

**John Styles, *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital's Textile Tokens, 1740–1770*. London, The Foundling Museum, 2010, 72 pp., 61 colour illus., \$12 Cdn, ISBN: 9780955180859**

Ellen L. Ramsay

Volume 36, numéro 1, 2011

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066754ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066754ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

#### Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

#### ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

#### Citer ce compte rendu

Ramsay, E. L. (2011). Compte rendu de [John Styles, *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital's Textile Tokens, 1740–1770*. London, The Foundling Museum, 2010, 72 pp., 61 colour illus., \$12 Cdn, ISBN: 9780955180859]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 36(1), 65–68.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1066754ar>

livre et les courtes notices biographiques composées par Anne-Élisabeth Vallée et Marie-Eve Beaupré permettent de ne pas rester sur notre faim en proposant des lectures et des informations complémentaires sur l'art des femmes du Québec.

Le regard critique que posent tant Trépanier que Landry sur l'histoire de l'art québécois et sur les œuvres présentées dans le cadre des deux expositions se doit d'être souligné. Par exemple, bien que les collections du MNBAQ soient riches de quelque 2600 œuvres réalisées par des femmes, Trépanier souligne l'absence d'artistes importantes, telles que Prudence Heward (1896–1947), Kathleen Moir Morris (1893–1986) et Ethel Seath (1879–1963), des collections du Musée tout autant que de l'exposition présentée à l'été 2009 (p. 15). Heureusement, Trépanier a pu rectifier le tir dans son essai et ainsi aborder l'art de ces femmes dans les pages du présent catalogue, tout en intégrant des reproductions d'œuvres qui n'avaient pu être montrées dans l'exposition, comme c'est le cas de *Au théâtre* (1928) et de *Au café (Portrait de Mabel Lockerby)* (avant 1930) de Heward, deux œuvres conservées au Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal.

Pour sa part, lorsque Landry aborde le caractère introspectif de certaines œuvres analysées, comme c'est le cas de *La Salle de classe* (1977–80) réalisées par Irene Whittome (née en 1942) ou de *Parfum* (1991) de Geneviève Cadieux (née en 1955), par exemple, le commissaire avertit son lecteur du danger d'y associer essentialisme et stéréotypes. Loin d'adhérer à une vision réductrice de l'introspection féminine, l'auteur explique que cette autoréflexion semble être utilisées par les artistes de la seconde moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle afin « [...] d'investiguer les divers ordres symboliques, et ce, à des fins critiques » (p. 154).

En terminant, en plus d'être la première synthèse sur l'art des femmes artistes québécoises ayant œuvré au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, le catalogue d'Esther Trépanier et de Pierre Landry inaugure la nouvelle collection « Arts du Québec ». Comme le souligne Trépanier, cette collection a été inaugurée afin de proposer « [...]

des livres qui ouvriront de nouvelles perspectives sur l'art d'ici » et misera aussi sur la diversité de l'art québécois, ainsi que sur la pluralité des médiums et des approches de l'histoire de l'art, en proposant « [...] des éclairages nouveaux, convoquant des dimensions historiques, sociologiques, thématiques ou esthétiques inédites » (p. 7). Il s'agit donc d'une collection à la fois prometteuse et bienvenue pour une discipline en pleine effervescence, celle de l'histoire de l'art québécois.

