**In the Eye of the Beholder: ‘Seeing’ Textiles in the Early Modern Interior**

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*This article explores the physical, cultural and aesthetic conditions for perceiving textiles in early modern England, in order to reconstruct contemporary responses to them. It begins by arguing for the level of explicitness of the engagement with the senses in printed materials on this subject. Focusing on sight, it then considers the depictions of the senses in the interior design at Bolsover Castle, Derbyshire and Knole, Kent, in relation to religious and moral ideas about the ‘eye of faith’, to Humanist representations of sight as a sense associated with women and to the élite mastery of the senses. The article then opens the subject out to consider different ways of ‘seeing’ textile furnishings in this period and the kind of visual responses they invited – it explores fading eyesight and looking glasses, times of day and mirrors. Finally, it suggests that textile objects functioned as perks and as evidence of loyalty and proximity to the crown, and points to the lack of distinction between new and second-hand pieces even among high-ranking members of society and to the sight and appreciation of inventory makers whose descriptions give access to their sense of the most obvious features of textiles, most notably colour and lustre.*

Introduction

‘Histories, grave stories and the best works become Galleries; where anyone may walk and exercise their senses in viewing, examining, delighting, judging and censuring’.[[1]](#endnote-1) With these words the author and doctor William Salmon (1644–1713) stressed that looking at paintings was essential if viewers were to develop their judgement, and recommended the long gallery as the best place to display pictures in the home. This article will take this premise one step further to consider a range of ways in which early modern men and women might have seen the textiles that surrounded them in the domestic sphere.[[2]](#endnote-2) Reviewing the different ways in which early modern people saw their world should help to explain why many interiors were decorated and furnished with textiles as they were. This article surveys a variety of contexts for early modern sight, ranging from the way it was seen to relate to the other senses, to the practical and conceptual constraints on and possibilities for seeing, to the influence of these specifically early modern attitudes on ways of viewing the domestic interior. It suggests that individuals were actively engaged in interested looking as they walked through the rooms of their own homes and those of their friends, neighbours and acquaintances.

Early modern England was a visual society, where pictures and symbols were used to convey information ranging from ideas about faith via wall paintings in the parish church to concepts of civic authority conveyed by placing the royal coat of arms in civic, religious and domestic buildings. The period also witnessed growing degrees of literacy amongst the laity, but this did not mean that the visual lost value. As Philip Stubbs demonstrated in *The Anatomie of Abuses* (1581), one thing many people looked at, and pondered, was clothing, because prior to the abolition of the Acts of Apparel in 1604, dress was supposed to define a person’s rank, especially a man’s rank, and make it clear to all who knew what to look for.[[3]](#endnote-3) The Crown did not seek to control how individuals used textiles to furnish their home in relation to their social status, probably because this was hard to police – being inside the home they were only visible to those the owner invited in. However, while domestic displays of wealth were not actively regulated, objects including textiles that might inspire faith or heresy in the beholder (dependent upon the point of view), were. Elizabethan injunctions included the declaration that ‘no persons keep in their houses, any abused images, tables, pictures, paintings, and other monuments of feigned miracles, pilgrimages, idolatry, and superstition’.[[4]](#endnote-4)

It is important to acknowledge the provisional nature of the comments made here – this is an exploratory piece, which does not provide a systematic investigation of the early modern sensory experience in the domestic interior. Whilst it is impossible to be certain how people in the past viewed their domestic environment, hints can be gleaned from how early modern people thought about the senses, and sight in particular, by the implications of the different meanings that can be applied to the words ‘look’ and ‘see’, and by what can be pieced together about the viewing of early modern domestic interiors from written sources such as inventories.[[5]](#endnote-5) This paper seeks to draw out some of the complexities of looking and seeing in the early modern home, both exploring general, culturally-determined ways of seeing and demonstrating how two individuals could look at the same object and see it and read it in different ways. As such, along with the other papers in this special issue, it may help shape the agenda for future research into early modern domestic textiles and the ways they were viewed.

