

Embroideries and the Stuart Period

Dr Giovanna Vitelli in conversation with Dr John West

www.stuarts-online.com

John West: So I'm here with Dr Giovanna Vitelli, director of the university engagement programme at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and we are looking at some seventeenth-century embroideries. I think these are really fascinating objects because of the way they seem to marry quite public political imagery with the personal domestic ideas in seventeenth-century England. These are all embroideries that contain images of stories from the Old Testament, and they particularly focus on Biblical kings and idea of Biblical kingship. But unlike say a piece of delftware or a coronation medal, objects that were mass produced and seen by quite a wide audience, these embroideries are one-offs. They're unique. They're produced in a domestic space designed for an audience of only a handful of family members, friends, or visitors to a household. Giovanna, can you start by telling us a little bit about who actually made these embroideries?

Giovanna Vitelli: Yes, I think the first thing to distinguish is that the embroideries we're going to be looking at were made by young women. There were also professional embroiderers of course, who were employed by wealthy people to embroider, for example, articles of clothing. The interesting thing about these specific embroideries and the collection at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford is that they are the products of individual hands, young hands likely to have been either educated at a school, at a boarding school where they were given a certain set of skills that enabled them, as it were, to develop their feminine attributes and make themselves more valued and valuable in the eyes of both their households and others.

JW: We don't always know the identity of the people who made each of these embroideries, do we? But we have an example like the Mallet Casket here in the Ashmolean where we do actually get a glimpse of who made this and what it meant to them, don't we?

GV: Yes, I think the Mallet Casket, which shows scenes from the life of Abraham is particularly interesting. It comes with documentation. It is one of the very few items we have that documents not only the provenance of the piece, but something which I think even more fascinating: it's the attribution of an embroidered piece to a specific person so much so that embroideries were clearly considered to be highly personalized objects that were closely identified with the individual. And if we look at [169] this tag, what it reads is 'this cabinet was made by my mother's grandmother, who was educated at Hackney school after the plague in London. All the young ladies' works were', and as you can see from the image the word 'burnt' is crossed out, 'all the young ladies works were destroyed that they were about at that time': and 'that they were about' means 'what they were doing' at the time. 'She left school soon after. Therefore this was made that these before 1665', which of course is the date of the great plague. And then the actual scrap of paper goes on to talk about another item and then talk about, as it were, the pedigree of the of the piece and how it was handed down from

generation to generation. And this is quite unusual. But what's absolutely fascinating about this is the connection the really tight connection between a young woman's output and her identity.

JW: So you've explained beautifully how these are intensely personal pieces. But what I also find very fascinating about them is that they also seem to be picking up on themes and symbols from public life. So each embroidery is showing scenes from the lives of key biblical figures, and many of them are kings, so in the casket we have the life of Abraham, Abraham was a key model of kingship in the Old Testament. We also have embroideries of the proclamation of Solomon. James I was compared to Solomon a lot. We also have images of King David, and King Charles was of course known as David. Do you think that when a young woman came to make an embroidery like this, and they made choices about what they were going to depict, they may have consciously started to look to those symbols from the political world around them.

GV: Yes, the actual biblical or classical themes that were chosen, as it were, for centrepieces, were chosen from a wide range of pattern books that were in circulation at the time. They may not have necessarily been chosen by the young woman herself. It may have been a family choice. It may have reflected political or social messages that were that the family wish to have transmitted. And as we appreciate, anything from the Mallet Casket which was at the time of the plague, or indeed looking at another embroidery such as the David and Bathsheba embroidery, which dated from an earlier period, the politics behind the family's position may have been expressed through the choice of biblical narrative. But what is interesting is the way in which the theme was illustrated by the individual young woman, and indeed these surrounding, if you want I wouldn't call them peripheral, but the surrounding motifs on any embroidery which are so rich and so varied would have likely been more in the purview of the girl or young woman to have chosen herself. For example in this particular embroidery of Ahazuerus receiving Esther, what we have is a really interesting set of motifs that actually surround the principal characters in the centre.