JULIE ANNE GODIN LAVERDIÈRE  
Université du Québec à Montréal

#### Notes

- 1 Esther Trépanier, « Les femmes, l'art et la presse francophone montréalaise de 1915 à 1930 », *Annales d'histoire de l'art canadien*, vol. 18, no 1, 1997, p. 68–80.
- 2 Esther Trépanier, *Femmes peintres à l'aube de la modernité montréalaise, œuvres de la collection du Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal*, Montréal, Musée des beaux-arts de Montréal / Conseil des arts de la Communauté urbaine de Montréal, 1997, 4 feuillets, [n. p.].
- 3 Esther Trépanier, *Marian Dale Scott : pionnière de l'art moderne*, Québec, Musée du Québec, 2000, 301 p.
- 4 Voir la bibliographie à la fin de *Femmes artistes du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle au Québec*, p. 276–84. Outre les ouvrages généraux portant sur l'art des femmes du Québec, cette bibliographie propose aussi des titres dédiés spécifiquement au travail d'artistes étudiées dans le cadre de l'exposition.
- 5 Trépanier annonçait toutefois sa démission de son poste de direction le 9 mars 2011. L'historienne de l'art effectuera un retour à l'enseignement en réintégrant son poste de professeure à l'Université du Québec à Montréal en septembre 2011.
- 6 Ceci est vrai pour l'homme tout autant que pour la femme artiste.
- 7 Le Musée du Québec prend le nom de Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec en 2002.

John Styles, *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital's Textile Tokens, 1740–1770*. London, The Foundling Museum, 2010, 72 pp., 61 colour illus., \$12 Cdn, ISBN: 9780955180859.

During the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century, London went through a small renaissance of new small private museums as well as the refurbishment and extension of older public museums. Smaller social history museums, with a diverse collection of artifacts from music to art, saw their way to fruition after many years of planning. The museum of interest here, the Foundling Museum, was established as a foundation in 1998 and opened its doors in 2004, adding to the over dozen museums that line Lon-

don's Museum Mile from King's Cross Station to the Thames River and the more than three hundred museums located in London.

The Foundling Museum is dedicated to the London Foundling Hospital, which was established in 1739 and remained in operation until 1954 as a home for over twenty thousand of London's deserted children. The founding governors of the hospital included the philanthropist Captain Thomas Coram, the artist William Hogarth, and the composer George Frideric Handel. Hogarth exhibited and donated art as part of the fundraising for the hospital, while Handel held regular concerts on behalf of the charity, including the annual production of his oratorio *Messiah*.

Today the Foundling Museum, located at 40 Brunswick Square, adjacent to the site of the original hospital, offers a steady stream of small but excellent exhibitions for the general public, many including art works of interest to the art-historical community. The museum houses a permanent art collection, including significant portraits and prints by William Hogarth, and hosts regular exhibitions by contemporary artists and children that act as a link between the museum and the art community in London. Recently the museum held an exhibit entitled *Handel, the Philanthropist* (2010), consisting of various visual artifacts relating to Handel, including paintings, prints, and manuscripts dating from the eighteenth century. The Coram Foundation, a childcare charity, now cares for the museum and promises to continue an excellent range of exhibitions.

*Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital's Textile Tokens, 1740–1770* (14 October 2010–6 March 2011) was an exhibition curated by John Styles, a historian specializing in the history of everyday objects of the eighteenth century. John Styles, a research professor in history at the University of Hertfordshire, is an authority on design and decorative arts.

For art and design historians, the significance of the *Threads of Feeling* exhibition catalogue lies in its insight into the approximately five thousand tokens of everyday fabric that were deposited with the children at the hospital from the mid-eighteenth century. This is the largest collection of fabric of its kind in Britain, and possibly the world, and Styles provides a good overview of the range and quality of fabric and design in the period. While other museums exhibit some of the silks worn by the wealthy in the period (for example, the Victoria and Albert Museum), this collection of fabrics and garments demonstrates the breadth and depth of everyday textiles available to working women around the time of James Hargreaves' spinning jenny (1764) and Richard Arkwright's spinning frame (1768). This exhibition and its catalogue virtually eradicate every stereotype about poverty and fashion, and suggest that even the poorest woman developed an individual fashion sense by selecting bright and beautiful textiles from the many available in the era.