Early Modern Views of Sight and the Senses

Early modern interest in the senses, and the multiplicity of ways in which they could be interpreted conceptually, demonstrated their ability to fascinate. For some, the senses were the route to sensual pleasure.[[6]](#endnote-6) For others, including the philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), the senses were a means of gaining knowledge.[[7]](#endnote-7) The senses could also influence an individual’s well-being, as indicated by Mary Queen of Scots’ comment in September 1570 that looking at and working on the embroidery designs created for her by Bastian Pages, a gentleman of her chamber, ‘in this dreary time cheers me’.[[8]](#endnote-8) This very multiplicity meant that sight was contentious; increasingly, the way that individuals thought about seeing reflected their religious persuasion. Stephen Gardiner, bishop of Winchester, identified the problem that some individuals had with religious imagery when he declared in 1544: ‘they wold we shuld se nothyng in remembrance of Christ, and therefore can they not abyde image’.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Henry VIII serves as a good example of an individual who had a complex relationship with religious images and texts. His collection of pictures at Whitehall included the provocative ‘Table with the picture of kynge henrye theight standinge vppon a Myter with three crownes havinge a Sarpent with seven headdes commynge oute of it and havinge a sworde in his hande wherin is written *Verbum Dei*’, as well as the very traditional ‘Table of embrawdrye with the picture of our ladye holdinge our lorde suckinge in her Armes and a daysye in his hande with this scripture *O mater dei Memento mei*’.[[10]](#endnote-10) Having the opportunity to look at such contrasting images, and others like them, may help to explain the king’s complex relationship with religion.

Post-reformation thinkers such as poet and commentator Richard Braithwaite (1588–1673) offered contrasting views of the senses. In his *Essaies upon the Five Senses* (1620) Braithwaite observed that ‘the five senses be those five gates, by which the world doth besiege us, the Devill doth tempt us and the flesh ensnare us’, adding that ‘there is no passage more easie for the entry of vice than by the cranie of the eye’.[[11]](#endnote-11) However, in *The Heavenly Exercise of the Five Senses* (1635) Braithwaite presented a contrasting view of the senses. Exploring each sense in turn, he claimed that the senses provided an essential framework for praising God.[[12]](#endnote-12) By offering these two opposing views of the senses Braitwaite drew out, and acknowledged, the inherent contradiction embodied by them – that they were the routes to good, evil and all points in between.

Braithwaite evoked the senses using words, but they were frequently represented visually, usually personified in female form, with each woman engaged in activities associated with the sense that they represented.[[13]](#endnote-13) The depictions were intended to remind the viewer how the senses allowed individuals to experience and enjoy the world, an acceptable reason for depicting partially dressed women in a domestic context. Sight was considered to be the most ethereal of the senses and it was usually represented by a woman holding a mirror, or, occasionally, a flaming torch to light her way.[[14]](#endnote-14) In this context the mirror was intended to play a positive role and was an effective way of conveying the act of looking, in the same way that a woman breathing in the fragrance from flowers represented the sense of smell. However, mirrors in female hands also had negative associations – most frequently related to pride and vanity.[[15]](#endnote-15) ‘Lecherye’, for example, was depicted as a fashionably-dressed woman riding a goat and holding a mirror in *The Mirroure of the Worlde* (1476).[[16]](#endnote-16) The connection between sight, female vanity and a keen interest in clothing continued in the seventeenth century, as can be seen in a printed set of the senses produced in the 1630s. Sight was represented by a coquettish woman with the text:

How doe you like me (Gallants) in this dress:

Tis neate although not costly you’l confess:

In Face, or Habitt, I noe fault can spye:

