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# Embroidered Illuminations



Portraits of Personal Saints in Digital Stitch

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment  
of the degree of Master of Design,  
Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

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# Abstract



I have designed a series of portraits of personal saints using new digital embroidery technology. Like a medieval manuscript, the embroideries illuminate spiritual experience by bringing to light the stories and symbolism surrounding the Catholic saints. Historically saints have been identified in art by distinctive symbols that have both a physical and spiritual interpretation. In this series I have stitched this symbolism together with images of close friends and family in order to uphold the exceptional qualities of these personal saints. Like a traditional embroidery sampler, this series demonstrates the stitch techniques I have developed using a Tajima industrial embroidery machine, like a sampler there is a spiritual message that has been developed within the context of a reinvestigation into my Catholic heritage. Although these embroideries are designed as objects of personal protection and devotion, it is the intention that the viewer may be inspired to contemplate spiritual ideas and to envisage the saints in their lives.



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Embroidered Illuminations

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# Part 1





Figure 1

# Introduction

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**“She became eyeless, and yet she “saw” because her spiritual sight remained undimmed...she looks at the torch with a yearning intensity that reminds us that true light is something within, something from God, something that sanctifies”**

**(Beckett & Biblioteca apostolica vaticana., 1998, p.16).**

**A**rt historian Sister Wendy Beckett is describing a painting of St Lucy. It doesn't matter which particular image Sister Wendy is referring to because St Lucy is recognised in iconography by her symbol; her eyes, which have been torn from her head during her martyrdom. She holds her eyes on a plate or on stalks like flowers (fig 1). Sometimes she holds a lamp, which can be seen to represent spiritual vision, as sight can be both physical and spiritual. Like St Lucy's eyes, these embroidered illuminations can be viewed in a physical or spiritual way.

I have created a series of illuminated personal saints using digital embroidery layered with digital print. They are the result of textile design through the exploration of new embroidery design technology and a reinvestigation into my Catholic heritage. Like a medieval manuscript, the design objects created by the Tajima embroidery machine have the intention of illuminating spiritual experience by bringing to light the stories of the Catholic saints. These stories are woven together with the images of the saints in my life, people close to me who are my personal heroes. Like a traditional embroidery sampler, the embroideries will be a demonstration of mastery of stitch techniques in a geometrically balanced design. Like a sampler, there will be a religious and symbolic message (fig 2).

This essay has two parts; part one analyses who saints are and why their rich symbolism provides potential as design inspiration. It also looks at the history of religious embroidery and the position of digital stitch. It discusses how illumination can be used to discuss spiritual ideas and how I have used it as a metaphor within the designs. The final chapter places the work within the context of other artists and designers who incorporate religious themes. In part two of this essay, I have stitched together the stories and symbolism of the saints. My selected 'canon' in written descriptions acts as a guide to the final embroidered images. I have chosen to use a different writing style to reflect the idea that to interpret religious symbols is a personal and unique experience. The writing expresses my spiritual response to the stories and symbolism of the saints linked with my personal connections to my patrons.





Figure 2.1



Figure 2.2

The opening chapter in part one describes who the saints are and how to become a miraculous saint. One of the fascinating areas of a study about saints is their relics, objects imbued with saintly power. I will discuss how textiles used in sacred rituals by secular people can become official relics and how I have attempted to replicate this within a contemporary textile design context.

The stories and iconography surrounding saints provide a rich source for design inspiration. In chapter two I will discuss how I analysed saint symbology to create my own canon of Patron saints by matching appropriate symbolism of the Catholic saints to describe the exceptional and heroic qualities of close family and friends. I have brought the symbolism of the saints into a contemporary context by design development for embroidered motifs stitched by a digital embroidery machine.

The legends and miracles of the saints that I have chosen to draw from in the embroideries are widely considered to be historically worthless, however their fantastical stories of splitting out of dragons and re-growing eyes can make their stories more interesting. Here, the embellished details and exaggerated facts can be described as “embroidered.” Chapter 3 discusses how the Catholic Church has historically utilized embroidery for the glorious embellishment of sacred textiles. The series I have produced draws from this cultural legacy and brings embroidery and spiritual ideas into the digital era. To use automatic stitching subverts a widely held assumption that religious embroidery is an act of contemplation and devotion, however, the technology has required patience and perseverance to master.

The central challenge of the use of digital stitch to communicate spiritual ideas, is in the expression of the mysterious inspiration philosopher Walter Benjamin would describe as “aura” that can be lost in mechanical reproductive processes. In chapter four I discuss how other textile designers who use digital media bring a sense of aura, which could also be described as uniqueness, depth, authorship and place, into their work. It also discusses how I have attempted to inject aura through the use of the digitising process as a design tool. This is possibly the first post-graduate project in Australasia to advance digital embroidery techniques, these embroideries can be considered to be samplers, a demonstration of the digital techniques I have developed.

Like St Lucy’s lamp, light has been used to symbolically represent spirit throughout European visual history and internationally. Chapter five explores how illumination can be used to express religious ideas metaphorically in different ways. I will also discuss how illuminated manuscripts (fig 3), spiritual guidebooks from medieval times that illustrate the lives of the saints, became a focus of visual inspiration in these embroideries.

Chapter Six describes how I have been inspired by artists that represent spiritual ideas by using Catholic artistic conventions and symbolism. The embroidered portraits are the result of an investigation into the saints in order to uphold friends and family as my personal holy people within a Catholic context. They are personal objects of devotion, but the intention is that they are also inspirational for a largely secular audience. Within an increasingly sceptical secular society, it is still possible to find enjoyment and beauty in religion. In describing the stories of the saints, philosopher Marina Warner in her book of essays *Signs and Wonders* states; “Taking this casket, the tinsel casket of folklore, fancy and myth - even of superstition - doesn’t mean consenting to its contents or affirming them- the salt, the mustard which make the material live are irony and humour”(Warner, 1996, p.91). To enjoy





Figure 3

the stories and imagery of the saints does not require devout faith or belief; these are the myths and legends of the Catholic Church and can be approached with a light heart; through folklore we can connect to our heritage and identity.

This series has developed using an iterative design methodology; a repeated process of design formulation, production and then critical analysis. Many of the early design iterations were cast away but have been important contributions to the design development. Visual and symbolic analysis was developed into designs and applied by incorporating different techniques. Within this process, each new design can be seen as a “re-iteration”, a new design that has evolved from the knowledge created by practice. This critical reflection comes mainly from personal evaluation, but also from academic critique. I have focused on designing as a “practitioner-researcher” as described by Gray and Malins in *Visualising Research*; as a practitioner-researcher, the designer takes on many roles; the creator, self observer (through reflection and critique) and an observer of others, by placing the research within the context of other design work and within a wider social context (Gray & Malins, 2004).

Like St Lucy’s lamp, the aim of this project was to illuminate the physical and the spiritual; by incorporating the physical capabilities of a new digital embroidery design process to describe the spiritual stories and symbolism of the saints and the exceptional qualities of those I have chosen to uphold ☥



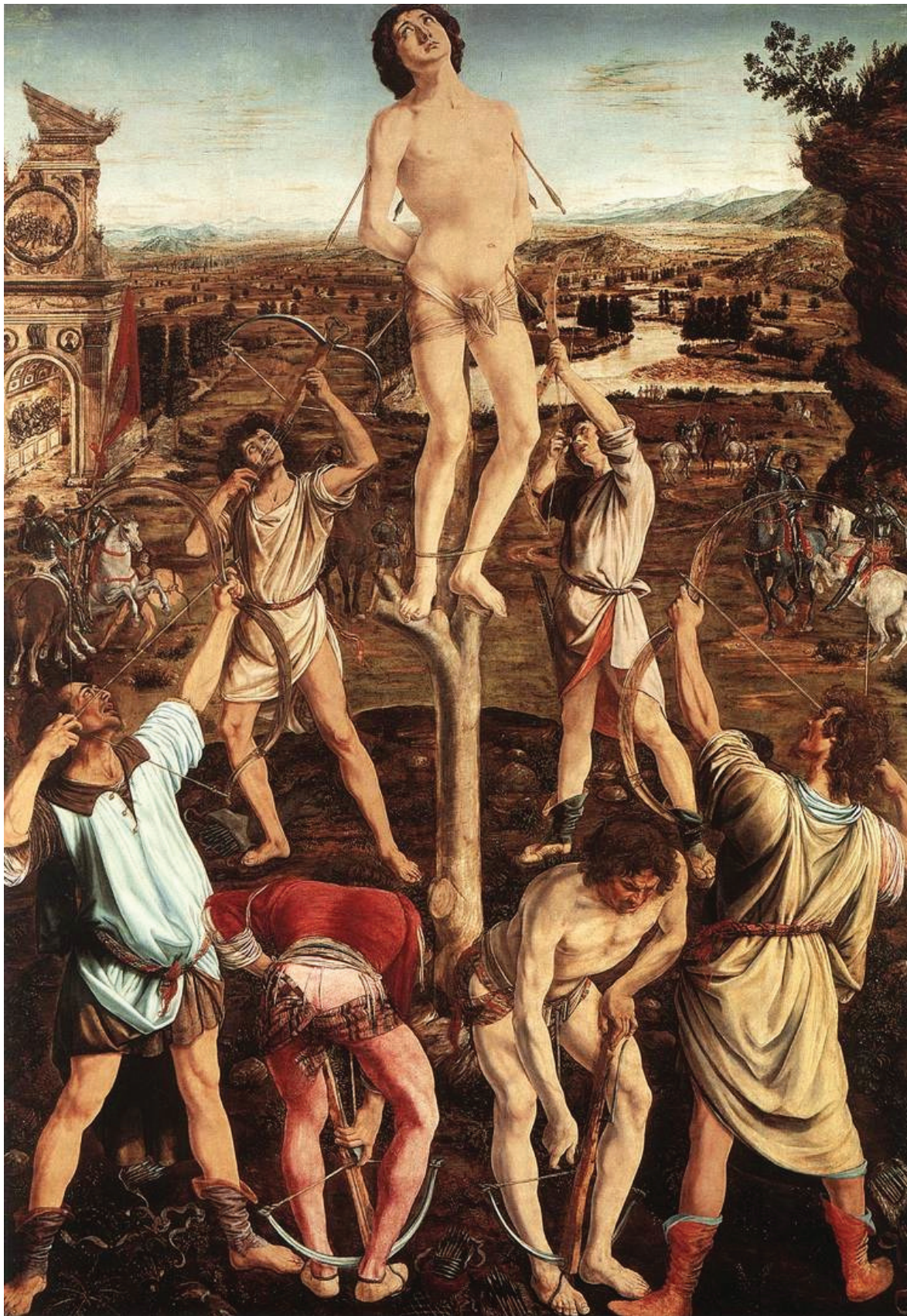


Figure 4

# Saints, Miracles And Relics

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**“Holiness can so easily appear as something remote from us, to be gazed at, but from afar. Yet to be a saint is a wholly practical and realistic growth into our own truth. It is what we are all meant to become, it is our deepest fulfilment, our own personal realisation of what we have been potentially from birth”**

**(Sister Wendy Beckett, Book of Saints, 1998, p.8).**

**A**s art historian Sister Wendy says, we grow saintly as we traverse life and overcome trials, growing to our full potential. She considers that we all have the potential to become saints, who are examples of such exceptional courage and faith, that if prayed to, they intercede on behalf of God and grant miracles. Although they have miraculous and supernatural qualities, the saints are human, flawed and mortal. By comparing people in my life with the patron saints of Christian mythology, I have embellished and embroidered my personal idols’ exceptional qualities to create a series of embroidered representations.

