



## I fear not the light



'I Fear Not the Light' is the motto of the Hewetson family, original owners of the schiffli machine now in the possession of Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), and the subject of this exhibition.<sup>1</sup> The phrase 'I Fear Not the Light' exemplifies many industrialists' adoption of a philosophy that emerged as early as the seventeenth-century. This was the Enlightenment idea that human advancement as a whole could only be achieved by individuals embracing innovation, and furthermore, that to do so was a moral, if not Christian, duty. Thus the Hewetson motto suggests that the family did not fear the light shed by the dawning of industrial progress, nor the Light, i.e. God, who would judge them for the role they had played in advancing human society. The schiffli machine, which was acquired by the Hewetsons when it was the height of technology,<sup>2</sup> exemplifies this aspiration, but can also be situated within a more specific set of ideas.

Industrialisation saw advancements in production, but this was often at the cost of design.<sup>3</sup> Though much attention was paid to the factory system as a whole, very little was given to the way in which designs entered the industrial process. At the time the only people sufficiently educated to create good designs were artists, and they were often viewed by manufacturers as arrogant and undisciplined.<sup>4</sup> In a factory system that aimed to be "...unvarying [as the] regularity of ... [a] complex automaton", this type of disruption was insupportable.<sup>5</sup> The answer to bringing skilled design to the factory whilst maintaining order had therefore to be either the training of a specialist designer, or to

finding a way to turn the practice of the artist into a mechanised process. The former idea took many years of educational expansion (the School of Art that is now part of MMU was a result of this), while the latter was more immediately achievable and resulted in such innovations as the schiffli.

The schiffli was one of many inventions that attempted to link the skilled artist with the machine in a way that would not disrupt the work of either. To do this a pantograph was employed that was moved by an individual and directed the machine. The hand-embroidery machine from 1828 was an example of this. It positioned an individual at a pantograph bed where a pattern was traced, the action simultaneously guiding the machine to create multiple stitched copies of the same design.<sup>6</sup> Thus the hand of the artist was directly converted into the mechanised labour of the machine. The schiffli was the later version of the hand embroidery machine that, with some changes, retained the use of the pantograph linking individual to mechanism.<sup>7</sup>

However, by the time the schiffli had been invented, the mood among some quarters towards the relationship between human beings and machines had turned away from the optimism of the Enlightenment. Far from not fearing the light, there was a growing dread of the dark undercurrents of a society increasingly ordered by mechanisation. Pollution, overcrowding, poverty and disease plaguing the industrial population,<sup>8</sup> coupled with a growing conviction that the universe, and indeed people themselves, may not be created by a

1 Jopp *The Hewetson Story 1898-1958*, p. 4.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

3 See for example the testimony of James Skene in the *Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures 1835*, q. 1121, p. 80.

4 Josiah Wedgwood quoted in Tattersall "Henry Webber" 1985, p. 38. See also Ure *The Philosophy of Manufactures 1967*, pp. 280-281.