Indeed t’is brave or else my Glasse doth lye.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Sight was associated with vanity and flirtation, while also indicating that pleasure could be gained by looking at beautiful things, an idea which was connected to the Renaissance view of the hand mirror as the route to self-awareness.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Representations of the senses were popular as a means of decorating the home, both on the fabric of the building, including the walls, fireplaces, staircases and ceilings, as well as on a wide variety of textiles.[[19]](#endnote-19) The senses were a common theme in seventeenth-century painting, especially in Italy and the Low Countries, with Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens’s *The Sense of Sight* (1617) providing a very good example of the latter.[[20]](#endnote-20) However, the scale of the interest in the senses can best be summed up by looking at the print trade. The five senses were the most popular of the series of prints depicting numerical groupings of allegorical figures, with the earliest drawn by Frans Floris, engraved by Cornelis Cort and published in the 1560s.[[21]](#endnote-21) Sight was represented as a seated woman admiring her reflection in a handheld mirror with an eagle by her side. A little over a century later, the stock of Thomas Jenner’s London shop offered the discerning shopper a choice of sets of the senses, supporting Anthony Wells-Cole’s view about the long-term popularity of numerical sets, a trend that looked back to pre-reformation traditions.[[22]](#endnote-22)

While many of these prints formed part of collections to be admired at home, some were more prominently incorporated into interior design and so embellished the domestic environment in a way which was highly visible to the household and its visitors. The inclusion of these prints, and of the senses, in household decoration can be demonstrated with a few examples. The Great Stair Case at Knole, Kent, which was remodelled by Thomas, 1st earl of Dorset, between 1605 and 1608, was decorated with imagery intended to educate the visitor as they climbed from ground to first floor.[[23]](#endnote-23) The staircase was seen as a suitable space for adornment; as William Salmon recommended in *Polygraphice*: ‘Let the Staircase be set off with [a depiction of] some admirable monument or building, either new or ruinous, to be seen and observed at a view passing up’.[[24]](#endnote-24) The sequence of images at Knole was painted in a grisaille scheme by Paul Isaacson, a master painter, who presented the viewer with the Four Ages of Man, the Five Senses and the Social Virtues with the intention of encouraging the viewer to engage with key philosophical ideas about the world. In this context the depiction of the senses, modelled on prints by Pieter de Iode, is most pertinent. They were not presented in the usual hierarchy which went from sight to taste. Instead this sequence began with smell and taste, then sight, followed by hearing and touch, possibly suggesting the centrality of sight to the human experience.[[25]](#endnote-25) Comparison with the fourteenth-century wall paintings at Longthorpe Tower, near Peterborough, which depicted the five senses alongside the seven ages of man and the twelve months, suggests that the Knole designs followed an established tradition.[[26]](#endnote-26) Such a scheme served to stress the place of mankind in the cosmos and emphasised how chastity, patience and the other virtues would shape individuals’ lives, while sight and the other senses would define how they experienced life.

The senses were also incorporated into the decorative scheme of the interior of the Little Castle at Bolsover, Derbyshire, but with very different intentions.[[27]](#endnote-27) In part this reflects the fact that the Little Castle was ‘a pleasure house’,[[28]](#endnote-28) not a grand country house like Knole, and in part that seventeenth-century prints presented the senses in a more humorous and so more trivial way than had been the case in the preceding centuries. The Bolsover paintings are thought to date from c.1619–1621 and Sight is the most richly dressed of all the senses in the series. While Hearing, Smell, Taste and Touch followed the prints by Floris quite closely, Sight did not, suggesting that it was consciously changed to suit the needs of the patron, William Cavendish.[[29]](#endnote-29) She was portrayed wearing a gown of red cloth of gold with a pomegranate design, opulent both in terms of the type and the quantity of the fabric, which is bunched under her right hand, suggesting that it might have been intended to represent a train. This painted depiction of Sight and the other senses formed part of the backdrop for Ben Jonson’s masque *Love’s Welcome*, which was performed on 30July 1634 at Bolsover.[[30]](#endnote-30) The masque was the centre-piece of the entertainments devised by William Cavendish for the visit of Charles I and his Queen, Henrietta Maria. The pictures of the senses were located in the Pillar Parlour or The Lower Dining Room, where part of the masque took place. The lines in the opening song – ‘When were the Senses in such order plac’d? / The Sight, the Hearing, Smelling, Touching, Taste, All at one Banquet?’[[31]](#endnote-31) – thus referred not only to the entertainment itself as a delight for all of the senses but to the very room in which the entertainment was performed. After the banquet, where the King and Queen could indulge their senses, the rest of the performance took place in other rooms in the castle, so providing opportunities for new and different sensory experiences.