To be a saint requires you to acknowledge and accept the shadow side of your personality and harness its powers for good. To be a saint also implies that sacrifice, a period of torture or exile has been undertaken to attain enlightenment. “Holy persons suffer for good reasons: suffering is instrumental. It purifies, it strengthens, it moves us forward” (Baldessari & Cranston, 2004, p.11). The suffering of saints, for example the martyrdom of St Sebastian (fig 4), can be considered to be glorified, although the compelling aspect of the story is often the torturous survival of boiling pitch and eyes plucked from heads. It is a reminder of their human frailty and our own suffering and can give us inspiration to look for enlightenment through our own trials.

The Roman Catholic religion deems many worthy and extraordinary people saints. During the investigations that take place as part of the canonisation process, pious Christianity alone is not valued because it can be seen as too self-serving. To be considered a saint is to have a completely generous spirit and a determination to fight injustice. Mother Mary MacKillop, (fig 5) who was recently declared Australia’s first saint displayed such courage when she exposed a paedophile priest in 1871 and paid the consequences via excommunication for her stand. Now she has been declared a patron saint for the abused (Brathwaite, 2010).

To become a saint there must be evidence of three genuine miracles occurring when help is requested through prayer. The official definition of a miracle is, “An unexplainable, extraordinary event which is attributed to divine

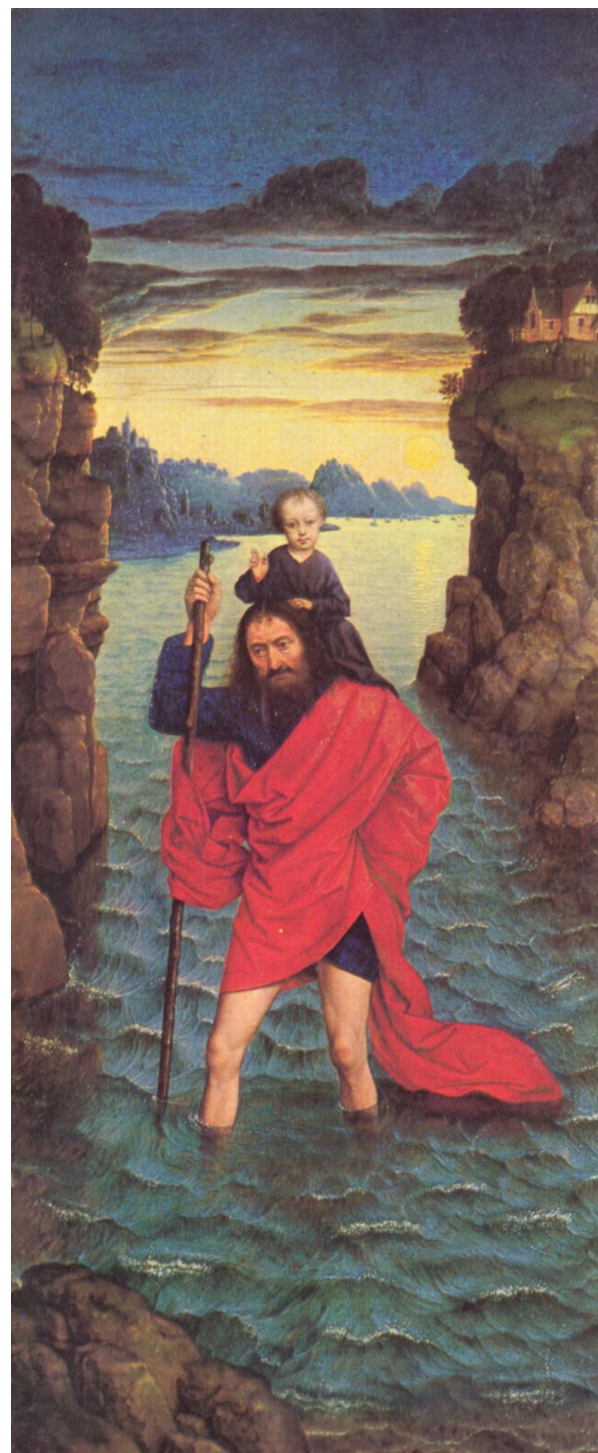




*Figure 5*



*Figure 6*



*Figure 7*

intervention” (Fournier, 2008). Miracles include averted disasters, miraculous healings, stigmata and bodies that don’t decompose. The miracles of St Mary MacKillop include miraculously curing a woman dying of leukaemia in 1961, after she had prayed for Mary MacKillop’s help (Brathwaite, 2010).

In New Zealand a study about saints is timely because investigations by the Vatican are almost complete for the canonisation of New Zealand nun, Suzanne Aubert (fig 6). Aubert nursed during the Crimea war then studied medicine at university in Lyons by hiding behind a curtain, as women were not permitted to attend. She then followed a calling to help Maori in New Zealand, leaving her disapproving family in France in 1853 to found a mission, The Sisters of Compassion at Jerusalem on the Whanganui River (Sisters of Compassion, 2010). Her many great works include the development of natural healing methods and medicines. Her administration of marijuana for period pain has given her the title amongst law reformists as “The Patron Saint of Pot” (Smith, 2005).

Mother Aubert also established and fundraised for orphanages and hospitals and wrote many books, including one of the earliest guides to Maori language. The work of the sisters, especially as a bridge of peace between Maori and Pakeha, was so highly esteemed that Whanganui iwi has granted them tangata whenua status. Her mission continued in Wellington and her image can be seen on the soup kitchen wall in Tory Street, where the Sisters of Compassion continue the charity work Suzanne Aubert established.

The evidence of four miracles attributed to Mother Aubert has been sent to the Vatican. In each case a person who had no hope of recovery, prayed to Susan Aubert and was cured with no scientific explanation. This was checked and endorsed by doctors (Smith, 2005). To be deemed a miracle “a medical recovery must be instantaneous, not attributable to treatment, disappear for good”(Fournier, 2008). If her work and life are regarded as truly holy by the investigators from the Vatican, she will be New Zealand’s first saint.

Many Catholics have a favourite saint, often through a connection with their own Christian names. Through research and reading my familiarity has developed with an extended canon of saints and I personally connected with certain saints through their intriguing symbolism and resonances with my own life. The ancient saints from the sixth and seventh centuries particularly inspired me, especially the group known as “The Virgin Martyrs” to which St Lucy belongs. They were probably upheld as excellent examples to young women to keep your virginity and put all your faith in religion, however, these legends can also be read as representing staunch young women who rejected the patriarchy, claimed a new faith (that they were eventually murdered for) and celebrated a life without men. Brave and pure young women prepared to die for their beliefs, jilted lovers who take terrible revenge, magical interventions, aspects of intense violence, intriguing symbolism; the stories of the Virgin Martyrs have timeless themes and appeal.

In a secular and post enlightenment society, the fantastical stories and miracles of the saints, part of the rich mythology of Catholicism, are in danger of being lost. In New Zealand, mass attendance is in decline and there are dramatically fewer priests and nuns (Hickey, 2004). Also, in 1969 the Vatican investigated the historic proof of all the 4000 recorded saints and removed those “whose evidence was lacking” (Mornin & Mornin, 2006) from the official *Universal Calendar* of saints. Those who were struck off included “The Virgin Martyrs” I have studied





*Figure 8*



*Figure 9.1*



*Figure 9.2*

here and other popular saints including Saint Christopher.

Even though New Zealand can be considered a secular society (in the 2006 Census, 32.2% responded as having no religion), some saints are still venerated albeit in a different form from the original intention, for example, St Nicholas on Christmas Eve, St Patrick and St Valentine. Medals representing St Christopher, patron saint of travellers are also popular amongst non-Catholics.

Objects that are imbued with holy power, like a protective talisman of St Christopher, can be described as relics. An official relic is either a body part of a saint (first class relic, most power) clothing or objects belonging to a saint (second class, less powerful) or cloth that has been in contact with a tomb of a saint (third class relic)(Sox, 1985). These objects are thought to have been permeated with the miraculous qualities of their saint. At the start of this project, I was particularly interested in the mysterious power of relics. During a trip to Rome I undertook a pilgrimage to visit tombs of the saints. By rubbing silk fabric on the holy statue of St Peter and on the tombs of St Agnes and St Cecilia I created official third class relics. The fabric from the rubbings is thought to have a special connection to the saint of the tomb it has been in contact with. If Suzanne Aubert becomes a saint, objects from her life, including a suitcase that belonged to her and can be seen at Jerusalem, will become second-class relics and third class relics can be made at her grave in Island Bay.

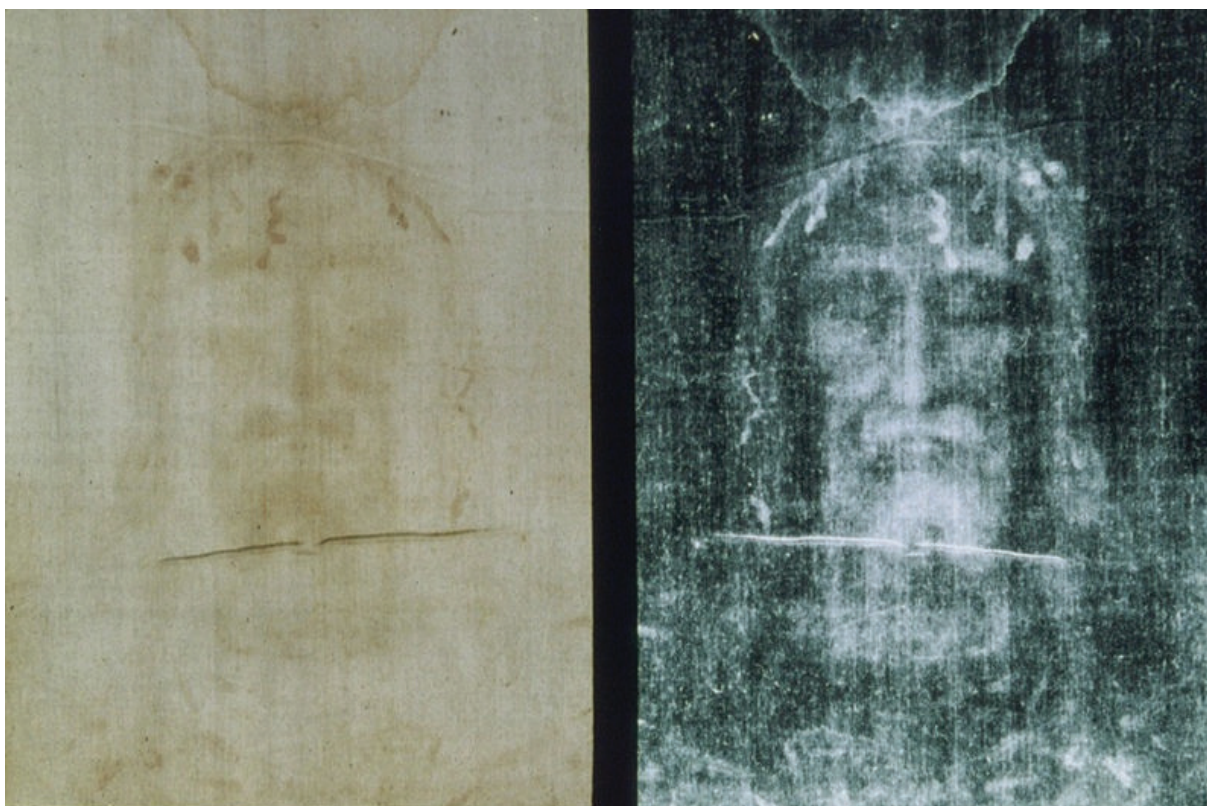
When rubbing the tombs of the saints, I was taking part in a ritual regarding sacred objects to create miracle fabrics. I was sceptical of the idea that cloth can become a conduit in the transference of some kind of holy power; however the ritual was surprisingly powerful. There was more than silk making contact with marble, a metaphysical awareness, whether it was real or imaginary that I would describe as a “divine experience”. The use of fabric for this ritual was also important, as it can be seen to have visceral absorbent qualities. The editor of *Surface Design* journal, Patricia Malarcher writes, “Cloth’s fluidity, allowing it to touch the surfaces of that which it wraps, gives it a particularly intimate relationship to ritual” (Malarcher, 2007, p.2). The power of this process was in the ritual as S Brent Plate in his introduction to *Religion, Art and Visual culture* states;

The contemporary desire to detach art from its stable isolated status and reconnect it to broader political cultural components is, I believe, a desire for some re-invention or re-enchantment of ritual as an important component in human life and in the realm of ritual we find the hinge between the turn toward visual culture and the practices of religious devotion” (Plate, 2002, p.9).