JW: So the story of a Ahazuerus and Esther and Haman comes from the book of Esther in the Old Testament. And Haman is the king's counsellor, And the king orders that all should bow before Haman, as his chief counsellor. But one person refuses to bow before Haman: that's Mordechai. And in response Haman says that Mordechai should be condemned to death. But not just Mordechai. All of the Jewish people. But Esther herself is Jewish. So she eventually convinces her husband to spare Mordechai's life and in the end Haman is killed in Mordechai's place. And interestingly in the very corner of this embroidery, you have this image of a man being hung from a gibbet. And that is Haman, isn't it. Now, this is a fascinating embroidery because if you look very very closely at the two pillars in the middle, behind King Ahazuerus, there is actually a very faint date: it's 1654, I think. So, this is a piece from the middle of the 1650s where you have a story about God's retribution against somebody who would try to destroy his people. I wonder if there's a slight glance to, you know, what might yet come to those people who have killed a king, perhaps, or challenged a king.

GV: It's difficult because these pieces of course lack documentation and understanding of choice. But that that is not a bad hypothesis. What's also interesting is that the individual characters in this biblical narrative are portrayed more or less on an equal social scale, at least the four front ones. So there's an interesting there's an interesting contrast, if you want, to say something like the David and Bathsheba, where items of dress (and in fact many embroideries the articles of dress and their position within the composition often reinforce, demonstrate and

reinforce social status) so this slightly, and again this is an interpretation, but it's it is slightly different and is, I think, reflective of the period. The time investment alone was extraordinary for any one piece, and it gives rise to the thought that, you know what, when these girls were sitting there working, was this was almost an opportunity for them to meditate on the topic at hand? And this is why I think that David and Bathsheba embroidery in particular is really fascinating because if you're sitting there working your hundred hours on your embroidery, what are you thinking about as a young woman when you're presented with this moral tale?

JW: In the case of David and Bathsheba, what is that moral tale, as you say, that the person creating this embroidery is dwelling upon?

GV: Well there's two ways of looking at this, Bathsheba was bathing out of doors and had undressed. She's naked and is being spied upon by King David, who lusts after her even though, of course, she's married and her husband Uriah is one of David's most prized generals. David having lusted after Bathsheba, who is, parading herself out in the open, sleeps with her, makes her pregnant, and then realizes that he has to cover up. So he invites Uriah to come back from the battlefield and encourages him, to take shore leave and sleep with his own wife. Uriah, ever the man, ever the soldier, says absolutely not. Well this causes a small problem for David inasmuch as he can't cover up any longer. So he arranges for Uriah to be killed in battle and then suffers the guilt, the remorse, and the consequences of that action in the bottom right hand panel of this. So if you follow it around, Bathsheba at front and centre. David seen slightly back from the action in the top left. He then commands Uriah to come back from the battlefield in the bottom left. Uriah is killed in battle (top right). The remorse and the guilt sets in (bottom right). But right at the centre constantly, at perhaps the forefront of a young woman's thoughts is Bathsheba in her in her pool. But imagine us embroidering, imagine a young lady embroidering, dozens of hours on a piece like this. But is Bathsheba being immodest? Is she inviting this attention? Is it likely to have reflected the current state of women in public in the Restoration? This is exactly the time of actress appearing on the stage, images of mistress being circulated in engravings and in paintings throughout polite society at the time. What would be a young woman's takeaway from this? Am I responsible by being immodest, for the gazes of otherwise pure and noble men? Or can we, and this is where it gets a little bit subversive, but could we think of David also as being predatory? And does this fit into a society which was, speaking of Restoration, trying to restore morals, trying to restore ideals, trying again to anchor society in some of the principles and values that were supposed to be reflected in something like this, ostensibly reflected in something like this embroidery.

JW: Yeah, I mean I was thinking as you described this story about the visibility of women post 1660, as you say. Women are on the public stage and some of those actresses being mistresses of Charles II as well. Nell Gwynn for example.

GV: Nell Gwynn, sure.

JW: You know, this seems to be an embroidery where you can imagine the person making it dwelling on the story but making those links out to the kind of gossip and rumour out in the city, about the behaviour of a king, like King David, who feels very highly sexed. So really I mean these are interesting, these biblical narratives, they could be guides for society order and kinds of behaviour for women. But there's also a chance that it gives these women, creators of these embroideries, a chance to reflect upon stories that in turn might trigger them to think about contemporary issues, contemporary concerns, anxieties even about women in society, women

in connection to the political world.