

'Nothing is more terrifying to me than to see Ernest Thesiger sitting under the lamplight doing this embroidery': Ernest Thesiger (1879-1961), 'Expert Embroiderer'

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Described as an 'effete sissy', 'an actor of wasted appearance, dithery cunning, reedy voice and look of tottering hauteur', 'an emaciated, neurotic priss', and compared to a butterfly, a mosquito and even a praying mantis, the actor and artist Ernest Thesiger personified what the biographer of his friend, the writer Ivy Compton-Burnett, has described as the 'limp-wristed vogue endorsed by so many outrageously witty and talented men-about-town in the 1920s.'¹ Thesiger went much farther than most and came to personify all that was fashionable, queer and the *outré* in the interwar years. He was an advocate of men's dress reform; he was photographed on several occasions for *Vogue*; the interior of his Montpelier Terrace flat appeared in a special feature in *House & Garden*; on stage he wore costumes designed by Charles Ricketts, Paul Shelving, Cecil Beaton and Angus McBean; off stage he had a love of make-up, jewellery and drag, and his fondness for female impersonation often led him to be compared to, if not mistaken for, the actresses Violet Vanbrugh and Gladys Cooper.² His unique embodiment of male femininity was admired and copied by 'Bright Young People' from Brian Howard to Stephen Tennant. In his forties when the roaring twenties began he nonetheless carried on regardless, portraying Miles Malpractice from Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* on the stage and surely serving as part model for Antony Blanche in Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* and providing inspiration for writers from Ivy Compton-Burnett to Nancy Mitford.

Thesiger's camp artifice was, however, no act and his effeminate manner, perceived as most pronounced in his enthusiasm for embroidery (Fig. 1), sometimes incited panic and aroused revulsion in others. This ranged from being snubbed by Waugh on account of his 'well-known tastes' after an unsuccessful meeting in 1924 at Gwen Otter's Ralston Street flat in Chelsea to being described more maliciously as 'an old pansy, affected, meticulous, garrulous, and entertaining' by James Lees-Milne, the architectural historian, who met Thesiger at Compton-Burnett's flat in Braemar Mansions, off Cromwell Road, in 1942.³ Thesiger never seems to have moderated his mannerisms and he took his embroidery with him everywhere. The writer Rose Macaulay remembered him sewing at a party and Jack Latham, the

actor, recalled Thesiger bringing his 'needlepoint' to rehearsals.⁴ With a reputation for being more camp than Quentin Crisp and more acerbic than Kenneth Williams, Thesiger was often dismissed by his contemporaries, and certainly by later critics, as lacking any real depth or sincerity. His friend, the composer Frederick S. Kelly, commented that, on one occasion, 'I began to try and get at his point of view as regards his work but he seemed rather alarmed at being taken seriously.'⁵ Aside from his prodigious career as an actor his artistic reputation, an *œuvre* that largely consists of flower paintings with names like *Gay Mixture*, has fallen so far from taste that recovery seems hopeless and his embroidery is seen, like his love of pearl necklaces, green nail-polish and antique rings, as nothing more than another aspect of a highly cultivated and contrived veneer.⁶

Those who remember Thesiger's embroidery often dismiss or diminish it as that of an amateur, a dilettante or even a *rara avis* (a rare bird). Sometimes observers were more hostile. Thesiger's friend the actor Alec Guinness recalled:

Once I remember, he was seen stitching in a London antique market and a group of toughs gathered round to mock him. He didn't turn a hair – just said 'In Chelsea I'm known as the stitching bitch – now buzz off.' And they did, of course.⁷

When interviewed for the film magazine *Close Up* the writer Oswald Blakeston asked Thesiger to describe the general reaction when people saw him sewing.