I also had a divine experience at the tomb of St Cecilia, the patron saint of music, in Santa Cecilia Trestavere, where the sisters were singing their vespers by candlelight above a very dramatic and realistic marble sculpture of St Cecilia by Stefano Maderno (1555)(fig 8). The tortured angle of the head and the white stone made her look very dead. In the opulent decorated shrine hidden downstairs, even though I was alone, the weight of all the other true believers was in the air. I was a representative of my devout ancestors and relatives who couldn’t have made this journey. I felt the need to be very serious and respectful, including observing the request to take no photographs. But where is the proof? The fabric looks and feels no different, but my soul feels more satisfied and the silk seems more precious.

My aim was to replicate this sense of saintly devotion in design objects by creating third class fabric relics of





*Figure 10*



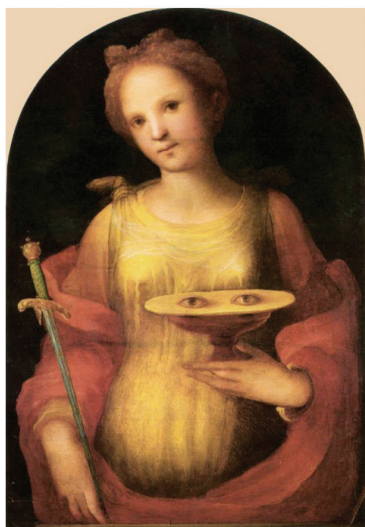
*Figure 11*



ordinary people. I identified twelve people in my life who, to me, have exceptional and heroic qualities. Their positive influence in my life makes them my “saints”. I attempted to adapt the ritual of creating third class relics in this project by giving the base cloth of the embroideries to my saints to handle, to imbue it with their uniqueness, however, this metaphysical quality remains invisible and is difficult to translate in the creation of a design object which is to be looked at (fig 9). If the intention of the finished series is to be objects of personal devotion, for me to know is enough. It becomes part of the “myth” of the object. Possibly in the future, with advances in DNA analysis, it could be proven that the fabric was really in a physical connection with my patron saints.

DNA analysis has been used to determine the authenticity of the most famous textile relics the *Shroud of Turin* (fig 10) and the *Veil of Veronica* (fig 11). These are referred to as “archeipoieta”, or icons that have been created miraculously without human hands. During the iconoclast period when the creation of holy representations in other artistic forms was banned, images created not by human hand were acceptable. The shroud that wrapped the crucified body of Christ is miraculously imbued with his image. The *Veil of Veronica* was created when St Veronica handed a towel to Jesus at the sixth Station of the Cross, leaving a perfect image of his face. These textiles created by supernatural or holy forces became the prototype images of Jesus that all other icons copied (Cormack, 2007).

In creating saintly textiles, I kept the miracle of “archeipoieta”, the creation of images without human hands, in mind. By looking at the scientific explanations for the creation of the *Shroud of Turin*, I considered the use of cyanotype and other complex chemical processes to create figurative portraits. I experimented with body contact prints, like the espresso face prints Jeffrey Valance used in *Relics from Two Vatican Performances*, his interpretation of the miracle of the Veil of Veronica (Valance, 1992). However, the photo stitch capabilities of the embroidery machine, in which the stitched images imbued the fabric with shroud-like qualities, and without human hands, was the process which interpreted this idea most appropriately ☺



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Figure 12

# Saint Symbolology: Lucy's Eyes

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**“Butterflies in clouds accompanied her standard;  
Pigeons miraculously fluttered toward her;  
Men fell into rivers and were drowned;  
Dead babies yawned and came to life;  
Flocks of little birds perched on bushes  
to watch her making war.**

**(Sackville-West, 1938)**

**H**ere, Vita Sackville-West is writing about St Joan of Arc. As for writers, the fantastical stories and vivid symbolism of the saints can provide rich visual inspiration for designers. I have incorporated the symbolism surrounding Catholic saints in embroidered designs to signify extraordinary and spiritual qualities. Although the saints were human, their exceptional faith and fortitude has given them the power to intercede on behalf of God and grant miracles years after their death. This mystical quality cannot be fully understood or described, but religious symbols can be gates to imaginative pathways that can lead us to our own interpretation of the divine.

A symbol, by its very nature refers to an absent reality. In mathematics it signifies an unknown quantity; in religion, poetry or art, it lends substance to an unknown quality- a value that remains out of reach. In a religious context, this quality is unknown (or unknowable) because it belongs to a different order of reality- a supernatural order- and can therefore be signified only by a sacred object (Gibson, 2006, p.21).

Historically, the identity of the saints is signified in their images, Saint Lucy holds eyes on a plate (fig 12); a dragon accompanies Saint Margaret. These symbols are taken from the saints stories and can be analysed in a literal way, Lucy's eyes were ripped from her head during her torture; Margaret was vomited up by the dragon that swallowed her. This symbolic language was developed, in part, so that the identities of the saints could be distinguished by an illiterate audience (Mornin, 2006), however these totems are symbols of a deeper religious nature. Saint Lucy's eyes are symbols of inner vision; Saint Margaret's dragon represents triumph over a spiritual block.





Figure 14

To emphasise the religious symbolism of the saints, I presented the example of eye shaped St Lucy Buns (Lussekatte) to describe the symbolism of St Lucy during a masters critique. These saffron flavoured cakes are traditionally baked in Scandinavian countries on St Lucy Day, which coincides with the winter solstice. Lucy or Lucia is Latin for “light” and St Lucy is celebrated at the arrival of lighter days (Castleden, 2006). A literal interpretation of the cakes symbolism is of eyes or ability to see; on a deeper level they represent spiritual vision.

St Lucy is the patron saint of sight, she is prayed to for eyesight problems. There is a patron saint for practically every occupation (including St Adrian patron saint of arms dealers), major European city (St Genevieve patron saint of Paris), ailment or concern (St Eugene, patron saint of dysfunctional families). These patronages are connected to aspects of their legends; because of St Margaret’s miraculous “re-birth” from the dragon she is the patron saint of nurses, those in childbirth and the dying. These patrons are invoked for inspiration, protection or with a particular request in mind (Fournier, 2008).

In this series, I have upheld a group of close friends and family as patron saints by considering how their special gifts and abilities can be symbolically linked to the saints from Catholicism. Symbols represent divine ideas; in these portraits the symbols provide a reference to identifying which aspect of my life each patron “looks after”. For example my youngest sister is chosen as St Margaret, patron saint of the dying and of those in childbirth because of her special gifts as a nurse who has specialized in palliative and neo-natal care. Her role as a guide for those going through life and death transitions matches the invocation of St Margaret, I would invoke Holly as St Margaret when I needed to be a kind nurse to my family or if I was dying (see chart on page 22-23)

Symbols that surround St Margaret include; Dragon, pearl, devil, shepherdess, crucifix and sword. To bring these symbols from ancient myth into a contemporary design context, I visually analysed the symbology of the saints from historic images. The deeper religious meanings and wider symbolic interpretations including Jungian perspective were researched. Then, through drawings, collage and photoshop I developed paper based designs with the intention of retaining traditional elements of the historic and spiritual significance of these symbols in the aesthetic (see appendix 1). In representing Saint Homobonius, Saint Lucy and Saint Dorothea I have utilised the same method which is described visually in the appendix.

An artist whose aesthetic and use of symbols appears to bridge historic conventions with the present is Russian ceramic artist Irina Zaytceva. In her pieces, Zaytceva portrays figures surrounded by symbolic plants and animals (fig 14). Zaytceva’s classical training as a porcelain artist gives the aesthetic of the ceramics a timeless and traditional quality while the format and subject matter (hermaphrodites) is unconventional and contemporary. These ceramics, along with the series I have embroidered can be described as “Symbolist”.

Symbolism as an art movement in the late 1800s arose as a reaction to industrialisation. It can be said to have had a basis in Catholic and industrialised Europe rather than in Protestant England where the culture was more open to the use of the symbols to describe concerns about the huge upheavals under going society at the time (Gibson, 2006). The origins of symbolism are interesting to consider in the application of an industrial machine to create symbolic textiles, and also to realise that those with a Catholic background may be more open to interpreting the symbols in this series ☸





Holly

SAINT MARGARET

Patron Saint of nurses  
and the dying  
Dragon



Tessa

SAINT LUCY

Patron Saint of vision  
Eyes on plate, Lamp



Bill

SAINT HOMOBONIUS

Patron Saint of business  
Bag of money



Julia



SAINT DOROTHY

Patron Saint of gardeners

Basket of apples and flowers



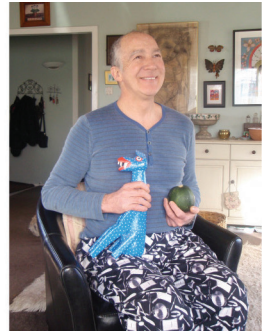
Anna



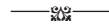
SAINT CATHERINE

Patron Saint of philosophers

Wheel, Crown



Philip



SAINT ANTHONY

Patron Saint of lost things

Fisherman, Jesus on a book





Figure 15



# Embroidered Faith

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**T**he use of digital stitch to create religious embroidery subverts an established assumption that hand stitching is an act of contemplation and devotion. Using an industrial embroidery machine that replicates thousands of hours of handwork in a fraction of the time creates a metaphor for my position as an interested but a non-practising Catholic. When I lived in Queenstown my parish priest Father Martin Flannery, called those of us, who dipped in and out of church activities without full-time commitment or deep-rooted faith or beliefs, café Catholics. To his mind we were only seeking a quick spiritual fix.

