

The Ceramic Installations and Papercuts of Charlotte Hodes

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the collaged paper-cuts and ceramic installations of Charlotte Hodes. Over many years she has developed a methodology centred on collage in which she has manufactured her own material in order to assemble a palette of patterns and other references in order to work on both large-scale paper cuts or using silkscreened printed ceramic transfers to cut in order to decorate manufactured ceramic ware for her installations. Referencing Paula Rego, Nancy Spero and Henri Matisse, Hodes has forsaken the traditional use of the brush on oil on canvas for, in her case of the scalpel blade as a drawing tool. The paper also considers the manner in which her imagery and attitude drive this practice, challenging a number of presumptions about the relationship of fine art to craft.

PRINT, COLLAGE AND CERAMIC

This paper considers the work of the British artist Charlotte Hodes. It highlights both the importance of print within Hodes' multifaceted practice and how collage is used as a working method within her overall production. In providing an overview of Hodes' practice and her approach to collage and print, I also propose how her work can be understood as subverting traditional female stereotypes. I should qualify that I draw upon my relationship with Hodes as her life-long partner. Whilst this might result in the occasional loss of objectivity, it has provided me with rare insights on a daily basis into her practice and working methods over four decades. This paper draws upon unrecorded conversations between us in her studio in London throughout 2021.

For almost two decades, Charlotte Hodes has forged a reputation built upon large scale papercuts, one such winning her the Jerwood Drawing Prize in 2006, as well as ambitious installations formed from her hand stencilled decorated ceramic ware as evidenced by her

commissioned installation Spode Trees and Dressed Silhouettes for the British Ceramic Biennial in 2015 and in After the Taking of Tea for Ruthin Craft Centre, Wales in 2019. In making these works, she set aside traditional oil and canvas to develop a multifaceted practice that retains the language of painting, and turns to print as a process for the production of her decorative collage material. Hodes' tutor when she was a student at the Slade (1982-84) was Paula Rego, who herself turned away from oil on canvas in favour of acrylic on paper, and produced major works using pastel on mounted



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1: Frieze (2017) Charlotte Hodes. Papercut, 865 x 3010mm. Photo: Peter Abrahams

Figure 2: TArtist in studio, London(2021). Photo Paul Coldwell

paper. Hodes has likewise forsaken canvas for paper and ceramics (both vases and ware) but has also discarded the brush in favour of her chosen weapon of choice, the surgeon's scalpel blade, with which she cuts large-scale papercuts and ceramic designs from sheets of printed transfers. Fig. 1 Hodes has used print as a means of producing her own collage material and to provide a ready-made palette from which to draw upon.

Hodes' visual language is grounded in collage. She builds upon the ambitious scale and example of Henri Matisse when, in his later years, he produced his now iconic cut-outs from prepared sheets of coloured paper. Matisse's palette was made from papers painted by his assistants using *Linel gouache* for the reason that these colours directly corresponded to the equivalent colour as printing ink. Initially Matisse had reportedly conceived his cut-outs as 'designs for stencil prints or pouchiors to be looked at in a book rather than as independent pictorial works.' (Elderfield, 1978)) as was the case for his *livres d'artiste Jazz*, published by *Tériade* in 1947. Hodes however has always conceived her papercuts as completed works in themselves, made using a palette from found and painted colour as well as inkjet printed sheets of designs and patterns of her own making. Additionally for her ceramics she makes screen-printed sheets of ceramic transfers from which to cut her designs. Over time, the variety and scope of her palette has expanded, and her studio is now festooned with material which is 'ready-made' for her consumption. These are arranged in boxes according to colour, and the studio has an air of self-discipline and organization. Every off-cut is saved in case it might just be required at a later date.

Nothing in this process is wasted, she is the manufacturer of her own printed collage. This extends to the manner in which she trawls references from the outside world, Indeed, this process of appropriation involves taking images, whether from photographs of her own or found, or objects drawn from both life or from catalogues and subjecting these through the process of drawing and re-drawing towards a refinement of shape and silhouette. These in turn serve as templates from which she cuts her designs. In both the collaged papercuts and her ceramic installations, the scale and ambition of these works sets them apart from conventional expectations. This, alongside and indeed driven by her passionate need to present the female experience with all its complexities and demands, is also what gives these works their authority.

Hodes recalls that as a fine art student at the Slade School of Art the decorative arts were looked down upon as if tainted by notions of craft and industry. During her time as a student in painting, any reference to decoration or indeed illustration was regarded as damning and was further used to endorse prevailing attitudes towards women artists, a point drawn by Llewellyn Negrin in her paper, 'Ornament and the Feminine',

Coupled with the denigration of ornament was its association with the



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 3. After the Taking of Tea (centre) & Remember Me (back wall), installation at Ruthin Craft Centre, Wales (2019) Charlotte Hodes. Photo: Steve Heaton
 Figure 4. After the Taking of Tea installation at Ruthin Craft Centre, Wales (2019) Charlotte Hodes. Hand-cut enamel transfer on 251 pieces of china tableware, on digitally printed cotton satin, 14000cm x 1220mm Photo: Steve Heaton

feminine. As a number of theorists such as Norma Broude (1982), Naomi Schor (1987), Penny Sparke (1995) and Wendy Steiner (2001) have pointed out, ornament was considered an intrinsically feminine domain. Thus, the devaluation of ornament meant at the same time, a dismissal of the feminine as inferior.