'Unprintable,' he replied.⁸ In 1926 Beverly Nichols wrote an article on Thesiger that suggested embroidery was the key to unlocking the unsettling affect of his character:

This uncanny atmosphere pervades his most domestic actions – even that habit, now famous of relieving his jaded nerves by a little genteel embroidery. Nothing is more terrifying to me than to see Ernest Thesiger sitting under the lamplight doing this embroidery. I feel that he is stitching spells into the velvet pile. I feel that he is embroidering little wickednesses into each leaf and flower. The needle bites and pierces, forlornly the silk straggles after. The shapes that gradually come to life on the cloth are innocent enough – a bud here, a sprig there; but, as G. K. Chesterton would say, they are the '*wrong*' shape.

They make me shudder. I dare not dream of the phantasms that would trouble a household which nightly retired under counterpanes of Thesiger's designing. In the still hours of early morning those counterpanes

would come to life. The innocent pink buds would deepen to a fierce crimson. The leaves would writhe and twist, until they tickled the sleeper's throat. The whole thing would swell and become bloated, assuming the shapes of those nightmares which the spiritualists have imagined, the shape of the elemental.⁹

There is an undertone, in such a characterisation, of the male embroiderer as unnatural or deviant and a connotation of embroidery as a sexually charged metaphor. Living in the interwar decades and immediate post-war years, in a time before the Wolfenden Report of 1957 and the decriminalisation of homosexuality following the Sexual Offences Act 1967, Thesiger was widely known for being open about his homosexuality even though he lived in fear of arrest, as happened to his friend and fellow actor John Gielgud in 1953.¹⁰ Any reference to homosexuality is omitted from the two volumes of published and unpublished memoirs he completed in 1927 and in 1955.¹¹ In place of this 'act of silence' are numerous references to embroidery, an act in itself that could arouse suspicion but also deflect attention.¹²

Yet, few men are as associated with the history of embroidery in Britain as Thesiger. When he died in 1961 his obituary notices recorded that 'he kept his hands and mind quick to serve things of beauty by embroidery' and throughout his long-life he 'experimented with embroidery of every kind, proving his technical ability and good taste.'¹³ He had long-standing associations with the Embroiderers' Guild, being elected a Vice-President in 1945, the Royal School of Needlework (RSN) and the Victoria and Albert Museum. And, even though there has been no biographical study of Thesiger,¹⁴ only a handful of artworks by him is known to be held in public collections,¹⁵ his surviving archive contains very little reference to his achievements in the textile field. Most alarmingly not a single piece of embroidery by him seems to have survived, yet his is perhaps the only male name to appear in surveys or studies of British needlework as a committed life-long maker rather than an occasional designer.¹⁶ Whereas most men who produced embroidery relied on the hands and skills of mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, or anonymous outsourced labour, Thesiger was singular in his commitment to the promotion of men as fabricators of their own designs. Largely remembered today for a series of films he made in Hollywood in the 1930s, as well as for his often-outrageous behaviour and aphorisms, Thesiger's serious contribution to the history of embroidery is for the most part undocumented and falling more and more into obscurity.

Much of what we know about Thesiger today is, in many respects, gossip. His interest in embroidery is thought to originate in his friendships with women such as Compton-Burnett or Queen Mary. But there is little evidence to support this. He met

Compton-Burnett through her life-long companion Margaret Jourdain, a distinguished historian of Georgian design, who before meeting the writer had been in love with Janette Ranken, the daughter of a prosperous Edinburgh family. Jourdain had first met Ranken while they were studying at Oxford. They then lived together after coming down to London. Ranken, however, had known Thesiger for several years and left Jourdain to marry him in 1917.¹⁷ As daughters of Victorian households these three women would all have been able to embroider and Jourdain published an important book on English embroidery in 1910.¹⁸ The evenings that Thesiger spent sewing and gossiping with Compton-Burnett are often recounted but it is the only instance his embroidery is mentioned in this context.¹⁹ Perhaps the most repeated story about Thesiger is that of his friendship with Queen Mary: 'In latter life he modelled himself on Queen Mary and grew more and more to resemble her, with his pursed lips, regal bearing and haughtiness of manner'; 'Queen Mary herself supplied the model for Ernest's own increasingly regal bearing in later life'; and 'Ernest, growing at the end of his life more and more like Queen Mary with his pursed lips and bolt upright bearing, his censorious dowager's air and crushing line in regal retorts.'²⁰ In time he became 'an actor more famous for doing needlepoint with Queen Mary' than anything else.²¹ Although Thesiger's name does not appear in the published biographies or the private archive of Queen Mary the anecdote of their sitting stitching together seems to have originated in stories that Thesiger himself relayed to young actors he worked with, such as Constance Cummings, whilst they appeared in *Madame Bovary* on Broadway in the winter of 1937, Patrick Macnee, who appeared with Thesiger in a production of *Once There Was Music* in March 1942, and Timothy Findley, who toured to Moscow with Thesiger in November 1955 as part of Peter Brook's production of *Hamlet*.²² Macnee recalled:

Ernest was a great mate of Queen Mary, and they shared the same passion: *petitpoint*. As Queen and actor stitched away the hours, conversation veered towards those members of the profession who were, and who were not, the more notorious kind of queen.

'And what of Mr...?' the royal widow enquired while embroidering the golden thrum of a daisy.

'Sound. Ma'am'.

'And young Mr...?'

'Happily married, they say.'

'Most reassuring.'

After a pause, the royal widow continued: 'And do tell me, Mr. Thesiger. What about Mr...?'

Slipping his needle through the cloth, Ernest slowly withdrew the thread to an inordinate height before informing Her Majesty, 'As a coot, Ma'am'.²³

The actor and writer Timothy Findley recalled Thesiger telling him that he had been 'Queen Mary's favourite sewing partner' for many years before her death in 1953:

'She was, in many ways, my dearest friend,' he told me. 'I sensed that her silence was made of the same ingredients as mine. She endured a kind of private mourning, from time to time. And so did I. It had to do with the lives we would have preferred to live but could not because of who we were.' He thought about this for a moment – then he added: 'I do not mean who we were when we were born. I mean the people we became by necessity, rather than by desire.'²⁴

In 1884, Thesiger's 'favourite aunt', Mary Thesiger, who was lady-in-waiting to the Duchess of Teck, first introduced him to Princess Mary. They may not have met again until at least after the First World War and may have had little opportunity to develop a friendship until the Queen was widowed in 1936. She is conspicuously absent from Thesiger's own memoirs.

The decisive influence on Thesiger's interest in embroidery, however, was neither Compton-Burnett nor Queen Mary but another man. In 1896, Thesiger entered the Slade School of Art with the ambition of becoming a painter. There he met Willie Ranken, Janette's brother, with whom he became utterly enamoured. It was Ranken, in fact, who first introduced Thesiger to embroidery:

To the surprise of many & the horror of some, I have also found great pleasure in needlework, which after all is only another way of making pictures. It started when, in France with Willie Ranken my brother-in-law we used to buy for a very, few francs pieces of 17th & 18th [century] petit point & gros point. They were often rather dilapidated & so we set about restoring them. The only snag was that the new work we put into them which looked perfect when first finished, faded to a dull grey, the modern work not having the lasting quality of the old.²⁵

Thesiger then 'took to making entirely new pieces, often reproducing the older design' and recalled several episodes when he and Ranken's needlework would shock and surprise:

One day, however, just as we were congratulating ourselves on being alone and the train was on the point of starting, a woman obviously very recently widowed, got into our carriage; she lifted up a number of crape veils and sobbed into a deeply bordered handkerchief. So immersed was she in her grief that she took no notice of us at all. So, thinking ourselves unobserved, we steadily produced our needlework. I thought I saw the widow cast a sidelong glance in our direction, but bravely continued to sew. Then I noticed that her sobs had subsided, and I looked up at her. Her handkerchief has been removed from her eyes and was crammed into her mouth. The sight of two grown men deep in embroidery had overcome her grief. She was in fits of laughter.²⁶