The preservation of the fabric, which makes this collection unique, is discussed in the catalogue. Women depositing their children with the charity were asked to provide a token to pin to the child's billet for future identification. Even though few of the children were reclaimed, their mothers expressed intent by leaving such a token. Where abandonment was complete and the mother was not present, the hospital staff cut a swath of cloth from the swaddling material found with the child to pin to the billet. These were then carefully folded within the billet. In the nineteenth century the tokens were interlaced in billet books at a time when the archives was opened and some of the larger objects were placed on display. The Coram Trust now has access to two hundred and fifty metres of entry books for

the children, including the textiles, stored safely at the London Metropolitan Archives in the City of London. Due to careful archiving of the fabrics by the hospital, the textiles remain in remarkable condition and some of those reproduced in the catalogue are seeing the first light of day since their storage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Styles discovered that the majority of the tokens left with the children were swatches of textile, one-third were decorative ribbons, and the rest were items of needlework, baby clothes, and other material objects (rings, locks, and keys). Styles states that the sheer quantity of patterned and colourful fabric sheds new light on assumptions about everyday fabrics for the historian. He located no less than forty different named fabrics, including many no longer familiar today. Calico, flannel, gingham, satin, and silk may be familiar to the reader; however, camblet, fustian, susy, cherryderry, calimanco, and linsey-woolsey may no longer be so well known. Styles states that the sheer quantity and variety of colourful fabrics breaks the stereotype that the poor only had access to plain, dull textiles.

To be sure, there were samples of the cheapest fabrics of the day in the collection, including Russian cloth and brown linen, but a parish overseer rather than a mother had probably purchased these. More popular for working women were coarse serges, shalloons, bay, camlets, and worsted cloths available at two shillings a yard. Most popular, however, were printed cottons and linens, and Indian chintzes costing two shillings or more per yard. These came in many designs and were washable because they were colourfast. Less common, but still visible in the collection, were silk fabrics costing five to six shillings per yard and occasionally a Spitalfields dress normally only worn by grand ladies. The popular printed cotton and linens were designed with stripes and checks and the more expensive but still affordable fabrics were designed with flower buds, acorns, sprigs, birds, butterflies, and shells. Heart designs were very popular as well, and despite the large number of fabrics in the collection there was seldom any repetition of design.

The uniqueness of so many of the designs is significant because between 1741 and 1760 a provincial textile shop selling inexpensive textiles would have only thirty named fabrics in stock. The Foundling textiles demonstrate, however, a collection of over forty named fabrics. This indicates that even a poor woman sought unique designs and went from shop to shop to find the fabric of her choice. This forms part of Styles' main argument in the catalogue. Other writers on fashion have tended to assume that poor women had only a few textiles to choose from and that they always chose the cheapest fabrics. The Foundling textiles however indicate that women developed their own taste and style and invested their money in fabrics of their choice, extending well beyond the cheapest textiles. *Threads of Feeling* therefore changes past assumptions about ev-

eryday textiles of the poor, as well as assumptions about the shopping habits of women, giving them a much more active role in their clothing selection. The catalogue amply reproduces a variety of named fabrics and a good selection of different patterns. The curator has made a judicious selection of images for the small catalogue.

Styles notes in the catalogue that most of the fabrics were commercially produced and only a few were hand embroidered. This illustrates the expansion of the textile industry and the democratization of fashion in the mid-eighteenth century. Now poorer working women could follow fashion or establish their own taste, whether it was with a full-length gown (the priciest object) or a short bed gown worn overtop of other garments. While silk had sheen, delicacy and vibrancy of colour, linen and cotton had both colour and endurance. The cotton printing technique came to England from India in the later seventeenth century and soon English textile manufacturers were incorporating the print and design technique into their own fabrics. Now cream and even white grounds could be used and easily cleaned in the communal laundry houses of the day. While they cost more than plainer darker woollens and worsteds, they outnumbered them. Foundling collection textiles were usually printed with a single colour contrast and dots were used extensively as a pattern created by nails hammered into the wooden printing block.

