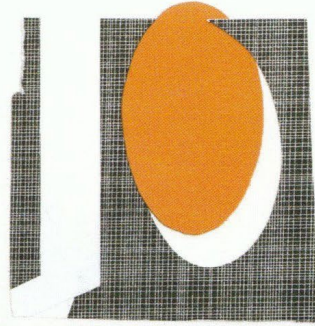


HEAT EXCHANGE

Artists Exchanging Energy





SUSAN CROSS

In 2014 I was invited to give a presentation to the Friends of the National Galleries, Edinburgh. My chosen theme was to research into 16th & 17th century jewellery in historical portraiture; examining its status, significance & symbolism. What particularly caught my jeweller's eye was the exquisite detail and fine craftsmanship that went into the embellishment of the clothes, in particular Elizabethan blackwork embroidery.

Elizabethan blackwork embroidery is a distinct genre of decorative needlework that dates from 16th and early 17th centuries. It was first introduced during the reign of Henry VIII and is also known as Spanish work, believed to have migrated to England and being made popular by Catherine of Aragon.

In parallel, suits of steel armour were often embellished with combinations of engraving, punched tool work, gilding and latterly acid etched to emulate the richly decorative surfaces of woven brocades and embroidered cloth.

The extraordinary effect of blackwork embroidery owes its distinctiveness to the contrast of black silk thread worked on white linen. New stitching styles were developed such as the 'speckled stitch' inspired by woodblock printing.

Studying this embroidery I noticed the random disappearance of the black silk. Due to the high thread count of the woven linen, the embroiderer's needle and thread indelibly punctured the cloth. Further investigation revealed that iron was used as a mordant to fix the black dye. The natural corrosive properties of iron have meant that over time the black silk is self-destructing, thereby leaving behind perforated cloth and a trace of a past age.