There was also a serious side to Thesiger's interest in embroidery. At the end of the First World War he helped establish the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry to support wounded ex-servicemen who were unable to return to the work they had left behind at the start of the war due to the severity of their injuries. It operated out a small office on Ebury Street and employed a recent graduate from the RSN to act as chief designer. Thesiger was given the title 'Hon. Sec. Cross Stitch'.²⁷ The workshop produced a vast range of embroidered goods, largely for fashion and interior design. In the first few years of operating it trained nearly 100 men and obtained several major commissions. The organisation quickly attracted the attention of companies such as Pearsall's who supplied all their silk and wool threads and who often promoted the workshop in their advertisements.²⁸ Weldon's, the 'first major English commercial pattern company', also supported the workshop through its magazines and mail-order service, and occasionally Weldon's patterns were made up by the disabled ex-servicemen for publicity purposes (Fig. 2).²⁹ As many of the men employed were in poor physical health most worked from home and received instruction and materials through the post (Fig. 3). The mainstay of the organisation's sales throughout the 1920s and 1930s was small items aimed at middle-class female consumers, including reproductions of historic tapestries, needlework pictures, bedcovers, children's clothes, furniture covers, personal items such as purses and handbags and miscellaneous household goods from wastepaper baskets and garden aprons to playing-card cases (Figs 4-6).

Thesiger's own interests in historic embroidery were very much reflected in the workshop's production. A panel for a firescreen by him based on a 17th century Dutch still-life painting, embroidered in rich reds, maroons and pinkish browns, is now only known from photographs (Fig. 7). His embroideries seen at exhibitions throughout the interwar years, and after, now all appear lost. The large carpet, after an 18th century design that was widely admired at an exhibition organised by the Embroiderers' Guild for the Festival of Britain in 1951, has disappeared without trace.³⁰ The ecclesiastical embroideries he made for several London churches, such as the kneelers for Chelsea Old Church, which depicted Henry Mossop, an 18th century actor, and Henry Patenson, Sir Thomas More's Jester, and the large *Garden of Gethsemane* embroidery that he made for Holy Trinity Church remembered 'as a reverent and moving interpretation,' also seem to have disappeared since the 1960s.³¹

In 1941 Thesiger published *Adventures in Embroidery* (Fig. 8), a survey of contemporary trends and developments in needlework and a spirited defence of his own interest in historical models. He included work by several of his contemporaries such as Hebe Cox and Tess Hope as well as male designers such as A. H. Williamson, and suggested the use of new sources such as theatre design, contemporary photography, advertising and abstract painting. He travelled north to research the Needlework Development scheme in Scotland and the embroideries being produced at the Glasgow School of Art. Widely praised, *Adventures in Embroidery* was reissued in 1947.³² Although clearly part of a wave of writing on modern embroidery that includes Louisa Pesel's *Portfolios* (1912-1916), Grace Christie's *Samplers and Stitches* (1921), Mary Hogarth's *Modern Embroidery* (1933), Molly Booker's *Embroidery Design* (1935) and Hebe Cox's *Simple Embroidery Design* (1948), it remains the most forgotten.

Throughout the 1950s Thesiger remained very much a public figure and continued to promote embroidery wherever he could. He was interviewed on the BBC's *Leisure and Pleasure* programme in April 1955 about his embroidery and in March 1959 he appeared on *Desert Island Discs*. He also took on conservation work, repairing a set of historic embroideries at Temple Newsam in Leeds, a commission originally offered to the RSN.³³

Throughout his long and productive life Ernest Thesiger was dismissed as effeminate, camp and frivolous. The image he projected of the male embroiderer elicited emotions on a sliding scale from fear to fun. But his commitment to embroidery is undeniable and his life and work deserve to be much better documented. Given that the centenary of the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry

is only a few years away surely it is time for a proper reassessment of this inimitable figure and his context. In 1944, in perhaps the last interview he gave about his needlework, Thesiger was fittingly described as a 'man who plays sinister parts usually murderers and madmen, now meet him in a very different light as an expert embroiderer.'³⁴

NOTES

¹ V. Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, Harper & Row, 1981, p. 50; K. Howes, *Broadcasting It: An Encyclopaedia of Homosexuality on Film, Radio and TV in the UK 1923-1993*, Cassell, 1993, p. 838; R. Barrios, *Screened Out: Playing Gay in Hollywood from Edison to Stonewall*, Routledge, 2003, p. 65; K. Tynan, *Selections from the Drama Criticism and Related Writings*, Longmans, 1961, p. 111; and H. Spurling, *Secrets of a Woman's Heart: The Later Life of I. Compton-Burnett, 1920-69*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1984, p. 31.