Knole and Bolsover were not unique and the senses were incorporated into the decorative schemes of gentry houses too. For instance, the ceiling of the gallery at Dean House, Edinburgh, c. 1627, included painted panels of Sight, Taste and Hearing.[[32]](#endnote-32) The 1632 wall paintings of Sight and Taste at Park Farm, Hilton, Huntingdonshire, were modelled the prints of Jan Barra (active 1623–1627) which are the earliest surviving set of the Senses.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The senses also proved popular on textiles, indicating how representations of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell could make the transition from prints to the domestic interior.[[34]](#endnote-34) A range of bodily impulses were depicted within the household and viewers were encouraged to either approve or disapprove of what they saw. In the series of six tapestries *Lady and the Unicorn* (c. 1500), for example, sight was depicted as a seated woman holding a mirror in her right hand with a unicorn kneeling in front of her and looking at its reflection in the same mirror.[[35]](#endnote-35) While tapestries of this quality were the preserve of the élite, it is noteworthy that Henry VIII did not own any sets of tapestries depicting the senses, although he did have sets of the virtues and vices, and the seven deadly sins.[[36]](#endnote-36) He did have other, non-textile, items which stressed the importance of vision, including several paintings of Mary Magdalene and specifically the *Noli me tangere*, which had links to sight with Mary Magdalene being the first person to see the risen Christ.[[37]](#endnote-37) Indeed the title of the painting stressed that while looking was permitted, touching was not, so favouring one sense over another.

Printed images of the senses were translated widely into textile designs, as revealed by the number of embroidered hangings, pictures, cabinets and mirror frames decorated in this way.[[38]](#endnote-38) In some cases the senses were among a number of different images, such as the forty-eight small panels at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire, dating from the late sixteenth century, illustrating Fortune, Intelligence, the Virtues and Vices, the Sun, Moon and the sense of smell.[[39]](#endnote-39) Textiles depicting the senses might also be found in the bedroom, as suggested by the example of a bed valance worked in tent stitch dating from 1580–1600, embroidered with a scene from court life in tandem with the five senses in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, while small cabinets and boxes decorated with embroidered panels could be placed in a variety of rooms, including long galleries, closets and parlours where they could be seen by a range of people. An example is a cabinet with personifications of the five senses, dating from the third quarter of the seventeenth century, now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Fig. 1).

[Figure 1 here: ¼ page. Caption:

Cabinet with personifications of the Five Senses, British, third quarter seventeenth century, Satin worked with silk and metal thread, purl, chenille, seed pearls, coral beads, and mica; tent, knots, rococo, satin, couching, and detached buttonhole stitches; woven metal thread trim; silk and paper lining; wood frame; turned wooden feet, 14.6 x 22.9 x 19.1 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Accession Number: 29.23.1.

*Courtesy of www.metmuseum.org.*]

As such, this imagery had a wide reach and its use as part of decorative schemes suggests that depictions of sight could be used to encourage people to look closely at objects in order to satisfy their curiosity, as well as to induce a sense of self-consciousness about their actions. Depictions of the senses, and the ways in which these illustrations were used and interpreted, demonstrate a shift in how the senses were thought about in the early modern period. They moved from providing a serious intellectual framework for understanding life to a more decorative, more mundane context.