The exhibition catalogue is divided into seven chapters, five dealing with the textiles (textiles, fashion, ribbons, baby clothes, and needlework), an introduction that sets the historical context for the collection, and a conclusion that emphasizes the emotive power of the tokens. Given the size of the catalogue, this arrangement of chapters seems adequate to the subject at hand. The organization flows naturally from chapter to chapter and Styles uses his visual material to illustrate the theme of each chapter. The author's overall argument about the uniqueness of this collection of fabrics seems borne out by the material at hand, and his arrangement of subjects flows naturally from the selection of textiles in the collection.

John Styles dedicates one chapter in *Threads of Feeling* to silk ribbons due to the plentiful nature of these ribbons in the Foundling collection. Ribbons were versatile for decorations on hats, sleeves, and gowns. Beautiful ribbons added a touch of luxury for only a few pence and were associated with love and courtship. At a time when poorer women were often illiterate, the ribbons conveyed a visually emotive message to the child and the governors. Sometimes a heart was used as a design on a billet. One heart in the collection was cut in half, with the mother keeping the other half until she and her child were reunited. Sometimes the ribbons were tied into loveknots, described by Samuel Johnson in his *Dictionary* of 1755. While there was no colour association between male and female in the

tokens, there *was* a distinction in the way the knot was tied. A topknot (a loose-knotted ribbon with strands hanging below) was used for girls, and a cockade (a circular rosette) for boys.

According to Styles, the fact that most of the fabrics were commercially produced and sold in shops indicates the tremendous growth of the textile trade during the period. It also challenges the assumption that needlework was universal among working women. Much of the embroidery, when it does appear, is very rudimentary and may have been done to leave a distinguishing mark on the garment for the communal laundry. Evidently, commercially produced fabrics were desired over handmade and decorated fabrics and sewing skills were not so widespread as previously thought.

While the exhibition catalogue is quite small, it contains an abundant number of small and large colour illustrations. Most of the illustrations depict the different varieties of textiles and printed designs and correspond with the descriptive text in the volume. This makes the volume easy to use as a small reference work, although it is merely suggestive of the much larger collection of five thousand textiles. Some of the fabrics in the catalogue have been enlarged so that the texture and the design can be easily discerned. While there has been fading on some of the tokens, Styles has elected to keep the colours as close as possible to the original condition rather than digitally enhancing them. As a result it is possible to judge how colourfast the various fabrics were.

Some of the best-preserved textiles, as it turns out, were indeed the cotton and linen prints. The textiles are shown pinned to the original billets, and so those interested in antiquaries may get a glimpse of eighteenth-century pins. Some swatches of silk have also survived quite well despite not being colourfast, and some of the finest detail can still be found on the "flowering linen" samples printed with stems, flowers, and leaves. The less expensive worsteds, in darker shades, have also survived quite well.

In addition to the textiles, Styles has included in the catalogue a variety of eighteenth-century artworks from the Foundling collection. One detail from a print illustrates the lottery selection process used when the places for children at the Hospital were limited. A woman is shown placing her arm into a large bag to draw a coloured ball that would determine whether her baby was accepted into the Foundling Hospital. A white ball indicated admission, a black ball indicated rejection, and a red ball meant the baby went on a waiting list. There is a full view of the hospital published according to an Act of Parliament by Laurie and Whittle of Fleet Street in 1794 after the original of 1750. A detail from a colour print of *The Female Orators* (1768) by John Collet is used to show the colour and design of a working woman's clothing. Here we see quite clearly the attention paid to the woman's attire, from bonnet to shoes, with textiles

suggesting bright yellow, blue, and red printed linen or cotton. There is a printed poem describing the elaborate use of ribbons in the period for decorating hats and there are details from Hogarth's work showing the use of ribbon cockades.

The catalogue provides the reader with glimpses of the billets themselves for those interested in this aspect of material culture. The ink handwriting, as to be expected from the century, is quite exquisite, expressing the pride of being literate. The billets record basic information about the child including the gender, date of deposit, clothing worn when received, and a token. Some of the billets have letters of intent from the mothers attached to them, although these are few and perhaps penned by a hireling or friend, according to Styles.