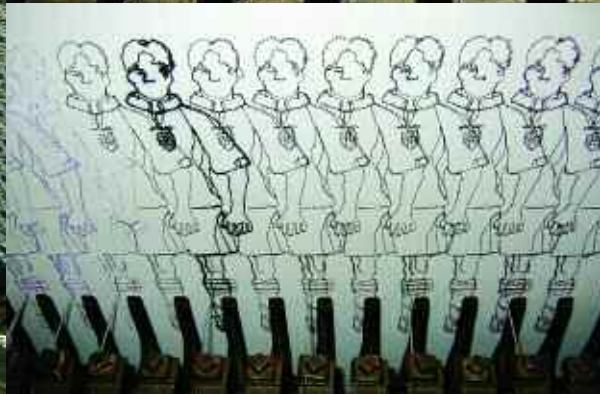
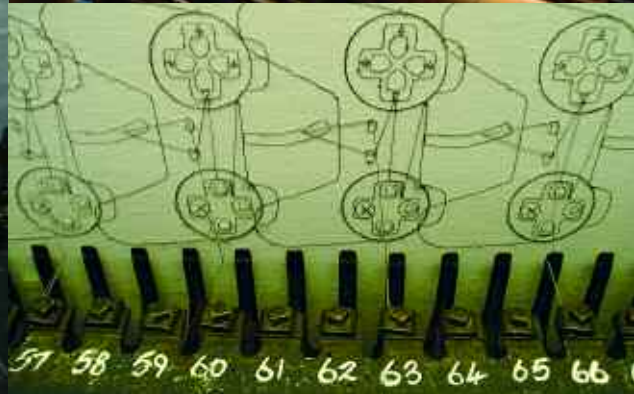
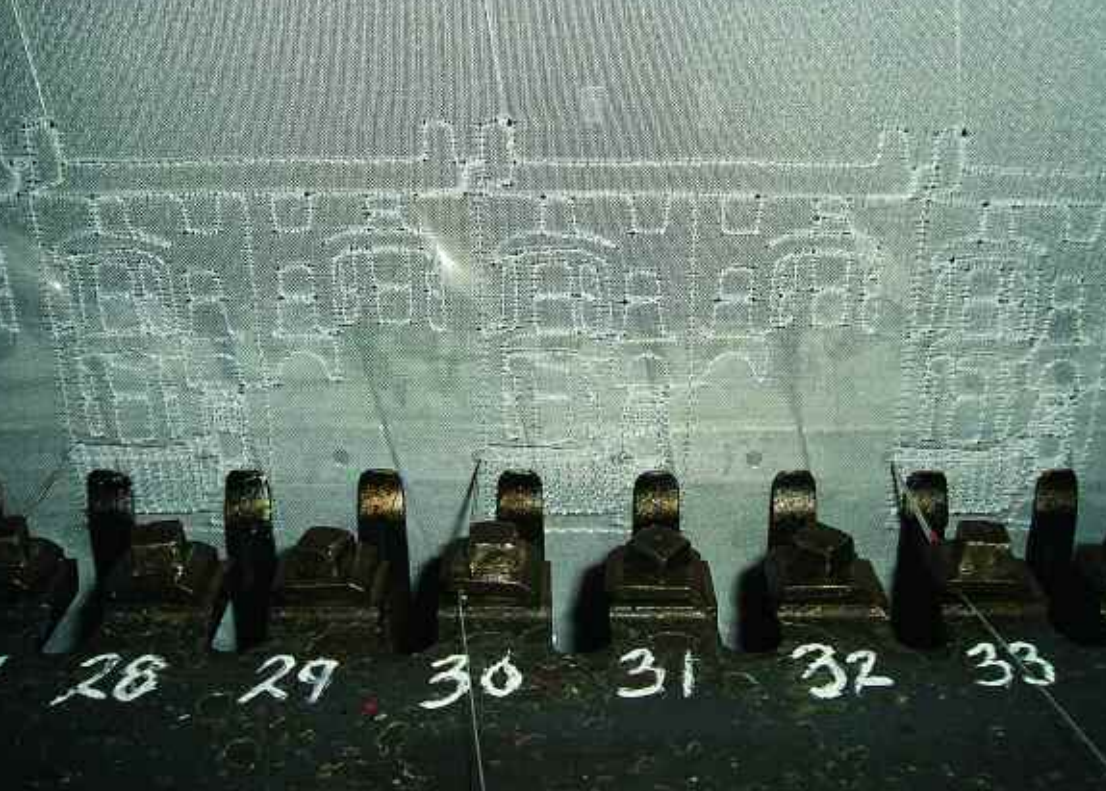
5 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

6 Miller "Design and Technological Change in the Embroidery Industry with Particular Reference to Computerisation" PhD. Thesis, p. 33. There were other examples used in sculpture see *Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures 1836*, q. 618, pp. 54-55.

7 It included technology gained from the lockstitch sewing machine, making rethreading less arduous (*Ibid.*, p. 36).

8 See for example Harrison *Learning and Living 1790-1960* 1961, pp. 6-7 for a discussion of the affects of industrialisation on forming a homogeneous working class.





benevolent God,<sup>9</sup> resulted in the sense that the Light had been permanently turned off, to be replaced by a gathering gloom. The happy union of individual artist and mechanised labour, in inventions such as the schiffli, was now understood by some to represent the overtaking of people by mechanisation, and it was not long before the ultimate conclusion was reached. It seemed that, not only had

mechanisation replaced human labour, but people were revealed to be little more than machines themselves.<sup>10</sup>

The power of the mechanistic metaphor to describe human beings, human society and the universe in general cannot be denied even in the digital age, and whether embraced or not, the metaphor created the very persistent notion of the individual.<sup>11</sup> It may seem contradictory to speak on the one hand, of everyone as machines, suggesting uniformity, whilst on the other of the individual, but the idea of mechanisation relied upon this contradiction. In removing the concept of a sentient creator, the result was that everyone become individuals responsible for their own destiny, but within an environment that generated itself outside of any human influence. When one considers such diverse ideas as Richard Burnet's economically driven 'spiral of success',<sup>12</sup> the hand-based social individualism of Bernard Leach,<sup>13</sup> the embracing of nothingness in post-war existentialism,<sup>14</sup> or Donna Haraway's acceptance of technology as a path to equality,<sup>15</sup> all, whether in favour of the mechanistic metaphor or not, search for the

way in which the individual finds a place either within or outside the mechanistic whole.