Digital embroidery does not require thousands of hours of laborious stitching and prayerful attention. After I have set up the frame in the machine, set up my threads and sent a digitised file, I can walk away, leaving the machine to the work of creating images of saints (fig 15). The contemplation and care given to each stitch, by a nun in a convent of yesterday, is now only a memory. However, the digitising process requires dedication and patience. Although I am creating images of saints with an intention of bringing to light the stories of people in my life with saintly qualities, it is within a secular university environment rather than a convent and not as an act of pure religious devotion.

Mary Schoeser in *English Church Embroidery* describes the work and lives of nuns who dedicated their lives to stitching a wide range of liturgical garments and altar frontals (Schoeser, 1998). The decision to become a nun in medieval times was often made for educational or social reasons rather than a religious calling. These women brought with them considerable wealth in the form of dowries, the richest were often given the softest tasks, such as embroidery. In *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* the stitching of nuns is described as “the triumph of artistic excellence, and with glorious richness of colour by the hands of the faithful women of the day and designed by the men of superior genius whom the Church had attracted to her side”(Corbett, 1913). Nuns were not only the handmaidens of God but also were allocated the task of upholding the artistic genius of men. The focus of convent life was prayer and the promotion of Christian virtues as shown through the lives of saints. However, embroidery, particularly of religious subjects became a popular past-time for women outside of the orders in the 1500s.

Within the Catholic Church, stitching of sacred vestments, often depicting saints, has been traditionally the task of nuns to be worn by priests as part of religious rites and ceremonies (fig 16). According to the General Instructions of the Roman Missal or GIRM 2002, vestments must be distinguished from everyday use (Commission for Divine Worship, 2002). Religious ceremonies and associated costume are designed to raise



Figure 17



Figure 16

the soul to higher planes. Just like devotional images in paintings and illuminations, the beauty and sumptuousness of sacred vestments, in contrast to the ordinary garments of the common people, can lead to a divine experience. Liturgical, blessed or sacred garments can only be worn by male priests who are ordained or given the duty of mediating between God and man in sacred ceremonies. The rich qualities of embroidery lends particularly well to expressions of a sense of gloriousness.

As Rozsika Parker in the seminal book about the history of embroidery, *The Subversive Stitch* writes, embroidery was considered virtuous activity for a woman; “Domestic arts were equated with virtue because they ensured that women remain at home and refrain from book learning. Ignorance was equated with innocence: domesticity was a defence against promiscuity” (Parker, 1984, p.75). Girls’ education, when allowed, was differentiated by the subjects they could learn until recent times. For example, I was taught at the oldest girl’s school in Australasia, Otago Girls High School in Dunedin. Embroidery was offered as a subject alongside such feminine skills as home economics in the 1980s. Strict conventions applied to our needlework designs and “neatness” was considered the most important skill to demonstrate in the production of our samplers.

Even as machine embroidery was perfected by the 1880s, hand embroidery continued to retain its status as a virtuous activity and was “prized and sentimentalised for its evocation of home, hearth and heart” (Parker, 1984, p.121). The Arts and Crafts movement promoted hand embroidery amongst craft as it was thought to “raise the moral tone of society...craft work brought comfort and orderliness into many a home, whose mistress is now to be found busily engaged by her own fireside, instead of gossiping beside her neighbours”(Parker, 1984, p.122). Parker goes on to discuss how this sense of virtue can be subverted by embroidery artists to make statements about ideal femininity. In 2010, the idea that a woman should stay home doing “her hand work” and the housework instead of socialising has been supplanted by the ability and need to work outside of the home. The womanly arts and crafts have been allocated to the retired or leisured class or to artists as a means of income.

Opulent religious embroideries have provided a plentiful vein of embroidery design inspiration. In particular the cross-based geometric design formats and the wonderful colour blends found in the sacred vestments and devotional objects in the book *De Fleurs en Aiguille* (Veron-Denise, 2009)(fig 17). Like a nun stitching an elaborate cope, it is my intention to uphold the subjects of the embroidered portraits. I am not in complete service to them or believe they actually have miraculous powers, but I have embellished or embroidered facets of their lives in order that viewers of the work might be inspired to think of the saintly attributes of people in their worlds ☸





*Figure 18*

# Digitising Spirit: The Soul in Digital Textiles

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**“These qualities of the human imagination are frequently cited as those not only most under threat from advances in technology but also as those essential in realising and maintaining a humanity that is not solely mechanical”**

**(Wood Carnie, 2010, p.19)**

**I**n this quote, academic and designer Bruce Wood Carnie is describing the contemporary lace exhibition at the University of Technology in Sydney of Cecilia Heffer who uses digital lace making techniques in her work (fig 18). Wood Carnie states that Heffer is successful at bringing humanity into her digitally created textiles by “referencing of a past era combined with a synthesis of the digital” (Carnie, 2010, p.20). The understanding here is that any process that can become mechanical probably will so it is important to develop an understanding of how imagination and humanity can be expressed using digital design technologies. In this series I have sought to express spiritual ideas and how this can be demonstrated through industrial embroidery design process.

One of the challenges of this project was to bring soul into a machine made product. In Walter Benjamin’s celebrated essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* he discusses how mechanical technology takes the “aura” away from the artifact produced (Benjamin, 1934). Benjamin believes that hand crafted objects are imbued with the uniqueness of the maker and the small imperfections that are the result of human intervention give the object a sense of history and place. Mechanical reproduction of an object also takes away the mysterious distance between the viewer of the object and the inspiration of the artist, the object loses its prestige and uniqueness; anyone with a machine could replicate it.

Digital design researcher Cathy Treadaway discusses how this can be addressed in her paper *Digital Imagination; The Impact of Digital Imaging on Printed Textiles*. Rebecca Earley, senior research fellow at Chelsea College of Art who is quoted within this paper, believes that manipulating machine produced fabric with further processes can give it “aura” as defined by Benjamin. “The textile artifact becomes no longer the product of the machine but a crafted expression of the artist’s imagination”(Earley, 2003, cited in Treadaway, 2004, p.266). In this series I have used a combination of techniques to give the embroideries both physical and spiritual depth.





Figure 19



By combining scanned hand drawings with photography to create embroideries layered with digitally printed pā silk and presenting them in an unconventional way, I have introduced what design researcher Malcolm McCullough (1996) describes as “authorship and origins”. By incorporating religious symbolism with a sincere intention to uphold the uniqueness of the people in my life I am injecting spirit.

However, the central design process practised during the development of this series was the digitising. The conversion of a drawn image to stitch commands for an industrial machine is highly individual due to multiple design decisions that are made at every point. It is an art in itself, in *Digital Imagination*, McCullough discusses how digital design methods can let imaginative ideas come to life; “Concepts become things. We can’t touch them yet, but already we can look at them, point at them and work on them as though with hand held tools” (McCullough, 1996, cited in Treadway, 2004, p.272). During the development of this series I have used Stylista software to take my ideas into the digital realm, and out of the end of a very fast needle. Although I have developed expertise as a digitiser, thanks to professional training at Sotech in Auckland, I am only at the beginning of the digitising journey.

Mastering the digitising was essential to having control over the design aesthetic, as seen in the earliest digitised samples of this project which resemble mass produced tablecloths. By examining examples of contemporary digital embroidery, I could see how other digitisers produced particular effects. Comparing the embroidery designs of commercially produced fabrics, I deciphered the digitising methods used and applied them to my own work. A key aspect in this process is the analysis of the embroidery fill types, density and stitches used. From an industrial perspective, more stitches and colour changes equates to higher production costs. From the perspective of this project, trying to restrict the number of stitches down keeps stitch times down; the final saintly embroideries have approximately 200,000 stitches and take 6-8 hours to stitch out, not exactly instantaneous.

Within the commercially produced fabrics I examined, for example the embroidered upholstery by GP and J Baker (fig 19), repetition is employed as a design technique so less digitising is necessary; digitising can be a slow and laborious process. Just as digital design researcher Craig Crawford states;

...digital innovation continues to be supplemented by hand-rendered paper or fabric artwork that is scanned and manipulated electronically. There is not always a temporal advantage in working this way as it can often take as long to render artwork as by hand, but the opportunity to alter colours, scale and repeat is greatly enhanced once the design exists in the virtual domain (Crawford, 2000, cited in Treadaway, 2004, p.259)

The choice of “fill” stitches used was a central to the design aesthetic of the embroidery. I was drawn to the embroidered portraits of established English artist Claire Heathcote whose work inspired the use of different decorative fills to delineate variances in tone (Pritchard, 2007). For example, the different fills used in the hair of “Tessa as St Lucy” define different texture and shadow. The use of an eye-shaped stitch fill to decorate St Lucy’s dress mirrors the eye symbols in the background and border. In particular the utilisation and development of the photo stitch fill became central to the design of embroidered series. I became interested in using photostitch for its “shroud-like” qualities. The recognizable image appears to be embedded in the fabric, especially when lit from behind. By experimenting with different stitch widths and lengths, I reached a density of stitch





*Figure 20*



*Figure 21*

that created a photorealistic effect (see appendix 2).

I also drew inspiration from contemporary artists who used digital embroidery as a medium, especially those who utilised it figuratively. As in this series, Justin Morin uses digital photographs to create embroidered portraits (fig 20). It appears he uses mainly “standard fill” in different stitch directions, the reflective surface of the threads creates different tonal effects. Angelo Filomeno uses digital embroidery on Shantung silk to discuss ideas around life and death (fig 21). It is interesting to note that both of these artists employ outside embroidery studios to digitize and stitch out their work. I have been in the unique position of digitiser and designer for the tajima embroidery machine at Massey University. This has enabled me to design from the perspective of knowing what will embroider most efficiently and effectively, and to utilise the digitising process as a design tool ☺





Figure 22



# Illumination: Divine Light

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**“Light transfigures and transforms as well as illumines,  
so is an ideal medium for visualising an experience of the divine”**

**(Loverance, 2007, p.77).**

**I**llumination is used to describe spiritual ideas in art in different ways. Illuminated manuscripts use intense colours and metallic effects so that the work appears otherworldly. Churches utilise the universal metaphor of light as God through the implementation of stained glass to create a sense of atmosphere and contemporary artists have used lightboxes as a metaphor for holy light emanating from within.

Illuminated manuscripts are ornamented religious texts (fig 22). The illumination refers to the gold and silver leaf and vivid pigments used in the illustrations and decoration. Many of the oldest surviving representations of Catholic saints are found in medieval illuminated manuscripts (Cormack, 2007). During research for this project I have particularly focused on the illuminated manuscripts known as “Books of Hours” which were richly illustrated prayer books commissioned by wealthy collectors in a similar way to contemporary art patrons (Putnam, 1962). Often these patrons requested that their images be included within the religious pictures, for example here (fig 23) Mary of Guelders is illustrated as the Virgin Mary in an illumination commissioned by her of the annunciation. In a similar way I am including images of people I know within the embroidery designs; by drawing attention to the aspects of these people that set them apart from others and embroidering these quirks of personality, they become exaggerated or illuminated.

