

Blackwork: a history of the Museum aan de Stroom

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Port museum, container vessel

1

Blackwork is a very old form of counted-thread embroidery probably rooted in Morocco. The Moors moved into southern Spain in the 8th century influencing the needlework of Toledo, Almeria, and Andalusia. Most sources credit Katharine of Aragon for introducing Blackwork to England when she came to marry King Henry VIII in 1509, thus making her portraits -made by mostly unknown painters- the most recognized blackwork imagery, although it was Juan de Borgoña the first painter to depict blackwork-embroidered garments. For this reason, during this period the technique was known as "Spanish work". By an Act of Parliament, only the elite wore such attire. Nevertheless, this lasted only until Katharine's divorce from King Henry in 1533; afterwards, it was simply called "Blackwork", popularized in less expensive fabrics and traded.

2

Blackwork was not only decorative, but served a purpose to reinforce cuffs and hems; for this purpose, it was useful that the design can be worked so

that it is the same on the top and on the bottom of fabric. Besides, the embroidery thread was black to help disguise dirt.

3

In the 16th century, Queen Elizabeth encouraged the improvement of book production. In 1533 one of the first embroidery pattern books was printed in England. It was entitled "Moryssche & Damaschin renewed and increased very profitable for Goldsmiths and Embroiderers", although a modern translation might read "Moresque and Damascene patterns suitable for goldsmiths and embroiderers". Printed by Thomas Geminus, the book, featuring arabesque designs in copper-engraved plates, was quickly popular among Blackwork embroiderers, popularizing the technique. At the same time, several books illustrating the strange flora and animals English traders and explorers were discovering in the New World were printed and traded alongside Geminus', thus helping Blackwork garments be traded all across Europe.

4

Thomas Geminus was in fact was a pseudonym for Thomas Lambric (1510 - 1562), a Flemish refugee in London, émigré from Lys-les-Lannoy near

Lille, in the portion of Flanders currently part of France. He practised as a medical surgeon, as well as a printer and engraver: his most famous book is "The byrth of Mankinde", the best English language reference book on midwifery in the 1500s. Much of Lambrit's private life and migration background is obscure; it is only recorded circa 1533 at an address in Blackfriars, an area in south-west London that derives its name from the black garments used by Dominican Friars who had moved its priory to the area in 1254.

5

1254 marks the opening of the first indoor trade market in Antwerp, the economic center of Flanders in the Middle Ages. The Vleeshuis (literally "meat house"), right next to the castle, functioned as a slaughterhouse and commercial center, through which the city was able to regulate the industry by limiting the number of butchers permitted to sell to 52. John I, Duke of Brabant recognized the guild of Antwerp butchers, thus becoming the oldest -and wealthiest- trade guild in Antwerp.

6

By the XVI century, the Vleeshuis had become too small and very neglected, so in 1533 a new building was erected. In 1796, during the French occupation, the guilds were abolished, and three years later the building was sold to the winemaker Peyrot. As he did not need all the space, he divided the interior into a storage area, a theatre auditorium, and studios on the upper floors, used by painters including Nicaise de Keyser and Gustave Wappers, and the organ builder Joseph Delhaye.

7

By the 18th century, Blackwork started to fall out of use; for this reason, it never really got established in America.

8

In 1899 the Antwerp city council purchased the Vleeshuis building for a home for the municipal archives, but soon after, the Provincial Commission for Monument Conservation decided to re-purpose the building as a Museum of Antiquities, opening as a museum in 1913, containing some 80,000 objects and becoming the oldest collection in Antwerp. Its collection included metals, ceramics, iconography, architecture and musical instruments.

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An institutional mamushka ; the larger doll is Saturn

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In 2011, the city of Antwerp decided to unify the Vleeshuis museum with the Ethnographic Museum, the National Maritime Museum, the Folk Museum, a collection of museum harbour cranes, the Paul and Dora Janssen pre-Columbian art collection, and the coordination of all cultural heritage items from or in the city, under a sole new institution: The Museum aan de Stroom, MAS.

Lieve Willekens, member of the curatorial team, head of Heritage and Diversity: "We decided to unify all collections and create new stories, skipping those museums: it doesn't matter what collection they came from."

10

In the 1980s, Flanders was centuries past their time of splendour. Eilandje, Antwerp's port area, once the center of trade, was a site of neglect, abundant with squats, prostitutes and drugs. Looking down from the undulating windows of the MAS, Quique points down the place where he first played punkrock, where he first picked his arm. "I was a youngster exiled from

Buenos Aires. La Barceloneta and then Eilandje, expats and punk rock, it seemed fine for a stressed-out port city boy". Only 20 years later Quique would realize the port item he had to pick to make a life was not punk but Tango and Murga.

Lieve Willekens: "The most radical intervention MAS makes on its surroundings is just to be there. This was a rough area: poor people, migrants, everything. Just putting MAS here, it completely changed. It is chic now.

- Does MAS have a relationship with the people affected by this gentrification process, those who had to move?
- People didn't *have* to move. It's just a natural process that people move."

Radical intervention: displacement

11

The smallest object in MAS's collection is a black Aztec ring, displayed on the eighth floor. Outside the exhibition room, in the large hallways, Quique leads a fake Mariachi band, composed by members of Los Murginales, the Antwerp-based Murga of which he is conductor. A few days in advance of the Mexican holiday, The Day of the Dead is celebrated in the context of the association between MAS and the local Mestizo Arts Festival. A migrant artist has been chosen to create an altar, collecting all sorts of objects from the urban area.

Near the omnipresent weaving windows, Mestizo Arts Festival director Gerardo Salinas -Argentinean, son of a disappeared peronist militant- holds a microphone and proudly states that for the following two years, the commissioned artist for the altar will be Aimée Zito Lema, daughter of the former peronist militant Vicente, exiled to Flanders during the country's last *coup d'état*.

Meanwhile, in the ground floor offices, Lieve Willekens lays out the plans for a new collection: one in which Antwerp inhabitants donate what they consider as their cultural heritage.

12

The second floor at MAS is called "Kijkdepot", visible storage. As a peephole to its vast, highly varied collection, the Museum displays miniature exhibitions in transparent vitrines. Small-sized antique books with copper-engraved plates share its containers with Chinese goods and items from First World War trenches. At the end of the hall, behind massive glass walls, the collection offers a hint of its volume in racks, cabinets and walls crammed with valuable objects. There, in a drawer, filed under the number AE.3540, rests an embroidered collar from the times of Queen Elizabeth.

13

Most frequently, relationships between museums evolve around the trading of objects. They barter and reciprocate, import and export, sell and acquire, tour and store, lend and more often than not bargain items from their collections.

When it's not objects, museums trade people.

14

- Has MAS ever been involved in an act of contraband, be it metaphorically speaking?

- No. What do you mean? Sorry, I can't think of anything. Not yet, no.

Bibliography:

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Entrevista a Sofia Dourron por Demian Orosz", in

<http://unidadbasicamuseo.org/2017/07/04/la-ene-laboratorio-conceptual-y-museo-mutante/>

Lieve Willekens (July 2017). Personal interview.

Google

Printed on transparency film.

Covers: Counted-thread embroidery on laser-cut plexiglas.

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