Given the power of this metaphor, it is unsurprising that the artists within this exhibition tackle the relationship between individual and mechanistic universe in their own way. Furthermore, the schiffli as an invention, was itself a symbol for the struggle to define the hierarchy between people and machines. But what was fascinating when watching the artists working with the machine, was how diverse the relationships actually were between the individuals and the schiffli. Indeed it seemed that, rather than be subsumed by a machine, it was the machine that appeared to develop human characteristics. The pantograph communicated a design, but it also transferred hesitancy, confidence, enjoyment or concentration to its many needles. As Drummond Masterton has noted in a paper on craft practice and digital technology, once one sets aside the obvious differences, traditional and modern tools are not that different. Both require the same "dialogue with materials and processes... to develop... a personal visual vocabulary".<sup>16</sup> Thus, for many, while the subject matter of

their work speaks of a hostile, relentlessly alienating society, the active engagement with an industrial machine had a familiar feeling of creativity. Rowena Ardern's work provides a good example of this.

'The Endangered' is a mechanically produced tablecloth, embroidered with endangered British wild flowers using the schiffli. Ardern has challenged the uniformity of the machine, by using irregular materials attached before the stitching of the flower outlines. Just as the diversity of their natural counterparts, these swatches vary in colour and coverage of design, while the practical engagement of human and machine is revealed in the unfinished removal of the appliquéd material. This successful relationship between artist and mechanism mirrors the ironic paralleling of endangered flowers with endangered machinery, in which the uncertain fate of both has created allies after centuries of hostility.

Jill Boyes and Isabel Dibden Wright have taken the abstraction hinted at in Ardern's work and revelled in experiment with colour. Through the manipulation of thread texture and density, as well as background material

and palette, they both explore the science of colour perception using mechanical repetition. This echoes colour experiments carried out by artists when advancements were made in understanding the mechanics of the eye.<sup>17</sup> The monochrome work of Sally Morfill, though differing in subject matter, also plays with human perception. Morfill uses the old technology of the schiffli to reproduce the action of stitching that, in the past, she has notated through freeze-frame photography and video. The stitched sequence created by the schiffli relies on the human eye and mind to compress time and space, in similar ways to that of Boyes' spectrums.

Watching Sally Morfill creating her work on the schiffli, it became clear that the apparent freedom of movement and openness of the finished piece required a highly ordered plan. Morfill stares intently at a detailed pencil sketch on the pantograph bed, following each line precisely. By contrast Alice Kettle had no pre-ordained pencil plan. Peeking over the apparatus, Kettle tries to watch the action of the machine rather than focus on the stasis of the pantographic bed. Her work creates a scribbly line that looks anything but the



9 During the early nineteenth-century, there had been a growing debate between the mechanistic concept of the universe, and that ordered by God. It seemed that it was the former example that seemed to be winning (See Webb "An Analysis of the Select Committee on Arts and Manufactures of 1835-6: Anatomy, Benthamism and Design" PhD. Thesis, pp. 30-32.  
10 See for example Grenville "The Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture" in the book of the same name 2001, pp. 13-48.  
11 Egbert *Social Radicalism and the Arts* 1970, p. 384.  
12 Published within *A Word to the Members of the Mechanics' Institute* in 1826. The true statement of the individual being in charge of their own destiny within an economically driven society.  
13 This was Individuality through sidestepping industrialisation and mass-production and re-joining the concept of makers serving a human community, from before the industrialised period (Leach *A Potter's Book* 1976, p. 2).  
14 Solomon *From Rationalism to Existentialism* 1971, pp. 265-271.  
15 Haraway *A Manifesto for Cyborgs* in Grenville *The Uncanny: Experiments in Cyborg Culture* 2001, pp. 138-181.  
16 Masterton "The hunt for complexity" presented in Pixel Raiders 2, 2003.  
17 Gamwell *Exploring the Invisible* 2004, pp. 111-121.





product of a machine and seems to overtly demonstrate the power of the individual over the mechanical. This impression is strengthened by the timelessness of the human figures in the final piece.