The “Books of Hours” became a rich source of inspiration for colour, motif, pattern and design composition. The use of intense colour with gold and silver leaf brought dimensionality and life to the religious images. The colours of daily living in medieval times, without synthetic dyes, pigments, and artificial light, would have been very muted compared to today, the vivid colours of the manuscripts would have appeared luminous and other-worldly. Illuminated prayer books were treasures designed to uplift the reader with their beauty; “... the diverse colours wherewith the book is illustrated, not unworthily represent the multiple grace of heavenly wisdom”(Putman, 1962, p.93). The pigments used by the medieval artists included ultramarine sourced from lapis lazuli, verdigris green from copper and saffron. Many of the pigments were exotic and expensive; originally lapis lazuli was sourced from one remote mine in the mountains of Afghanistan and was more valuable than





Figure 23

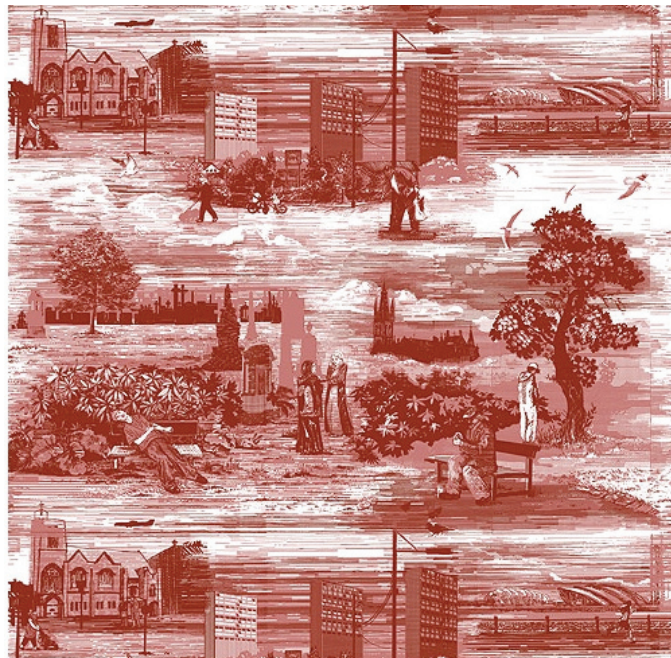


Figure 23

gold. The pigments used in medieval illuminations have inspired the colour choice of the threads used in the saintly embroideries.

Another design technique used in illuminations to captivate the audience was the highly decorative and imaginative illustrations in the borders. Often these decorative elements contained symbols that referred to the religious moment in the main illustration, but typically they were of more earthly references like flowers and animals, providing a profane contrast to the sacred (Harthan, 1977). In the embroidered images I have stitched, I have adhered to the manuscript format of a main illustration, which contains the saintly image surrounded by a decorative border. Here, the symbols, which identify the Catholic saint are the main motif. Other flowers, animals and decorative motifs have been adapted and re-worked from the “Books of Hours” but all have symbolic significance. Even the symbolic meanings of the decorative flowers have been researched to ensure relevance to saintly subjects, for example, in *Tessa as Saint Lucy*, the blossoms are based on the St Lucia cherry, blossoms symbolise feminine power.

Pattern and decoration has often been reviled during the twentieth century. In *Textiles Today*, Chloe Colchester states “...revivals of pattern during the twentieth century present an interesting counterpoint to mainstream modernism. They indicate a range of dissatisfactions with the limitations of rational, secular modernist thought” (Colchester, 2007, p.113). One of the ways contemporary designers have contributed to the current revival in pattern is by referencing historic conventions, “re-invoking aspects of the culture and values of the periods preceding 20th Century modernism” (Colchester, 2007, p.113).

I have attempted to balance the aesthetic of a traditional illumination, so that the traditional aspects resonate with the viewer, but have also incorporated digital styles (such as photostitch) to signify the contemporary context. Other textile designers who have reworked historic artistic conventions and in doing so make statements about contemporary culture include Alistair McCauley and Paul Simmons, known in their designs as Timorous Beasties. The Glasgow Toile (2005) (fig 24) is based on the structure of “toile de Jouy”, traditional fabric designs originating from Jouy in France from 1760-1843. They are monochromatic landscape scenes, usually of peaceful rural scenes. By using the same colours, line weights and structure, the work appears like a traditional pastoral scene until closer inspection reveals contemporary scenes of drug-taking, mugging and the general dystopia of modern urban Scotland (Hemmings, 2005). Here, the Timorous Beasties are illuminating their own ideas about their society in a paradoxical way.

Illumination is also defined as spiritual or intellectual enlightenment; it is the intention that these textile works will express spiritual ideas. Illumination also means elucidation; clarifying these ideas so that they are clear to the viewer has been an important consideration during the design process. One way to express that spiritual ideas are present is to use illumination or light as a metaphor within the design to express these connections. Light as a symbol plays a powerful role in mythology, art and literature. Metaphorically, light is power, vision, knowledge and glory. Light is the element of God, light is divine. “When Christians say God is light, they mean that God is not merely like light, God is light itself, the source of all life” (Baldessari & Cranston, 2004, p.8).

The light shining through stained glass onto the congregation and illuminating religious figures is a device used





Figure 25



Figure 26

to convey a sense of drama in the church. Theatres can be considered to utilise light in a similar way (fig 25). Light coming through a window implies that there is something beyond; Roger Homan, professor of religious studies at Brighton University, states that the significance of light shining through stained glass is central to a church's spiritual function. As well as the metaphor of light penetrating the darkness, he believes that the colours of the glass create a muted effect, an ambience that adds to the sense of stillness and reflection within a church which makes you "proceed reverently...we view not an image but the light beyond which it mediates for us. The image owes its life to that ultimate light. This sense is much keener than it is in respect of the reflection of light upon opaque surfaces. The stained glass image is therefore like an ikon: we are not to look at it but through it (Homan, 2005, p.2).

Self-illuminated boxes express this metaphor; like a stained glass window, the suggestion is that there is something beyond the image itself. In describing the light of Saint Lucy, Sister Wendy refers to true light being something from within (Beckett & Biblioteca apostolica vaticana., 1998). Artists who have used light boxes to express spiritual ideas include Michael Parekowhai who has used traditional kowhaiwhai motifs from the spine of the wharenui. The wharenui is the Maori place of spiritual worship and kowhaiwhai are designs representing tribal lineage with the koru, which represents new life, as the central motif. Parekowhai enhances the spiritual significance of these kowhaiwhai designs and brings them into a contemporary and Christian context by illuminating them from within (fig 26).

The idea that textiles could be displayed in this way was generated by a display of silk scarves stretched onto light boxes in Liberty of London that I viewed in 2008. Although the scarves are beautiful draped on the body, on the wall they become elevated to luminous works of art. In the lit objects I have created, I have purposefully used a sheer silk paj as a base fabric that has been digitally printed in order to retain a translucent effect. The print design has been created from miniature religious symbols particular to each saint, mirroring the embroidered motifs. The design repeat structure is drawn from the tile designs of Italian Renaissance churches and the tile motifs illustrated in medieval illuminations (see appendix 1). By fading the print from the centre, a halo naturally forms when the saint's head is embroidered over it.

The halo is a universal pictorial device used to portray holy people; a circle, often centred from the nose, which can be described as holy light emanating from within. In *Kundalini; The Evolutionary Journey in Man*, Jungian psychologist James Hillman describes how an extension of consciousness can be seen as a luminous circle around the head; "The saint is painted with a halo, implying that sanctity has something to do with illumination, with altered consciousness" (Hillman & Krishna, 1967, p.115). Within the context of contemporary spirituality, a halo can be described as an aura. To examine this concept further I visited Aura reader Sonna-Ra in Raumatī. She describes aura as "a representation of the higher self" (Sonna-Ra, personal communication, August 4, 2008) an analysis that is in line with traditional saint symbology. We discussed the process of learning to 'read' auras; I believe this has much to do with sensitivity and body language and pose, which have been important considerations within these embroidered portraits. In this series I have used metallic threads emanating from the head to create glowing halos.

Embroidery takes on a new dimensionality when lit from behind as seen in this x-rayed image depicting patron



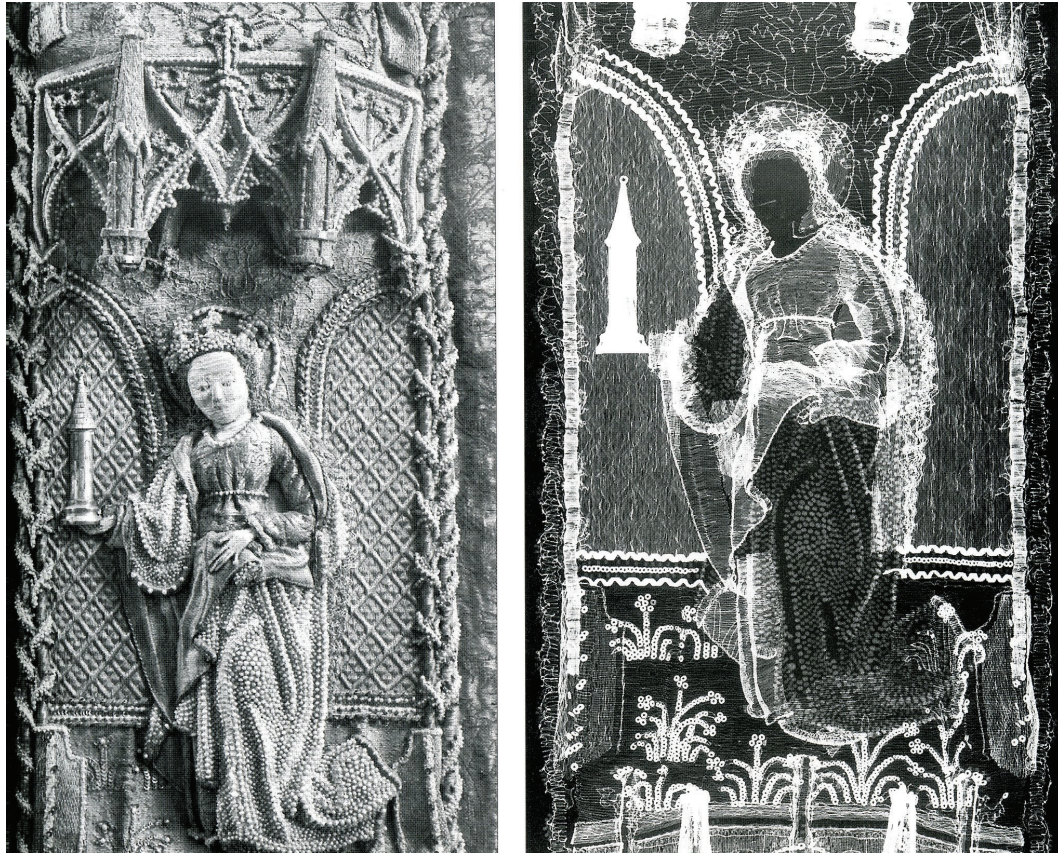


Figure 27



Figure 27

saint of architects, St Barbara, holding her tower (fig 27). During experimentation with light boxes, I was drawn to the way tiny dots of light pierced through the stitch holes. The light shines through the translucent fabric but actually comes through the holes as well. The heavy thread (which could be considered the *noa*) contrasts with the light (*tapu*). In his discussion of being in a “State of Grace”, Hillman describes the experience; “the mighty indescribable world to which I belong, as a slender beam of light slanting into a dark room through a tiny hole does not belong to the room it illuminates, but to the effulgent sun millions and millions of miles away”(Hillman & Krishna, 1967, p.127). In these embroidered lightboxes, the source is not the sun but electricity, which can be seen as coming from the same source as all energy, and perhaps godliness. The use of electricity to illuminate also brings to mind the computer or television screen, which can be seen as the contemporary window to the world, the cord plugged into the collective consciousness (fig 28) ☼



Figure 29

# Christian Art: The Tinsel Casket

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“Adherence to Judeo-Christian practices (in modern art)...has mostly been avoided, at least partly because of a distrust of Christianity’s role in the social ethics of the world in recent centuries and partly because of over familiarity”

(McEvilly, 2004, p.11).

