

Institution: University of Hertfordshire
Unit of Assessment: Panel D (30): History
Title of case study: Threads of Feeling: Exhibiting the Foundling Textiles
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>‘Threads of Feeling’, a major exhibition of the textile tokens left with abandoned infants at the London Foundling Hospital in the mid-eighteenth century, was curated and based on original research by Professor John Styles. Displayed at the London Foundling Museum in 2010–11, it received 19,132 visitors in six months. A permanent online presence from 2011 extended its reach, and when it travelled to the USA in 2013, a further 46,619 people saw it over two months. Its public popularity, enthusiastic critical reception and role in inspiring textile practitioners in particular have all ensured significant public awareness of this previously little known aspect of social history.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>The initial research into the textiles that led to the ‘Threads of Feeling’ exhibition (2010–11) was undertaken as a crucial component of a broader project on clothes, fashion and the plebeian consumer in England, 1660–1830. The work was carried out by Styles between late 2004 and early 2006 as Research Professor in History at the University of Hertfordshire, with the support of a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship, and resulted in his book <i>The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England</i> (2007). Subsequently, an AHRC Knowledge Transfer Fellowship, awarded in 2008, enabled him to conduct additional work on all 5,000 Foundling Textiles, generating the research underpinning the ‘Threads of Feeling’ exhibition and its associated outputs.</p> <p>The 1980s and 1990s witnessed an explosion of research into consumption and its history, with a particular focus on eighteenth-century Britain. A key priority was to identify markets for the goods that flooded out of the factories and workshops of the early British Industrial Revolution. Yet scholars engaged only very intermittently with the experience of the majority of the population: the labouring poor, and those small farmers and tradespeople who stood immediately above them in the social hierarchy. The principal reason was a drastic shortage of evidence. In the absence of readily available sources, historians who debated the emergence of a consumer society in eighteenth-century Britain often concluded that it was restricted to the aristocracy and the upper-middle classes. Styles’ <i>Dress of the People</i> remedied this omission. Employing a variety of unfamiliar sources – especially criminal records and newspaper advertisements – it demonstrated that it was not only the rich who owned new fabrics and fashions: their reach extended far down the social scale to the majority of the population.</p> <p>The most exciting, unexpected and poignant area of Styles’ research for the book turned out to be the London Foundling Hospital’s surviving textiles, which were little known before an article by Gillian Clark on infant clothing appeared in <i>Costume</i> in 1994. The hospital opened in 1741, and roughly 5,000 small pieces of fabric – chiefly colourful textiles, often cut from the foundlings’ clothes – were left by impoverished mothers along with the babies they abandoned in the 1740s and 1750s. These tokens, possibly the world’s largest collection of everyday eighteenth-century textiles, were kept by the hospital as a means of identifying the children’s parentage. They provided indispensable material evidence for Styles’ project, of a kind almost unknown in museum collections, which have tended to collect elite dress and fabrics. Especially important was the evidence they furnished that colourful printed cotton and linen fabrics were already available to poor unmarried mothers in the period before the onset of the Industrial Revolution.</p> <p>This evidential use of the Foundling Textiles was the feature most consistently praised in reviews of <i>Dress of the People</i>. Following its publication, Professor Styles identified aspects of the textiles significant for other areas of historical scholarship, in particular infant clothing and health, textile</p>

design, and the relationship between material things and the emotions. Realising that the tokens, which offered a direct, visually arresting link to each abandoned infant, were of potentially much wider interest, Styles proposed curating a public exhibition in order to share his insights into their historical significance and demonstrate their aesthetic and emotional power. The award of the AHRC fellowship enabled him to bring this project to fruition.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Publications

John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Yale University Press, 2007), i–xii, 432 pages, 130 illustrations, 37 tables.

