

Ways of Reading Gestured

Rowan Bailey

Chetham's Library contains the accumulated labour of many hands. It is a space full of material inscriptions. It is a space of and for reading and writing. The visible presence of hands in the library's collection have thus served as referential stimuli for Brass Art's constellation of art works. To take hands as a focal point calls upon the gestures they signify in different parts of the collection. Brass Art have searched for visual motifs and have found some fascinating instances in William Hogarth's prints, in the anatomical plates of William Cowper and in the marginalia of John Dee's books. Taking Dee's manicure as a starting point, they have embarked on a journey of enquiry into the appearance and reappearance of the hand as a motif of many meanings.¹

We see Brass Art's own hands as sculptural forms occupying spaces within the library. In particular, the caged-presses allow certain perspectives to come into view. Hands of varying shapes and sizes hold globules of blown glass, emphasizing alchemic processes located in both the literature of the collection and in the processes involved in Brass Art's use of casting methods, 3D printing and glass blowing techniques. These are preoccupations with the transformation of matter – in the shift from one material state to another and in the meanings these changing states evoke.

Brass Art's hands equally sit quietly on book shelves, occasionally calling out to us as we pass by. It is our peripheral vision that senses what is being gestured. Outside of the range of any direct stereoscopic gaze, this way of seeing is like a spectral whispering. There are also cast hands that find their way onto the plinths of certain books, serving as the custodian for its contents. As a communicative tool, a carrier of meaning and a marker of the practices of reading and thinking, these hands engage and ignite the library as an environment filled with many stories of political power, patronage and secrets of the universe.

Hands in Hogarth

In Hogarth's series *Marriage a-la Mode* (1745) and *A Harlot's Progress* (1732), hands point to narratives that unfold with each print. Gesture is integral to the viewer's reading. In Plate I of *The Harlot's Progress*, Moll Hackabout, a young woman newly arrived in London from the country, uses her hands in an act of restraint towards an old woman reaching out to caress her cheek. We see what it is to be enticed into other more dubious worlds. One hand clenching the wrist of the other speaks to us. We recognize what is happening. But the hand soon learns to adapt. We see its transformation in the successive plates, entering into scenes where the hand becomes an intermediary between bodies. The rubbing of thumb and forefinger is the commonplace gesture for payment due. Poor Moll eventually dies from venereal disease, after arrest and hard labour in Bridewell Prison. In the final Plate (VI) hands are awash with meaning. What kinds of gestures might we read?

I see hands obliviously preoccupied by a toy, hands attired in mourning gloves, hands caught in a religious stupor, induced by wine, hands clenched around sacks of coins and hands clenched in mourning, hands prying open a coffin lid, hands tweaking the fingertips of an innocent, hands tending to narcissism in a looking glass, hands reaching out and being restrained by another, and

finally, hands that clench a tear soaked cloth, large fisted, larger than all the hands in the funereal scene. All these hands are at work. They are alive and animated. The noises we perceive are sounded out by the gestures we read.

Innocence, sorrow, betrayal, greed, vanity, remorse, fear, sadness, loneliness, boredom; all of these emotions and states of being are at play in this scene of hands. We read Hogarth's series in a different way when we look for the motif of gesture and start from this point of view. This extends to what we might find inside the books of the collection and outside within the space of the library itself. Hands carry precious insights. They are the carriers of form as much as acts of their own self-formation.

The Hand as Leitmotif


With such an exposure to gesture, how can we not notice the hands inside the paintings on display in the main reading room? Like a Baader-Meinhof phenomenon, we start to see hands everywhere. A handshake here, the caress of a ruche there, or the placeholder for a key passage of text that we ourselves cannot read. Even the small, statuesque ornaments expose their hands, as if somehow bereft from the body, calling out to us as we wander past.

I wonder if this might be a way to read history? Perhaps gesture is the 'leitmotif' that travels through time and provides us as readers in the present with new ways to narrate the past? The term 'leitmotif' stems from the German 'leiten' meaning 'to lead'. These are the hands of a special kind of materialism, that, in the spirit of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who wrote together in the reading room of Chetham's Library, seek to work with and for the hands of the many. This is what hands can do – they can point us towards alternative histories or stories. These hands of history are in abundance. The cast hands of Brass Art are, one could say, a luminescent exposure to the unnoticed. The hands of *Gestured* are like

the manicules of John Dee. They point to significances, to resonances, to moments of connection, and to the very act of reading itself as a process which allows us to enter into many psychic worlds. Like an alchemical experiment we are transformed by being carried from one state to another.

The Philosopher's Stone

Let's make a brief return to John Dee. The manicure has served as the starting point for thinking about the hand. The typographic fists of Dee are bound up with scrying hands and the mysteries of the universe. Dee and Edward Kelly became obsessed with the practices of alchemy and the transmutation of base materials into gold. It is with a magical synchronicity that the philosopher's stone finds its way into contemporary science, or from another point of view, we start to notice the connections between phenomena, that is, we learn how to read for insights in the materials of the past and the present.

Just after *Gestured* opened to the general public it was announced in the media press that for the first time in world history the collision of a pair of neutron stars had been detected.² Telescopes across the globe were able to 'see' the merger of gravitational waves and light. These tremors in space and time were picked up 130 million light years away. Whereas the scrying apparatuses of Dee and Kelly might be described as the tools of magical instruction, equivalents in contemporary space science could be said to be found in the LIGO, the Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory. The magic of this contemporary moment, in relation to the alchemical obsessions of Dee and Kelly, is that gold is the material outcome and after-effect of an interplanetary explosion. Maybe Dee's manicules were always pointing in this direction. It just took until 2017 for us to see the phenomena these fingers had been pointing to. 

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¹ For an account of the histories of typographic note conventions, including the use of the manicule see Keith Houston, *Shady Characters: The Secret Life of Punctuation, Symbols, and Other Punctuation Marks*. New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013.

² See Hannah Devlin, 'New frontier for Science as Astronomers Witness Neutron Stars Colliding'. *The Guardian*. Monday 16 October, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/oct/16/astronomers-witness-neutron-stars-collide-global-rapid-response-event-ligo>

Gestured is part of Meeting Point2, a year-long project led by contemporary art specialists Arts&Heritage (www.artsandheritage.org.uk). Funded by Arts Council England's Museum Resilience Fund, Meeting Point2 supports small and medium scale museums to commission artworks.

Brass Art: Gestured
ISBN: 978-1-910029-34-3



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