Some of the tokens, such as rings, bracelets, locks of hair, etc., are permanently on display in the Foundling Museum and not included in the catalogue due to its focus on fabric. The fact

that the Foundling Hospital kept meticulous records for hundreds of years is testimony to the earnestness of the patrons and governors, including Hogarth and Handel, who considered the hospital to be a worthwhile charity. Today the Foundling Museum helps to fill a gap in the history of everyday life in England from the early eighteenth century to the 1950s.

*Threads of Feeling* is an abundantly illustrated small volume, leaving the reader with the desire to pursue the subject further, especially the specialist in eighteenth and nineteenth century art and design. The catalogue is small but proportional to the size of the exhibition, and it is therefore hoped that John Styles will be incorporating more of his discoveries from the Foundling textiles into one of his forthcoming books.

ELLEN L. RAMSAY  
York University

Anne Whitelaw, Brian Foss, and Sandra Paikowsky, eds., *The Visual Arts in Canada: The Twentieth Century*. Toronto, Oxford University Press, 2010, 496 pp., 185 colour illus., hardcover \$85, soft cover \$60 (available August 2011), ISBN: 9780195434590.

A recurring challenge faces all survey projects—be they books, exhibitions, archives, or any media products that claim a national scope and, in this case, a large timeframe like the twentieth century. How many projects and producers (meaning artists, curators, critics or historians, dealers, and key patrons) who over the years have received acclaim for their contributions might we reasonably expect to make an appearance in an updated survey text? Is there any point in suggesting that those who produced the history of art are sitting periodically watching the serial drama of the writing of the history of art? The hypothetical audience numbers are dizzying. With the topic being the twentieth century, knowledge-holders could include any living recognized practitioners 85 years or younger, which in effect means anyone working in the 1940s to the present day.

The editors of the *The Visual Arts in Canada* are fully aware of the messiness and tensions of a historiography that treads in and out of a space of post-representational politics. Some of the chapter authors openly engage in discussions of “missing histories.”<sup>1</sup> A self-announced achievement appearing in the introduction states that this book “offers the most comprehensive survey ever published of the richness of Canadian art production and reception during this period” (p. xiii). Thus a big topic—resisting while furthering the construction of an art history that represents the nation state—connects with a big publisher, Ox-

ford University Press. With subsequent revised editions, this OUP book will be in print for a long time.

The book opens with a reflective introduction underlining that each author was given “complete freedom” to define the “methodological underpinnings” of their chapters with a mix of chronological approaches and analyses “configured along the lines of ethnology or social activism” (p. xiv). Without naming which chapters default, the old synthesis habits of our disciplinary practices are clearly evident, and I say this sympathetically. Representations of what the introduction refers to as “notions of group, regional, and national identity” (p. xiv) lead us to a familiar road movie approach to survey synthesis writing where the chapter narrative names exemplary artists, exhibitions, et cetera, as it accelerates or swerves from one region and timeframe to another. You can almost hear the scoring pings on the pinball machine counter. What tilts this machine is when the unexpected as opposed to the expected exclusions become too many, too obvious, or too visible. For example, given that it has been a hub of artistic innovation and organization as well as an exporter of arts administrators and policy bureaucrats, it is hard to understand why Quebec City in particular keeps being short-changed within written national art history surveys.

This book brings together new essays by twenty scholars known for past writings on topics they return to here. The contents of *The Visual Arts in Canada* are as follows. Anne Whitelaw's “Art Institutions in the Twentieth Century” (chapter 1) opens the book with Laurier Lacroix's “Writing Art History in the Twentieth Century” (chapter 20) closing it. There are seven chapters specifically dedicated to a history of painting and related themes by Brian Foss (chapter 2), Charles C. Hill (chapter 3), Gerta