Religion is a sensitive and deeply emotive subject. It has been suggested to me that to discuss religion within a design context is “brave”. There are however many artists who work directly with religious imagery but have taken ideas surrounding the spiritual outside of the traditional church context to create their own spiritual meaning. In these embroideries, I have used Christian art conventions and symbols to depict people I know in a way that upholds them.

By doing this is a new way, I am attempting to express constructions of my own spirituality, following the tradition of artists such as Colin McCahon, Rita Angus, Francis Alys and Heather Straka.

In *Christian Art*, Rowena Loverance (2007) suggests that a decline in Christianity presents new artistic opportunities; “it is only traditional Christianity that is in decline. The twenty-first century has actually seen a growth of interest in religion, or at least in personal spirituality...however this has not yet translated into a new religious vocabulary” (Loverance, 2007, p.45). This textile project references Christian artistic conventions in a new way that intends to contribute to this new visual vocabulary. In particular the use of stitch and digital technology to re-present symbolism related to past depictions of saints. The motifs and imagery could be seen to be clichéd but are a powerful visual tool, because even in a secular society, our connection to them is still strong. They are part of our “ancient memory of the actual” (Milne, personal communication, October 19, 2010).

Religion and spirituality have always been at the core of New Zealand creative practice. Director of the Nadene Milne Gallery, Nadene Milne agrees, “no, I don’t think it is brave, it’s normal. There is virtually no other discussion...spirituality is the central issue in New Zealand art” (Milne, personal communication, October 19, 2010). Growing up in Dunedin, the creative legacy of Colin McCahon and James K. Baxter was pervasive. Both were heavily influenced by Catholicism; Colin McCahon’s *The Blessed Virgin Compared to a Jug of Pure Water* (1948) (fig 29) was on permanent display at the Hocken Library where I analysed it as part of school certificate





*Figure 30*



*Figure 31*

art aged fifteen. Here, the use of Catholic symbolism is direct and evocative without adhering to Christian art conventions. It was the first time I interpreted spiritual symbolism without associating it with religious dogma.

Another early influence was Rita Angus. I first encountered *Rutu* (fig 30) when it was on permanent display at the then National Gallery which is now the Massey University fashion department. When Rita Angus painted herself as a goddess in *Rutu* (1951) she used Christian conventions and cross-cultural ideas (she paints herself as Polynesian) to represent her own idealised spirituality. The gestures, pose, consideration of background and use of a golden halo are drawn from historical representations of Catholic Madonnas and saints. She uses this as a device to express a sense of spirituality; one based on the concepts of Christianity but not necessarily connected to the Catholic religion. *Rutu* was exhibited at Te Papa at the retrospective exhibition *Rita Angus: Life and Vision* at Te Papa in 2008. This exhibition also included a portrait of her friend Robert Irwin, posed as St Luke, the patron saint of painters (fig 31). In writing about this image for *Art New Zealand*, Ruth Watson describes this image; “His unclouded gaze and halo create an image of timeless clarity and innocence”(Watson, 2008). In this painting, Angus upholds her friend’s special gifts as an artist and gives him otherworldly qualities. Similarly, I will uphold my family and friends saintly characteristics in embroidered portraits even though I know they aren’t entirely innocent.

Heather Straka who exhibited her work at the Nadene Milne Gallery in Queenstown incorporates similar conventions. Straka not only deals with ideas of religion and the influence of early missionaries such as shown in *Jesus in Furs* (2005) (fig 32) but also explores taboo notions of cultural appropriation. Straka uses Catholic imagery in a subversive way and describes herself as a “recovering” Catholic. Although there are aspects of the Catholic Church I reject, I don’t believe the church has damaged me. I am simply investigating my heritage and trying to bring to light some of the stories and symbolism surrounding the saints that may be lost.

Internationally established artist Francis Alys bought the story of St Fabiola to light in an exhibition in New York in 2008. Alys presented a collection of 300 Saint Fabiola representations, mostly paintings but some embroideries and collages (fig 33). Fabiola was a saint from a wealthy Roman family and was married to an abusive man. She left her husband and remarried which is forbidden by the Catholic church. When her lover died she pledged herself and her money to the church and underwent a laborious penitence. The church eventually welcomed her back and made her an example of virtue. She is the patron saint of divorced people. Through a novel by Cardinal Wiseman, Fabiola became a Victorian heroine and was painted by Jean-Jacque Henner in late nineteenth Century (Volk, 2008). This painting provided the prototype for the copies collected in this exhibition. By bringing together many different “authentic copies” into a gallery setting, Alys subverts the idea of kitsch. “Styles and genres abound, from academic realism to caricature, folk art and photorealism... while the artists have tried to stick to the prototype, they’ve always added something of themselves; their homes, their histories, their sadness and desire” (Volk, 2008, p.125). The exhibition/installation also illustrates that St Fabiola’s image was popular enough to want to copy. Maybe because having a religious picture in your house invites comment, or maybe her story of bravery (in the face of domestic abuse) resonates.

In *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art*, Elkins (2004) suggests there is no place in a contemporary secular society for art that is sincere in its expression of religious values, or it appears to be propaganda for



Figure 32



Figure 33



religion. The imagery has to demonstrate that the religious content is woven into the work rather than being straightforward or openly pious; "...and it follows that irony must pervade the work, must be the air it breathes" (Elkins, 2004, p.17). The series I have embroidered is not a straightforward expression of devotion to Catholic saints; my feelings towards Catholicism are too conflicted to truly believe dogma. However, the intention is to encourage knowledge about the saints and to express a sense of spirituality.

The use of saintly imagery to represent people who are clearly not saints (or even very religious) is ironic. When someone is described as a saint it can have negative connotations of being pious, sanctimonious, or being so perfect no one can relate to you. However, we all have a saintly side that desires to be held up above society and "beatified". It is in this area of tension that an element of humour and irony can come into the work. Although there is an ironic element, the intention is a sincere exploration of ideas of saintliness and the desire to uphold the personal saints in my life.

From November 15 this year, the Whangarei Art Museum will present *Credo and Quest: Religion and Spirituality in New Zealand Art*. It will be one of the few major surveys of New Zealand creative practice curated from a spiritual viewpoint. It is an iteration of the established idea that art galleries are "the new urban cathedrals of our time" (Potham, 2010), that culture and art have become the new spiritual source. The artists represented include designer David Trubridge's *Icarus* lamps. In the media release, curator Scott Potham states "the subject is fraught with almost rabid sensitivities and embedded cultural values. Yet artists have long been at the forefront of questioning of faith by interrogating and dissecting personal and collective values – on the quest for what it is to lead a fully realised and fulfilling human life" (Potham, 2010) ❧



*Figure 34*

# Conclusion

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**I**n creating a series of digitally embroidered representations of saints, I have illuminated the stories of the saints and upheld the unique and exceptional qualities of my personal saints. I have applied this research to designs for an industrial embroidery machine and in the process have developed digital embroidery design technology.

In this series I have sought to light the stories of St Margaret, St Lucy, St Homobonius, St Dorothea. St Catherine and St Anthony will be completed for the masters of design exhibition in February 2011. Historically these saints would have had the status of the celebrities of today but with the miraculous powers of being an intermediary with god, now some of their stories are fading into history. Although our society is becoming more secular, the inspirational and entertaining stories of the saints can have relevance within contemporary life without necessarily accepting Catholic dogma.

The symbolism surrounding the saints is unique and extraordinary. Although images of the saints are often beautiful and inspirational as they are, knowledge of the deeper meanings of saint symbology can provide a visual language for designers to speak about divine ideas. Here, I have taken the symbols and connected them with close friends and family members to create a series of personal patron saints, and to honour the positive contribution these people have made in my life. Examining religious symbols and the stories of the saints did become a spiritual journey, not in a thunderbolt kind of way, but by revealing different pathways to explore personal spirituality. To analyse and bring to light the unique and exceptional qualities of my chosen canon through embroidery designs was a connecting experience and I believe I fulfilled my intention to uphold them in a sincere yet lighthearted way.

The legacy of religious embroidery that was often stitched by nuns inspired the geometric layout and stitch types used in the designs. I reflected on the intention of the nuns of history, stitching the lives of the saints as a holy ritual. Initially I believed that by using a digital embroidery machine, I would save a substantial amount of time, and the machine would “pray” for me, however, learning the software and the slow digitizing process has been a dragon I have had to slay. Once the images are digital however, the ability to manipulate and replicate the designs is rapidly achieved, and I have since ascertained that many sacred vestments are now embroidered in this way ([www.catholicembroidery.com](http://www.catholicembroidery.com)).

One of the significant contributions to the field of textile design made here is within the development of digital stitch techniques. In particular I pushed photostitch techniques to create photo real effects in selected fill





Figure 35



area. I also experimented with appliqué and created further challenge by using silk paj as a base fabric for this series. Fragile silk paj is not the easiest fabric to embroider, but by using the finest silk to enhance translucent effects, I have developed knowledge of the limits of stitch density, to prevent the silk from splitting apart, and “compensation”, to avoid bunching. I have experimented with different backings and have concluded that “trickfilm” is by far the best for light fabrics. These parameters could be built upon and extended to enable the creation of lace and embroidery-lasercut combination fabrics. There are many areas of digital design development that could be taken further. I particularly would like to improve knowledge of registration in order to create lengths of embroidered fabric with a single head embroidery machine.

Illuminating the textiles has given them more dimensionality. Although it could be seen as literal to illuminate the saints, I believe light boxes elevate the textiles in a way that lampshades (my original intention) couldn't. These embroidered light boxes are prototypes for an exhibition of an extended canon of patron saints (my initial twelve) that I intend to show in 2011. Although the images have deep personal meaning to me, they could be sold to people who are interested in having an image of a particular patron saint, if you were a nurse for example, or as the interest I have had, in people with the same saint name, like Lucy. They could also have particular appeal to other “lapsed” Catholics who are interested in their cultural heritage. I have considered that the light boxes could be sold as small limited editions, to take advantage of the ability for the digital medium to be easily replicated, but at 6-8 hours for each piece to stitch, there is still a significant labour component involved.

For a viewer to be interested in Christian art or designs does not necessarily mean they are religious.

Writer David Freedberg, in an interview discussing *Beyond Belief: Modern Art and the Religious Imagination*, exhibition of international art that discussed religion at the National Gallery of Victoria (featuring work by Colin McCahon) says, “What the Beyond Belief exhibition shows is that art and religion interpenetrate, that they're mutually fructifying, and that religious imagination is present in all area of life. I believe that in one way or another everybody is endowed with a religious imagination”(Crumlin, 1998). Freedberg goes on to say that religious imagination is suppressed in some individuals because of age or society, and that art can call on the remnants of it. I have discovered many references to Catholicism within the realm of fine arts however there are few within the field of design. I believe one reason is that the use of industrial processes to create religious designs can be considered kitsch. This is an area of discussion that could be elaborated on in further research, however there is rich potential for designs to be inspired by spiritual ideas without being dogmatic or overly insincere.