² For example, see M. De-La-Noy, *Eddy: The Life of Edward Sackville-West*, The Bodley Head, 1988, p. 150; S. Hastings, *The Secret Lives of Somerset Maugham*, John Murray, 2009, p. 253.

³ M. Davie (ed.), *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1976, p. 184; and M. Bloch (ed.), *James Lees-Milne: Diaries, 1942-1954*, vol. I, John Murray, 2006, p. 34.

⁴ S. LeFanu, *Rose Macaulay*, Virago, 2003, pp. 190-191; and J. Curtis, *James Whale: A New World of Gods and Monsters*, Faber & Faber, 1998, p. 240.

⁵ T. Radic (ed.), *Race Against Time: The Diaries of F. S. Kelly*, National Library of Australia, 2004, p. 121.

⁶ *Flower Portraits by Ernest Thesiger*, The Fine Art Society, Ltd, 148, New Bond Street, W1, December 1938, no. 11.

⁷ A. Slide, *Eccentrics of Comedy*, The Scarecrow Press, 1998, p. 147.

⁸ O. B., 'Comment and Review: Actor's Viewpoint,' *Close Up* (Vol. VII, no. 3, September 1930), pp. 212-213.

⁹ B. Nichols, 'Woad! Celebrities in Undress: IX. Ernest Thesiger', *The Sketch* (vol. CXXXIV, no. 1737, 26 May 1926), p. 284.

¹⁰ For this context see M. Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957*, University of Chicago Press, 2005.

¹¹ E. Thesiger, *Practically True*, William Heinemann, 1927; and Unpublished autobiography, 1955, EFT/000065, Ernest Thesiger Archive, Theatre Collection, University of Bristol.

¹² E. Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, University of California Press, 1990, p. 3.

¹³ 'Obituary: Mr. Ernest Thesiger: Skilled Actor of High Comedy', *The Times* (16 January 1961), p. 17; and M. Worsley, 'Ernest Thesiger, C.B.E.', *Embroidery* (vol. XII, no. 1, Spring 1961), p. 11.

¹⁴ The closest to a biographical survey to date is the short entry by Michael Anderson in H. C. G. Matthew and B. Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 54, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp. 232-233, which mentions embroidery once in passing.

¹⁵ Thesiger's watercolour 'Chelsea Old Church, after destruction by a German bomb in an air raid on the night of 16th/17th April 1941' is in the Victoria and Albert Museum (P.53-1941). This was part of a series of watercolours of London churches that were damaged or destroyed during the Blitz; see 'London's Bombed History: A New Series of Watercolours by Ernest Thesiger', *The Studio* (vol. CXXI, no. 578, May 1941), pp. 153-155. Three watercolours, a lithograph, a pastel and a photo-reproduction of a pen-and-ink drawing by Thesiger (Reg. Nos 04.0060, 04.0061, 04.0062, 04.0063, 04.0064, and 02.0749) as well as several letters from Thesiger 'painter, art-seamster, actor, author' all survive in the archives of Thesiger's friend the composer Percy Grainger; information supplied in emails from Monica Syrette, Assistant Curator, 3 and 4 April 2013, Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne, Australia. **The only other surviving work by Thesiger is a painted copy of an Aubusson carpet for the dining room, and two miniature paintings of Italianate landscapes for the library, in Queen Mary's Doll's House dating from 1921-24, Windsor Castle, Royal Collection Trust.**

¹⁶ For example, see C. Howard, *Twentieth-Century Embroidery in Great Britain to 1939*, B. T. Batsford, 1981, pp. 71-72, 186-187, and T. Beck, *The Embroiderer's Story: Needlework from the Renaissance to the Present Day*, David & Charles, 1995, pp. 135, 140-141.