Llewellyn Negrin, 'Ornament and the Feminine', (2006)

This attitude can also be seen when considering the writings of the critic Clement Greenberg whose influence was significant in the period while Hodes was studying.

The pairing of femininity and the decorative is a strategy used throughout the 1940's and 50's to distinguish good from bad painting. The authority of his (Greenberg) judgements in these cases rests upon the deep-seated, unexamined cultural attitudes about women's intellectual and creative capacities informed by the hierarchy of art and craft and the low status of women's artistic production within it.

Author (2004)

No such prejudice can be found within Hodes' work and practice; she wholeheartedly draws upon this craft and decorative tradition, recognizing in it its complexity and the inherent collisions of language and style that are commonplace but so often taken for granted. She has built upon her experience of working in the Spode ceramic factory during numerous residencies between 1998-2004 where she became familiar with transfers being printed from copper-engraved plates, the contrast between these prints and how they could be reconfigured and assembled on the ware itself. Later in 2014, with the support of funding from Arts Council England, she researched the archive of historical copper plates at Spode, observing how details would be arranged on the plates for economic and practical reasons. Furthermore, she understood that a ceramic vessel or platter, that might include a cartouche, areas of decoration, pure colour, sprigs, as well as the form of the ceramic itself, might itself be seen as collage.

Hodes' subject matter, which is layered on top of these traditional wares, consciously represents material that has invariably been seen within the domestic environment, traditionally the domain of women.

Charlotte Hodes' artwork takes crafting techniques and objects associated with traditional—particularly feminine—crafts, and displaces the values commonly linked with art/craft.

Westley (2020-21)

Her iconography draws upon this domestic landscape and is populated by images of vessels, utensils, ornaments, patterns, furniture, flowers and computer icons. But for all the elegance and grace of Hodes' work, and indeed these works are unapologetically sumptuous, she is a quietly subversive figure and her vision is rebellious.



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 5. After the Taking of Tea detail (2019) Charlotte Hodes. Hand-cut enamel transfer on china tableware on digitally printed cotton satin. Photo: Steve Heaton
 Figure 6. After the Taking of Tea; Grey Shadow (2018) Charlotte Hodes. Papercut, 550 x 720mm. Photo: Peter Abrahams

We may see it [...] as a positive affirmation of an indispensable aspect of human experience, a reclamation of the feminine as a necessary condition of a healthy and complete life, and as a beautiful and delightful denial of the overbearing claims in the social sphere, of the utilitarian and the instrumental.

Gooding (2007)

Figs 3 & 4 In her monumental installation *After the Taking of Tea* 2021 at Hestercombe, Somerset – which consisted of over 250 individual pieces spread over the surface of numerous trestle tables – Hodes presented the lavish aftermath of a spectacular tea party. Plates were piled up awaiting removal, the place settings were now disrupted, some of the china was broken and her designs leapt from plate to vase, tea cup to bowl, as if determined not to be confined. Silhouettes of women are pictured, as if rising above the chaos, suggesting that they might just leave and abandon their traditional duties. The printed imagery, glazed across various groupings of crockery, plays with notions of tea and teatime, Britishness and Empire, and its historical importance in polite society. This is further endorsed by ribbons of text that weave their way across the ware, featuring quotations referencing tea from amongst others, T.S.Eliot, Thomas de Quincey, Oscar Wilde, George Orwell, Henry James and Kasuso Okakura. Hodes points towards how formality and etiquette, for the most part, has been overturned, but goes further. The women make an appearance to playfully defy historical conventions, they stand on teapots, use tea sieves as mirrors and microphones, and nonchalantly walk across or rest upon the ceramic surfaces.

The figures and patterns weave their way around each other and across the various pieces of china, often flowing from one to the next, with shapes echoing across the room. The imagery is drawn from sources as various as the Spode Museum Trust archive of engravings, 18th-century French art, paper pattern templates and everyday clippings. Her interest in pattern, form and colour is the same regardless of which surface she selects: china vessels become a canvas for her thoughts and many of the same images reappear in the large-scale papercuts. This is Hodes's largest installation to date and the first showing of the 250-part work 'After the Taking of Tea'. It is a transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Jones (2019)