The intention of undertaking a masters project was to update my textile design skills, particularly in the digital design area, and further my knowledge of Catholic symbolism. I have been privileged to start this project at the same time as Massey University purchased the Tajima embroidery machine. The opportunity to learn digitising programmes and to operate an embroidery machine has enabled me to develop a skill that can be translated into accessible business opportunities. Hitoshi Uije, director of digital print at Philadelphia University says, “What I see in the future is a neo-cottage industry for designers. They can be a designer, they can be a manufacturer, and they can be a retailer” (Uije, 2008, cited in Lui, 2008, p.59)

In 2008 I used the Tajima embroidery machine to produce embroidery designed by Auckland fashion designer



*Figure 36*



Adrian Hailwood for his collection shown at NZ Fashion Week (fig 34). Hailwood has since expressed interest in the design and production of embroidery for further collections. Similarly, I have received interest from established New Zealand fashion designer Tanya Carlson to develop embroidery for her lines and I could extend this service to other fashion designers. A digital embroidery business operated by a textile designer could be used to produce costume and set design embroidery for film and television. The possibility to design and sample embroidered products here (for my own designs or others) and have them produced at larger factories (for example in China) also has potential as a textile design business. The name of this future business comes from one of the saints I have encountered within this project; Fabiola.

In conclusion, like St Lucy's lamp this research has been revealing in a physical and spiritual way. Research into the saints has brought to light a wealth of textile design inspiration that can be applied to embroidery designs within a commercial or art context, while also expressing spiritual ideas. Physically, development of digital embroidery techniques in combination with updated computer aided design skills, I have established new design opportunities.

As this project was coming to an end in October 2010, I went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem on the Whanganui River to follow the footsteps of Suzanne Aubert and to reflect on this project from a spiritual perspective (fig 36). Unfortunately the sisters who I had arranged to meet could not be there, but I am sure that the spirits of Mother Aubert and James K Baxter were. In a poem presented as thanks to one of the Sisters of Compassion, Baxter wrote of illumination;

And then we are at peace

Like the fog, like the river, like a roofless house

That lets the sun stream in because it cannot help it.

James K. Baxter Farewell to Hiruharama (1969)





Embroidered Illuminations

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# Part 2





# Holly

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as

## Saint Margaret Of Antioch



Patron Saint of Childbirth and the Dying

Margaret, her name means Pearl, the mystical centre, the object of the spiritual quest.

Holly, the crown of thorns whose berries are the beads of Christ's blood. Its points protect through the threat of pain, the essence of its bark is a balm for the dying.

Margaret, from Antioch in Turkey a millennium and a half ago. When Christianity was a crime her teen rebellion was a secret marriage to Christ. Banished, she wandered as a shepherdess protecting her flock.

Holly, my youngest sister, a gentle '80's child. Trained in the arts of care for the smallest souls who have arrived too soon and for the bodies of those whose time it is to leave. Like a shepherdess she is vigilant, guiding her patients through the deadly nightshade and checking for the signs of wolves.

Margaret was the object of the governor Olybrius's obsession. Humiliated by her rejection (and a regular narcissistic psychopath), he ordered her to be lashed until her blood ran like a stream, then imprisoned her in a tile-lined cell.

Satan appeared in her cell in the form of a dragon. Satan, that great enthusiast for self-destruction, here to prevent us from the freedom of enlightenment, from the freedom of being the best we can be. Too weak to resist, Margaret is sucked whole into the beast's hell mouth, her dress snagging on the devil's teeth.

She travels to the dark recesses of its shadowy bowels where secret mysteries of faith are hidden and revealed only to those who continue their journey, like Margaret. Refreshed by her discoveries, she calmly makes the sign of the cross with her fingers. The dragon cannot endure this spiritual irritation and its back splits open like a chrysalis. Saint Margaret emerges perfect and reborn, surrounded by a golden aura.

Those in childbirth or dying invoke Saint Margaret's help; Holly's delicate hand is offered in kindness to those stepping into and out of their earthly lives.



Figure 37

# Tessa

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as

## Saint Lucy



### Patron Saint of Vision and Eyesight

Lucy, Lucia her name means light; the light that connects our eyes to the sun and the light that connects our souls to God.

She was born about 300 in Sicily. Lucy carried her dying mother to the altar of Saint Agatha at Catania; exhausted, she rested her head on the altar and Agatha with her breasts on a plate, appeared to her in a vision. “Virgin sister, faith alone will cure your mother”. Lucy looked into her mother’s eyes and her suffering instantly ceased. They both converted to Christianity which was against the laws of the Roman Empire, and Lucy made the radical decision to remain chaste; her pagan boyfriend Paschasius was not impressed.

He told the police. So they came for her with a thousand men and a team of oxen to drag her to a brothel, the usual punishment for brides of Christ. But her faith made her unmovable. They tried to burn her alive, but the flames fanned a perfect circle around her. Paschasius placed a sword against her throat but before he cut, Lucy tore out her eyes which he had always admired and presented them to him on a plate.

Miraculously, a new pair, more luminous than the first, grew in the empty sockets. Although she had no eyes she could see, her spiritual vision remained.

Tessa, a Gisborne girl I met in Goa, has a spirit that will not be dimmed. Like Lucy she guides us with a visionary torch. She helps to create fantastical journeys, ‘Sploring through swaying gardens of flowers that she has made from baby’s hands, and over Buddha fields to storytellers up trees and into caves where magic men turn into dancing lights, through vines to feel the rhythm, and our spirits are renewed.

St Lucy is prayed to so that we can see. Tessa frames the joyful, the colourful, and the cheeky with her camera so that our eyes and spirits can delight. Tessa sent a message from the convent at Jerusalem, Sister Sue is waiting for you.





Figure 38

# Bill

---

as

## Saint Homobonius

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**Patron Saint of Business People**

Homobonius Tucenghi from Cremona Italy, his name means “good man” and Bill is my good man.

He was exceptionally bonus at making money, and sharing it with those who needed, a trait so rare that they rushed him into being a saint in 1199.

A saint Super-Star, Pope John Paul dedicated 1999 to Homobonius, because he wasn't a priest or martyr, he was an ordinary dad and husband who was extraordinarily generous and that kind of saintliness is easy to understand.

He has a magic money bag where the alchemy of the deal takes place, this is his favourite place and he keeps it scrupulously clean. The greatest treasure he's found in there are his daughters whose images are impressed forever on his soul. The cords of the purse are the heart strings that connect us and gather our wee family together.

Bill is a flying fish, happiest in the mercurial sea. Flying from Pacific island to Pacific island to make magic money bags that distribute treasure fairly to the poor. His winning smile, bravery and honesty open doors to Ministers and Generals and on to fishing boats in heavenly locations.

We called you “dollar Bill”, you changed our perception. The reality of planting trees and watering them to yield fruit for jam, and branches to swing from and build houses in. And if you climb high in the money tree you can see the other side of the world. And you've shared it with me.

St Homobonius is invoked by business people because of his skill at creating profit in an honest way. Bill shares these gifts; like Homobonius he's good and he's all man.



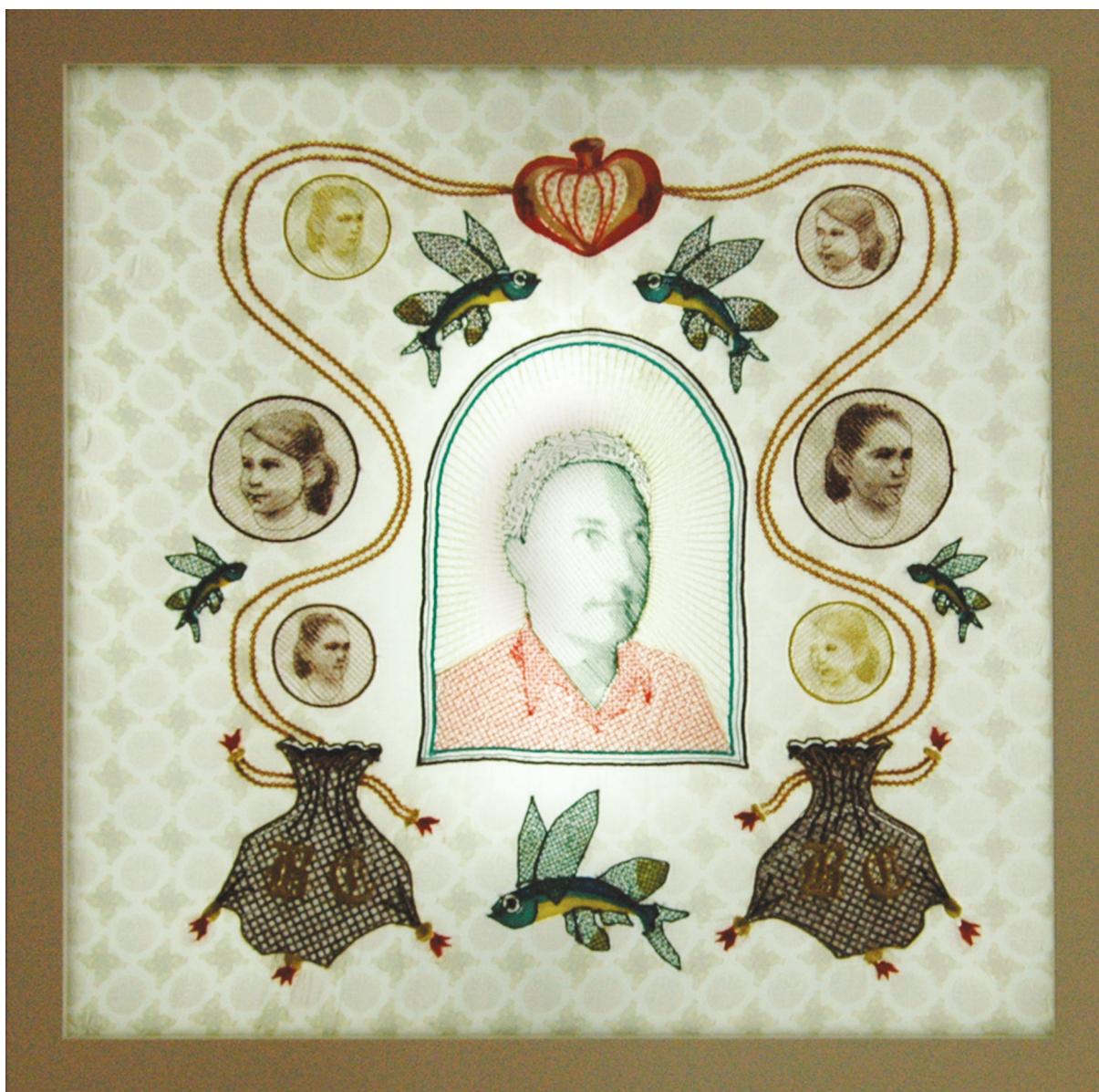


Figure 39



# Julia

---

as

# Saint Dorothea



**Patron Saint of Florists and Gardeners**

Dorothea means “gift of god”. She was a staunch young beauty from Cappodiocia in Turkey who refused to worship idols. Like many other Christians, she was sent to death by the Roman emperor Diocletian who believed that he was actually God.