There are other artists who explore the schiffli's potential for creating sequences, though with varying encounters of machine and maker. Susan Platt's stitched poetry, though taken from an individualistic perspective, allows the machine to become partner in the composition of the work. By employing its inherent repetition, Platt here and there subtracts and adds threads, allowing the schiffli a say in the narrative. In Jane McKeating's piece the monochrome simplicity of graphic marks is also suggestive of print, this time of instruction manuals. These repetitive images of mundane objects belie the anguish of loss within domestic life. Like the experience of learning the schiffli's functions, the images represent a whole host of new tasks to be acquired and undertaken when one's usual life is disrupted. The threat to a personal and secure private life is also explored by Nina Edge whose piece was exhibited in the front room of her own home,

a home under threat of demolition. Edge plays around with the idea of the net curtain being a barrier on the world by using light behind it to reveal her personal living space. This life is under threat because economic profits outweigh the needs of a local community. Here again the schiffli, though once part of the industrialised, capitalist-led economy, becomes an ally as it too is under threat of demolition.

Edge's personal David and Goliath battle illuminates another work in the exhibition. Nigel Cheney's 'The Rabbit Moon' uses the artist's experience with the schiffli to create a densely patterned surface evoking the rich Aztec story of the sun and moon's creation. Like Edge's real life situation, one protagonist considers the wider human community, the other only himself, but in the Aztec story, the unworthy is punished. Two protagonists, their faces shown Janus-like, are also important figures in the work of Rozanne Hawksley. These are soldier recruits, whose painted profiles Hawksley frames within the embroidered form of a military badge. Like Edge, she too refers to the powers that shape the life of the individual, in this case the effects of the deadly machine of war on once youthful recruits.

'Armchair Politico' by Stephen Dixon and Alison Welsh also discusses the effects of war on the individual but references the way that, for many of us, such events take place within a domestic setting. Calling on the work of Jean Baudrillard, Dixon and Welsh question how much of the real impact of war we feel when we become desensitised through the relentless play of television and internet images. Does the war only exist for us as a media construction? Hawksley reminds us that real people are really dying, but in a world of packaged images that alienate us, many cannot feel this horror sufficiently. Dixon and Welsh's embroidered chair, introduces the subject of the power of both the media and large corporations to desensitise and erode the individual, a subject also explored by Lynn Setterington, Melanie Miller and Kate Egan.

Setterington highlights the homogeneity of our food consumption by using the repetition of the schiffli to parody the bounty of our supermarket displays. Here natural products are ordered to satisfy our expectation of regular and mass-produced shapes. Supermarket brands provide a display for us

denying temporal and spatial difference, subverting any notion of local, or even national, produce or tradition. Melanie Miller takes up this theme in her work on national dress in which costume, signalling national and individual identity, is replaced by the mass-produced and Westernised language of jeans and football strips. The repeat of the schiffli reminds us of the arduous and repetitive labour needed to create such a mass of identical clothing. Here the schiffli takes the role of the machine of corporate power, destroying individuality though the illusion of consumer choice.

Kate Egan's inflating and deflating quilts draw on many of these themes. Like Dixon and Welsh, Egan calls on Baudrillard's theories, considering his claims that, as consumers, we now live to a rhythm set by the cycle of consumption, use and refuse. Yet as the artist suggests, this simple cyclical motion is often itself a myth. Many of us are not only controlled by our attempts to keep up with the latest technology, but are almost overrun by it. Egan's motif of the already outmoded computer games controller gives us an example of an object that is still found in

people's homes gathering dust, left in limbo, it is neither useful nor rubbish. Again here, the schiffli, as an equally outmoded piece of technology, becomes an ally to all who are left behind by the relentless consumerist machine.

It is no coincidence that, for the artists in this exhibition, such massive and important contemporary themes have provided the central motif for their work on the schiffli. The schiffli, as a machine constructed for industrialised society, has become at once both the symbol of the strength of that society and a sign of the victims of it. Furthermore, with its roots in the invention of the early nineteenth-century, the politics of the schiffli's very mechanism also reveals the role of artists, who, from that time, have been seen as rebellious commentators negotiating with an all-too-powerful mechanised universe.

Dr Jane Webb  
Senior Lecturer in Material Culture  
BA (Hons) Contemporary Craft  
Manchester Metropolitan University

(For a list of references see page 59)