ISBN 978-0300121193

John Styles, 'What were Cottons for in the Industrial Revolution?', in Giorgio Riello and Prasanna Parthasarathi (eds), *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 307–26. ISBN 978-0199559442

– REF2 Output

John Styles, 'Patchwork on the Page', in Sue Prichard (ed.), *Quilts 1700–2010: Hidden Histories, Untold Stories* (London: V&A Publications, 2010), pp. 49–50. ISBN 978-1851775958

Exhibition and Exhibition Publication

John Styles, 'Threads of Feeling.' Exhibition. (London Foundling Museum, October 2010–March 2011.)

John Styles, *Threads of Feeling: The London Foundling Hospital's Textile Tokens, 1740–1770* (London, The Foundling Museum, 2010), 72 pages, 60 illustrations. ISBN 978-0955180859

– REF2 Output

Quality of Research: Grants Awarded

Leverhulme Trust, 2004: A Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship awarded to Professor Styles, 1 October 2004 to 30 September 2006, to research and write *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, Yale University Press, 2007). **Award: £71,281.**

The British Academy, 2007: A British Academy Small Research Grant awarded to Professor Styles to assist with illustrations for *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, Yale University Press, 2007). **Award: £2,890.**

Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2008: An AHRC Knowledge Transfer Fellowship awarded to Professor Styles to research and curate the exhibition 'Threads of Feeling' at the Foundling Museum, London. **Award: £75,079.**

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The London Foundling Museum opened in 2004 to tell the story of the hospital and its children, yet the Foundling Textiles remained in the London Metropolitan Archives, relatively inaccessible and previously virtually unknown outside a small circle of specialists. Styles' research into the textiles, combined with his previous findings on clothes and fashion, were the basis of the 'Threads of Feeling' exhibition, which ran at the museum from October 2010 to March 2011. Attracting 19,132 visitors, it was the best-attended display since the museum's opening. It was accompanied by workshops, a lecture series, a CD of four eighteenth-century songs selected by Styles on textile-related themes, a re-creation by London Printworks Trust of one of the printed textiles, and the book written for the exhibition – *Threads of Feeling* – which sold 5,509 copies from October 2010 to July 2013.

The exhibition was extensively reviewed in specialist print and online art, antiques, fashion and crafts publications. Textile practitioners in particular credited 'Threads' as a source of creative inspiration. One Twitter user told her followers '[it] will alter your ideas of pattern, colour and poverty', while a costume designer said it was 'important work, and will add inspiration to my own costume project on Attachment Issues'. One woman wrote: 'I am inspired to finally enrol on a textiles course next month, and booked the place this morning'; another said that this 'astonishing exhibition . . . inspired me to produce some textile work!' Interest was such that the annual Stitch and Craft Show's promoters paid for four 'Threads' exhibition cases to be displayed at Olympia from 17 to 20 March 2011, a commercial show that admitted over 15,000 paying visitors. The exhibition also inspired at least two poetry anthologies: *Foundlings* (2011) and *Tokens for the Foundlings* (2012).

Visitors from Europe, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, the US and other countries left comments that suggested the exhibition's significance extended far beyond those interested in history. Words that recur over the 59 visitors' book pages, in magazine reviews, and in social media posts are: 'moving', 'inspiring', 'poignant', 'thought provoking', 'fascinating', 'upsetting', or 'sad'. But many also felt 'hopeful', and some reflected on personal experiences:

I am currently trying to 'heal' after being left by mother at four months. This was very personal and thought provoking.

or expressed empathy for others:

One of saddest things for me was that not every child could be accepted.

The poverty and desperation that must have existed . . . is what makes this story sad.

I think most people viewing those tokens instantly grasp how awful (in most cases) it must have felt to give your baby up. Or to have been abandoned.

There was also astonishment that the foundlings' story was not more widely known. One Facebooker thought the exhibition 'a fascinating view of something I didn't know about and left me wanting to revisit and find out more'; and a comment in the visitors' book simply stated: 'It should be on every school curriculum.'