Sight and Seeing

During the early modern period, sight was generally considered to be the most important and refined of the five human senses.[[40]](#endnote-40) Sight provided an individual with the means of capturing memories, measuring things and appreciating colour, as well as gaining a perception of space and landscape.[[41]](#endnote-41) There was also a strong belief that seeing something linked the viewer and the thing seen, so giving great significance to a person’s gaze.[[42]](#endnote-42) John Donne (1572–1631) made this connection in his poem, *The Ecstasy*, when he observed: ‘Our eye-beams twisted and did thread / Our eyes, upon one double string … And pictures in our eyes to get / Was all our propagation’.[[43]](#endnote-43) As a result, seeing could have a moral or religious component and this was reflected in ideas such as the eye of faith, second sight and the evil eye.[[44]](#endnote-44) The nature of a person’s gaze or their visual appreciation of their surroundings depended in part on whether they chose to look because they had the time or the inclination. This would tend to favour the social élite and those with time for leisure but it would be unwise to suggest that those lower down the social scale did not do so. Indeed, the insistence with which these ideas were discussed across a range of domestic, social and religious contexts suggests that looking was open to all. In addition, the way an individual might look would be tempered further by their surroundings being either familiar (where looking was about recognition), or unfamiliar (so that the viewer’s looking was directed by curiosity and the opportunity to see something new).

The quality and quantity of indoor lighting in the early modern home, which would influence how well the interior was seen after dark, was directly linked to the wealth, and often the social status, of the family. Taking one example of lighting, candles were available in a range of options from expensive, clean burning beeswax to modestly priced, rather smoky, tallow tapers which could be made at home. The amount of detail perceived by an individual also depended in part on the quality of their eyesight. For many this would become an issue as they got older, especially when light levels were low, such as at dusk and in the evening. However, for others who lived with poor or deteriorating sight for much of their lives, this would have resulted in a very limited appreciation of their surroundings. Henry VIII certainly wore glasses as he got older. Numerous pairs with decorative cases were kept in the King’s removing coffers as well as in the private apartments of his main properties, including ‘a Spectacle case of golde engraven with the Armes of England with twoo spectacles’.[[45]](#endnote-45) He also had other reading aids, including ‘one brode glasse to loke vppon a boke garnished with gold’ and ‘a glasse to reade with set in wodde with a handell’.[[46]](#endnote-46) By the early to mid-sixteenth century, it was no longer just royalty who benefited from spectacles.[[47]](#endnote-47) The increased availability of glasses was noted in Pietro Paolini’s painting *Allegory of the Five Senses* (c.1630), with the man representing sight holding a pair of spectacles in his hand.[[48]](#endnote-48) None of these factors discussed here were unique to viewing the early modern interior, but that does not make them any less significant to our understanding of contemporary perceptions of sight, and the ability to correct poor eyesight at an increasingly affordable cost was a distinctly early modern development.

Guidance on how to look at visual material in a domestic context, and how to interpret it, was essential. Seeing and interpreting were linked explicitly and discussed in detail.[[49]](#endnote-49) As George Puttenham (1529–1590) observed in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), by the late sixteenth century there was a lot to look at:

The Greekes call it *Emblema,* the Italiens *Impresa,* and we, a Deuice, such as a man may put into letters of gold and sende to his mistresse for a token, or cause to be embrodered in scutchions of armes, or in any bordure of a rich garment to giue by his noueltie maruell to the beholder.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Even so, in spite of an extensive body of early modern literature on emblems, which extended to over a thousand printed works, some emblems and mottoes still proved hard to interpret.[[51]](#endnote-51) For instance, when Nicholas White visited Tutbury in February 1569 and spoke with Mary Queen of Scots, he saw her cloth of estate with the motto ‘*En ma fin est mon commencement*’ [In my end is my beginning] and reported: ‘which is a ryddil I understand not’. Whether he did not understand the French, or the significance of these words to Mary, or whether the sentiment being expressed was lost on him, it is not possible to tell.[[52]](#endnote-52) However, the meaning of a cushion made by Mary Queen of Scots and sent to the Duke of Norfolk in 1571 was not lost on William Cecil. The cushion, which was cited as evidence at Norfolk’s trial for treason in the following year, was ‘wrought with the Scotts Queen’s own armes and a devyse upon it with this sentence, VIRESCIT VULNERE VIRTUS [Courage grows strong at a wound], and a hand with a knife cutting down the vines’.[[53]](#endnote-53) Cecil read this as Mary ‘declarynge thereby her courage and willinge the Duke by such a watch sentence, to take a good harte unto him’.[[54]](#endnote-54)

