached its apogee between the second half of the thirteenth century and the middle of the fourteenth. It was a craft appreciated and exported throughout Europe, sought

after by ecclesiastics, royalty such as Isabella of France (Queen of England, 1308–1327) and upper class members of society. In 1246, the Benedictine chronicler Matthew Paris tells an anecdote about Pope Innocent IV, who wrote to English Cistercian abbots requesting such vestments.¹ This enthusiasm is also reflected in a Vatican inventory from 1295, where more than 113 *opus anglicanum* are listed.² Owning such pieces of craftsmanship was thus a symbol of wealth and social status.

The exhibition, ordered chronologically, was divided into seven sections: ‘Bishops and Burials’, ‘The Making of Medieval Embroidery’, ‘The Royal Court at Westminster’, ‘International Renown’, ‘The Age of Chivalry’, ‘New Directions’ and ‘Survival and Rediscovery’. These sections, and consequently the catalogue, tried to thoroughly cover the major aspects of *opus anglicanum*, such as their production (chapter 1), use (chapter 2), dissemination (chapters 3, 4 and 5), evolution (chapters 6 and 7) and rediscovery (afterword).

Among the most precious pieces on display were the fourteenth-century funeral achievements of Edward of Woodstock (1330–1376), son of Edward III and later known as the Black Prince (cat. 65). Woodstock was deemed by his contemporaries to be one of the finest English army commanders and his personal military habiliments or ‘achievements’ are a rare example of secular embroidery. The exhibition displayed his surcoat and shield, embroidered with heraldic lions and fleurs-de-lys, against a dark wall which contrasted with the now faded colours of the material. Next to these was the small enameled Dunstable Swan Jewel (cat. 70), intended as a heraldic ornament. In fact, the V&A showcased many other media alongside

embroidery, including manuscripts, panels and stained glass to highlight the pictorial interconnections between different contemporary forms of artistic production. The formulation of painting, architecture and sculpture as major art forms over decorative arts dates back to the Renaissance, and if this cleavage is still felt today, it was missing from the medieval economy of craft. The V&A's display thus subverted the classical hierarchies of genres: embroidery was the chief focus of the exhibition and other categories assumed the role of comparative materials.

Striking curatorial decisions were made to immerse visitors into a world of golden and silvery threads. The room was dimly lit, with lights positioned to vividly illuminate the pieces. From the onset, glass cases surrounded visitors and delineated the path of the exhibition, following an undulating movement like that of a suturing thread, stitching a new appreciation of *opus anglicanum*. Although materials were held inside transparent containers, it seemed the exhibition wanted to incite a chiefly sensory experience to better contextualise the vestures. If cabinets of curiosities and what Constance Classen designates as 'early museums' emphasized tactile encounters as a privileged way to gain knowledge,³ then nineteenth- and twentieth-century museums voluntarily disembodied visitors' experience, denying social and physical encounters in the collection space, as argued by Helen Rees Leahy throughout her 2012 book *Museum Bodies*.⁴ Yet, questions of embodiment have recently emerged in museological practice and art performances situated in museums.⁵ Even though direct tactility is forbidden due to the fragility of the textiles, the exhibition employed diverse strategies to provide a sensorial experience. Many cases, like that

of the Madrid Cope (cat. 31), allowed the clothing to be viewed from several sides, encouraging an awareness of one's own body in the presence of these embroideries. A majority of the vestures were displayed at human height, so that standing before the cases, viewers could see their reflections within the forms of the clothing as if wearing them. The glass barrier oscillated between isolating the object and merging it with the viewer by way of its reflection. The positioning of garments elicited not only the images figured on them but also the thickness, intricacy, heaviness and folds of the material, affirming the technical skills of the craft as well as evoking how *opus anglicanum* interacted with the human body. Moreover, facing such ecclesiastical vestments behind a glass repositioned the status that *opus anglicanum* had for most of the medieval population: magnificent but distant habiliments of rich clerics.