¹⁷ Richard Thesiger, Ernest's nephew, disclosed to Hilary Spurling that he was told by Janette Thesiger that the marriage had never been consummated; Spurling, *Secrets of a Woman's Heart*, pp. 93 and 310 (n. 60).

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- ¹⁸ M. Jourdain, *The History of English Secular Embroidery*, Kegan Paul, 1910.
- ¹⁹ Spurling, *Secrets of a Woman's Heart*, p. 35.
- ²⁰ M. Elliman and F. Roll, *The Pink Guide to London*, Gay Men's Press, 1986, p. 202; and Spurling, *Secrets of a Woman's Heart*, pp. 32 and 266.
- ²¹ R. Dyer, *The Culture of Queers*, Routledge, 2002, p. 14.
- ²² For example, see J. Pope-Hennessy, *Queen Mary, 1867-1953*, George Allen and Unwin, 1959. Letter to the author from The Royal Archives, Windsor, 21 August 2012, states that Thesiger's name does not appear in the correspondence or papers of Queen Mary or anywhere else in the Royal Archives.
- ²³ P. Macnee and M. Cameron, *Blind in One Ear*, Harrap, 1988, p. 114.
- ²⁴ T. Findley, *Inside Memory: Pages from a Writer's Notebook*, HarperCollins, 1990, p. 56.
- ²⁵ Unpublished autobiography, 1955, [unpaginated] EFT/000065, Ernest Thesiger Archive, Theatre Collection, University of Bristol.
- ²⁶ Thesiger, *Practically True*, p. 41.
- ²⁷ 'Disabled Soldiers Embroidery Industry,' *The Friends of the Poor. The Fourteenth Report (For the Year Ending March 31st, 1919)*, p. 11.
- ²⁸ P. A. Sykas, 'Re-threading: Notes Towards a History of Sewing Thread in Britain,' in M. M. Brooks (ed.), *Textiles Revealed: Object lessons in historic textiles and costume research*, Archetype Publications, London, 2000, pp. 123-135.
- ²⁹ K. L. Seligman, *Cutting for All! The Sartorial Arts, Related Crafts, and the Commercial Paper Pattern*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1996, p. 28; and idem, 'Dressmakers' Patterns: The English Commercial Paper Pattern Industry, 1878-1950,' *Costume* (Vol. 37, no. 1, 2003), pp. 95-113.
- ³⁰ *1951 Festival Exhibition of Embroidery*, 4-23 June 1951, R. W. S. Galleries, 26 Conduit Street, W. 1 [The Embroiderers' Guild and the Arts Council of Great Britain], Loan Exhibit M.
- ³¹ Worsley, 'Ernest Thesiger, C.B.E.', p. 11. This disappearance of these ecclesiastical embroideries (although some are known from photographs) has been confirmed by letter to the author from Canon David Reindorp, Chelsea Old Church, undated [July 2012]; letter to author from Revd Liz Russell, Holy Trinity and All

Saints, South Kensington, 3 June 2012; and email to author from Revd Peter Kettle, Holy Trinity, South Kensington, 22 March 2013.

³² See reviews in *Times Literary Supplement*, 2 June 1942; *Listener*, 26 March 1942; *Women's Magazine*, June 1942; *Times Education Supplement*, 1 August 1942; *Lady*, 23 April 1942; *Time and Tide*, 6 June 1942; *Librarian*, June 1942; collated in Thesiger's Scrapbook, EFT/0000161, Ernest Thesiger Archive, Theatre Collection, University of Bristol.

³³ 'Men who Embroider,' unattributed magazine clipping, EFT/000066/13, Ernest Thesiger Archive, Theatre Collection, University of Bristol; and 'A famous actor helps Temple Newsam,' *The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Mercury*, 7 June 1955, p. 4.

³⁴ 'Ernest Thesiger, Expert Embroiderer', British Pathé Archive, 26 February 1944, Film ID. 1289.16, <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/ernest-thesiger-expert-embroiderer> [accessed, December 2011].