Unfazed by her fate, Dorothea declared that she will be going to the Garden of Paradise in heaven. “Ha ha!” They mocked, “send us flowers and fruit when you get there”. As she lay her head on the executioner’s block, she prayed to God to send fruit and flowers from heaven.

After her head rolled, an angel appeared as a small child carrying a basket of rare roses and three exotic apples as a gift for the executioner. The crowd instantly converted to Christianity.

The apples are a symbol of knowledge, of the choice between food for the soul or food for the body. Julia the flower mother nourishes both.

Roses of continual life and re-birth climb out of your basket where the guardian ancestors bloom and future spirits bud. You live in a garden of cornflowers and granny bonnets, the symbol of the holy and creative spirit you inspire in us.

Florists and gardeners evoke Saint Dorothea for abundance and beauty. Julia provides magical creativity and nourishment for the soul.



Figure 40







Embroidered Illuminations

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# Part 3



# Appendix 1.1



## Key for St Margaret Process

	St Margaret emerging from the dragon
	‘Hell Mouth’ dragon for applique frame
	Photo of Holly
	Illumination inspiration for deadly nightshade
	Symbols link chart
	Drawings
	Digitalised files
	Embroidery sample
	Tile Pattern from Italian church
	Background digitally printed silk

### The Symbols

<b>Satan</b>	Spiritual block
<b>Dragon</b>	Satan
<b>Sheep</b>	Shepherdess, guidance
<b>Sword</b>	Martyrdom
<b>Holly</b>	Christ’s blood

# Design Process for St Margaret















# Appendix 1.2



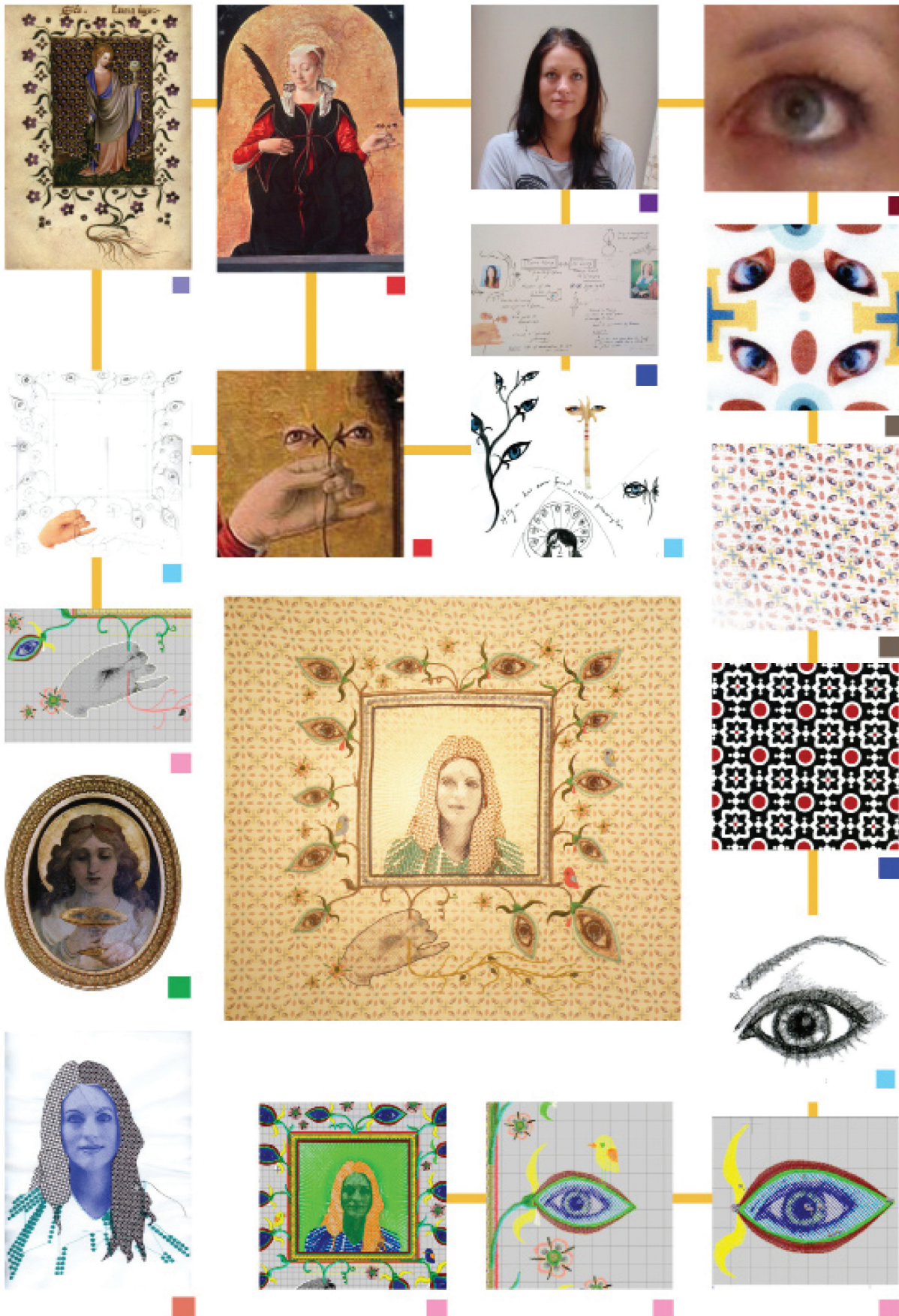
## Key for St Lucy Process

	St Lucy holding her eyes on stalks, inspiration for eye and hand motif
	St Lucy, frame and blossom inspiration
	Photo of Tessa
	Eye close up for background tile
	Background digitally printed paj silk
	Tile inspired from Italian church
	Digitalised embroidery sample
	St Lucy holding her eyes on a plate
	Drawings and collage
	Digital EMG files

### The Symbols

Eyes	Physical and spiritual vision
Hand	Communication and knowledge
Blossom	Feminine power











# Design Process for St Lucy



# Appendix 1.3



## Key for St Homobonius Process

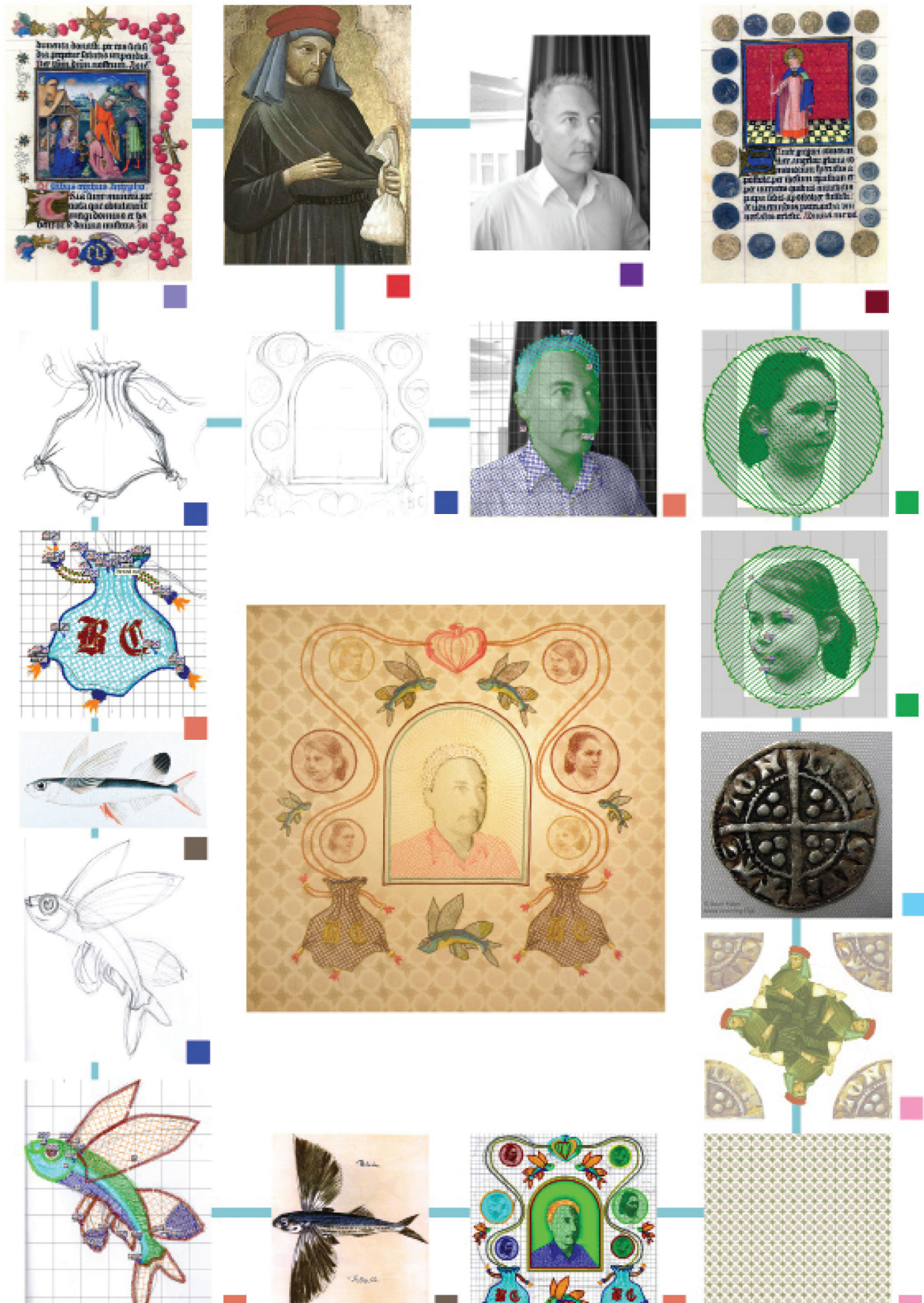
	St Homobonius carrying his coin purse
	Purse motif from illumination of adoration of the maggi
	Photo of Bill
	Adaptation of coin motif from illumination of St Augustine
	Visual inspiration for flying fish motif
	Drawings
	Digitalised files
	Daughters as coins
	Ancient Roman coin
	Background tile photoshop file

### The Symbols

Purse	Identity, inner treasure
Coin	Imprints on the soul, treasure
Cord	Link between material and spiritual worlds
Fish	Male fertility, Christ
Flying	Heroism













# Design Process for St Homobonius



# Appendix 1.4



## Key for St Dorothea

	St Dorothea with Angel carrying basket
	St Dorothea carrying basket
	Photo of Julia
	Frame from Mary of Guelders
	Roses showing ancestral lineage in Illumination of St Anne
	Tile inspiration from Italian church
	Flowers for background tile
	Background tile photoshop file
	Drawings and collage
	Digitalised EMG files

### The Symbols

Flowers	Souls of the dead, evolution
Basket/bowl	Women's work, fertility
Apples	Knowledge of the physical and spiritual
Columbine	Granny Bonnets, flower of the holy spirit
Cornflower	Christ
Angel	Messenger from God
Rose	Continuation of life and rebirth



# Design Process for St Dorothea

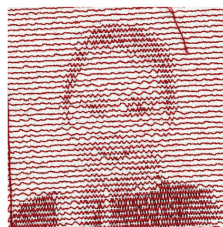




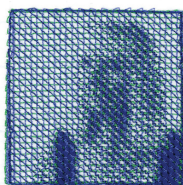
# Appendix 2.1



# Digitising Progression



November 2009



March 2010



May 2010



June 2010



September 2010

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