Overall, the narrative of 'Opus Anglicanum' pushed visitors to engage with the preciousness of medieval embroidered cloth in a way that reinforced their historical status as symbols of wealth, and the technical skills required for their creation. Not only did the exhibition anchor *opus anglicanum* in its historical context, but the gallery space, by merging simultaneous distance and proximity to the body, also suggested a sensory experience of materials that were meant to be seen, worn and touched, but are now too fragile to be handled. In this way, the V&A proposed a specifically sensory model of presentation and highlighted the prominence of the largely forgotten works of English medieval embroidery. Prompting visitors to reconsider the craft's classification as minor art, the exhibition worked to restore its once enjoyed prestige and importance.

- 1 Henry Richards Luard (ed.), *Matthaei Parisiensis, Monachi Sancti Albani, Chronica Majora*, vol. 4, London, 1872–73, pt 3, p. 546. Cited in Julian Gardner, ‘Opus Anglicanum and its Medieval Patrons’, in Clare Browne, Glyn Davies and M.A. Michael (eds) with the assistance of Michaela Zöschg, *English Medieval Embroidery: Opus Anglicanum*, New Haven and London, 2017, 49–59, p. 51.
- 2 Bonnie Young, ‘Opus Anglicanum’, in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 29, no. 7, 1971, pp. 291–298, p. 291.
- 3 Constance Classen, ‘Museum Manners: The Sensory Life of the Early Museum’, in *Journal of Social History*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2007, pp. 895–914.
- 4 Helen Rees Leahy, *Museum Bodies: The Politics and Practices of Visiting and Viewing*, Farnham, 2012.
- 5 Karin Harrasser, ‘(Dis)playing the Museum: Artifacts, Visitors, Embodiment, and Mediality’, in Sharon Macdonald, Helen Rees Leahy (eds), *The International Handbook of Museum Studies*, vol. 3, Chichester, 2015, pp. 371–388; Laura De Caro, ‘Moulding the Museum Medium: Explorations on Embodied and Multisensory Experience in Contemporary Museum Environments’, in *ICOFOM Study Series*, vol. 43b, 2015, pp. 55–70.

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‘Jana Euler’, Cabinet, London, 19 January – 11 March 2017.

A small painting hidden in a corner of Cabinet’s new gallery space in Vauxhall sets the scene for Jana Euler’s solo exhibition: a tropical island has imploded, much like the world order in 2016. As if being sucked down into the centre of the earth, the palm tree-lined coastline has morphed into an underwater open circle, from which foul fumes emerge. That *island* (all works 2016) is framed by the gallery’s state-of-the-art smart home devices only adds to the work’s dystopian effect, nuclear warfare seemingly at the visitor’s fingertips.

Melting paradise aside, on view are eight oil paintings, roughly two by two metres each. Representation is altogether evicted from the centre of four of these paintings, all titled “ ” and unframed. Each depicts a face whose features have been evacuated to the margins of the canvas, reversing figure and ground. A smiley’s loud yellow hue, airbrushed eyes and grin are placed outside of its round outline, much like the hour marks of a wristwatch are mirrored along the outer perimeter of its empty face. Another work depicts the watch’s negative image, with the hours decreasing from twelve to one, taking up a notch the exhibition’s vertiginous distortions. But it is in the painting of a woman’s body that Euler’s centrifugal method of composition is at its most eccentric. Here too the figure’s facial features have been folded over the edges of a central vacuum, so that blown-up, horizontally flipped ears appear on either side; upside-down, bulging eyes on top and inverted full lips below – all rendered in a caricaturesque, hyperrealist style. Most bewildering of all, the painting’s fish-eye-like perspective shows diminutive frontal and posterior views of the nude woman’s body, unfolding from her gigantic chin and forehead respectively. The result is a grotesque doubling of the body, front and back facing each other with the pierced, Janus-faced head acting as an elastic bridge, flesh stretched over the skin of the canvas like a drumhead.

Such bodily contortions should not surprise anyone familiar with Euler’s paintings of the last five years, which have often featured hyper-flexible, airbrushed figures trying to squeeze into serpentine architectural models, as well as disparate body parts coalescing in inchoate anatomies. This plasticity partly reflects the malleability of the image in