In two medium size collage/papercuts (each 52 x 72cm) shown alongside the installation, *After the Taking of Tea; Light Shadow*, and *After the Taking of Tea; Grey Shadow*, the female figure is accompanied by a dustpan and brush as if following in her wake. It is something of a riposte to Botticelli's *Primavera* Figs 6 & 7, in which a spring goddess is portrayed scattering flowers and petals before Venus. Hodes's women are depicted scattering detritus, perhaps an allusion to the cleaning role traditionally designated to women, that endless task only evidenced by its failure! Hodes's women walk away from the task with better things on their minds. While drawing on such historical references, Hodes invites a comparison with the American artist, Nancy Spero, an artist for



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure 7. *After the Taking of Tea; Light Shadow* (2018) Charlotte Hodes. Papercut, 550 x 720mm. Photo: Peter Abrahams

Figure 8. *Remember Me detail* (2017) Charlotte Hodes. Hand-cut enamel transfer on 122 pieces of china ware on printed vinyl, 1300 x 11850mm Photo: Scott Murray

whom Hodes has great admiration. Both can be seen as transgressive and engaged in that dilemma between women seen as goddesses as opposed to women with agency. Spero's assertion about her own work, written in 1994, could equally apply to Hodes

This work is subversive of the status quo, a rebellion of what is perceived as the status quo, the idea of what a woman's role should be: non-assertive, feminine, and a helpmate. I'm talking about women taking their bodies and their lives in their own hands.



Berg (2019)

Figure 9

Essentially, both Hodes and Spero make one-offs. Spero uses her library of directly printed stamps, Hodes her unique artworks, each valuing the quality of print over its reproducibility. In a long mural-like wall piece, *Remember Me*, 2017 (a reference to Dido's lament in Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*) Hodes takes the convention of showing plates on a wall or dresser, that middle class equivalent of the aristocrat's picture gallery, and presents it as a single entity composed of some 122 plates running 1185cms in length.

Hodes' plates each carry fragments and the imagery freely crosses the ware to form a single multi-faceted image. Fig 8 Just as the title *Remember Me* references classical music, the composition suggests a symphonic structure; sections of the work are grouped as if to suggest each movement with its particular mood. Interweaving themes run through the whole piece with one passage even breaking out from the rectangular confines of the patterned vinyl print. The ceramic plates are arranged across a wall to create a single image on a patterned surface, in which the pattern escapes the plates onto the 'wallpaper'. At each end the plates literally escape the wallpaper. There is clearly a nod to Spero's printed mural like installations in which she printed directly on the wall of the gallery from her stock of templates. Fig 9 And like Spero, the gesture is absent, the outline clear, the emotion conveyed through the orchestration of colour and composition.

Remember Me represents the tension between chaos and order. The ceramic ware struggles to contain the imagery, yet everything is held momentarily in place. The slightest change and that fragile equilibrium would be shattered, further endorsed by the fact that the plates hang precariously from the wall, with no indication of how they are supported.

Hodes' vision is a complex one; on one level she presents finely crafted pieces that can sit comfortably with the palaces of high art and it's no coincidence that she was invited in 2005 as the first Associate Artist at the Wallace Collection in London, that personification of flamboyant elegance. There, she took on the *fêtes galantes* paintings of Antoine Watteau and the indulgence of their collection of Sèvres porcelain. But on another level, she is no mere admirer, she is also an interloper. The viewer soon realises that conventions have been overturned and a new order proposed, one predicated by mischief. As Janet

Figure 9. *Remember Me* detail (2017) Charlotte Hodes. Hand-cut enamel transfer on 122 pieces of china ware on printed vinyl, 1300 x 11850mm. Photo: Joel Chester Fieldes

Mckenzie observed her recent work reveals that a playful irreverence is important for her in addressing serious issues. (2014)

In Hodes' work, roles have been challenged and the female muse has stepped down from her pedestal and commences to wreak-havoc. She now balances herself precariously on a chair, pretends to be a caryatid, breaks the crockery, and leaves behind her domestic duties. Fig 10 The women in Hodes' work, now released from being merely decorative or subservient, are now free to play – the female representation of the proverbial bull in the china shop. Hodes challenges the conventions of painting and the decorative arts, and by adopting a methodology of collage, and substituting the brush for the scalpel blade, she has produced a body of work which not only acts as a bridge across fine art and craft, but demonstrates just how fertile this territory can be.



Figure 10

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Paul Coldwell is Professor of Fine Art at the University of the Arts London. As an artist, his practice includes prints, book works, sculptures and installations, focusing on themes of absence, journey, and loss, He has exhibited widely both in UK and abroad and his work is included in numerous public collections, including Tate, V&A, British Museum, the Arts Council of England, Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva and MoMA (New York). His publications include, *Printmaking: A Contemporary Perspective* and *Morandi's Legacy: Influences on British Art* and co-editor of *Picturing the Invisible; Exploring interdisciplinary synergies from the arts and the sciences*.

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IMAGE GALLERY



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Figure 10. Caryatid #1 (2018) Charlotte Hodes. Papercut, 1120x350mm. Photo: Peter Abrahams