The 'Threads' Facebook page increased the exhibition's reach, as did a permanent online exhibition (www.threadsoffeeing.com), which received 11,600 visits in the first six months (approximately 6,000 being from the USA and 2,000 from the UK) and was rated one of the five most innovative cultural websites by the *Daily Telegraph* in 2011. The Foundling Museum visitors' book, and American blogs, record that some even travelled specifically to see the London exhibits in 2010–11. One American visitor wrote that it was 'well worth a special trip from Boston. I will use the information for [a] study of American quilts that contain 18th century English fabrics', while a US blogger declared in October 2010 that she had decided to book her flight 'because I've yet to see an exhibit that has my name written all over it to quite the extent that this one does'.

News therefore spread to the US long before the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation paid for the entire original exhibition to be displayed for a year at its DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Museum in Virginia, with a symposium and other special events organised around it. From its opening on 25 May 2013 to the end of July 2013, it received 46,619 visitors and was widely reviewed in the press, specialist textile journals, and on blogs.

Its reception has been, if anything, even more overwhelming than the London exhibition. Again, visitors were moved by the textiles, and prompted to reflect on the foundlings and their mothers, as well as their own experiences of adoption or abandonment; as in London, visitors recorded their interest from a crafts or textiles perspective, combined with learning about the foundlings' history. One wrote on the DeWitt Wallace blog: 'Discarded clothing is the paint I use to come to terms with my childhood and family history . . . My work of transforming ordinary unwanted cloth into art

invites reflection on rejection and renewal.' A fashion blogger welcomed the 'unprecedented glimpse at some beautiful period fabrics' alongside a 'fascinating, albeit often sad, exploration into a part of the 18th century that I had not really considered much in the past'. Some visitors said that Colonial Williamsburg had mounted its best exhibition yet, and on 30 May 2013 one wrote on the exhibition's Facebook page: 'I drove 14 hours just to see it in Williamsburg and hear the talk by John Styles. It. Was. Amazing.'

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Exhibition Data

Comments quoted in section 4: A file of visitor book, Twitter, Facebook and blog comments pertaining to the UK and US exhibitions and including the quotes above is available on request.

Institutional corroboration: Two individuals representing the London Foundling Museum and Colonial Williamsburg can corroborate visitor numbers and, in the case of the London exhibition, sales of the book *Threads of Feeling*.

Selected Press and Online Coverage (Copies available)

General Audience

Katherine Boyle, "'Threads of Feeling': Mothers' tokens of love in 1700s Britain', *Washington Post*, 24 May 2013.

Jenny Gilbert, 'Mothers and babies whose lives hung by a thread,' *Independent*, 24 October 2010.

Eve M. Kahn, 'Giving up their babies, but not their hopes,' *New York Times*, 4 April 2013.

Specialist Audiences

Antiques: Barbara and Ken Beem, 'Threads of Feeling', *New England Antiques Journal*, Sept. 2013, pp. 48–51.

Design: 'Swatch with mother', *World of Interiors*, March 2011, pp. 102–7.

Textiles: Shelly Goldsmith, 'Scrap of a thing', *Selvedge*, pp. 37–40.

Selected Websites and Blogs

DeWitt Wallace 'Threads of Feeling' blog (2013): <threadsoffeeding.history.org/join-the-thread/>

'Material Culture' (quilt history blog) (2011):

<barbarabrackman.blogspot.co.uk/2011/01/threads-of-feeling-18th-century.html>

'Scrapiana' (textiles blog) (2011): <scrapiana.com/2011/02/14/threads-of-feeling/>

'The Risky Regencies' (history/literature) blog (2013):

<www.riskyregencies.com/2013/06/10/threads-of-feeling-exhibit/>

Creative Works Inspired by 'Threads of Feeling'

Jaime Robles, *Foundlings* (Exeter, 2011). Poetry chapbook. (Copy available.)

Tony Curtis (ed.), *Tokens for the Foundlings* (Bridgend, 2012). ISBN 9781854115812 (pbk)