The most important things in a room were not always the most visible and there were various ways to conceal things from the casual gaze. A number of the paintings and embroideries owned by Henry VIII were covered with protective curtains such as ‘a Table of the Salutacion of our ladye embrodred with venice golde and silke with a curteyne of redde sarceonette’.[[55]](#endnote-55) While this might have been to protect a precious devotional piece, the inclusion of the inscription *CLAMAT SVA* [She calls her own] inside the bell that Mary Queen of Scots kept beside her bed is harder to explain.[[56]](#endnote-56) This might have been a simple conceit about service, but it could also have referred to her aspirations to be Queen of England and Scotland, which needed to be kept from unsympathetic eyes such as those of the ardent puritan, Sir Amias Paulet, who was her gaoler from 1585. Other marks of ownership might be concealed for very different reasons. One such example can be found at Knole amongst the collection of textiles acquired by Charles Sackville, sixth earl of Dorset, when he was Lord Chamberlain to William III and Mary II from 1689 to 1697. Many of the chairs, sofas and foot stools acquired by Sackville still have various sets of royal initials stamped onto the underside of seat rails or on the webbing.[[57]](#endnote-57) While these items had been in the royal collection, the initials had acted purely as ownership marks which the clerks could check and record. Once in Sackville’s possession, however, he could reveal them to visitors if he wished and when he felt the sight of them would give added lustre to his reputation and his acquisitions.

Seeing the Early Modern Interior

These early modern views of sight as a sense and attitudes towards ways of looking provided a distinct context for engagement with the domestic interior. Walking into a room in a domestic setting in early modern England was a sensory experience. The individual could make use of sights, sounds, smells and the opportunity to touch polished wood, ceramic or textile surfaces. What humans see when they look at furnishings includes their colour, lustre, texture, size, placement, condition and quantity. These were many of the details that were recorded in inventories of the goods of the élite, gentry and middling sort, reflecting the financial value of textiles in the domestic context. Inventories were generally taken by men with expertise, for example Nicholas Bristow, Henry VIII’s clerk, who knew what they were looking at in terms of the materials, techniques, styles and value of the items, both when new and second hand.[[58]](#endnote-58) The length of the descriptions, especially in élite inventories, often reflected the financial value of the items, with paintings in Henry VIII’s inventory being described in up to ten words compared with state beds, recorded in three to four hundred words.

Most modern analysis of early modern interiors is done by considering inventories, which list the items present (and presumably used) in a particular room. However, inventories pose many problems as a source, including not linking particular categories of object with specific rooms, recording minimal information and, most significantly, recording a specific moment in time (the time when the inventory was compiled), and unless the text was annotated to reflect changes it soon became out of date as items were added or removed from the house. Even so, one of the primary functions of an inventory was to use language to create a visual impression of the objects, which others could then use to identify things they were looking for.

Probate documents therefore often included significant material details, including dimensions, condition or a qualitative assessment of whether the item was the best, second best or worst in a particular category. Colour was often omitted from descriptions of objects listed in inventories and wills. The reason for this is hard to explain. In some instances it was because other significant details were sufficient to identify the item. Where colour was recorded, however, it could be one of the most significant things to be observed.[[59]](#endnote-59) In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there was a specific interest in the brightness of a colour and whether it was lustrous, with less concern with the hue.[[60]](#endnote-60) However, there was a noticeable change in colour vocabulary in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and in the range of colours described in inventories.[[61]](#endnote-61) In 1547 Henry VIII’s clothes were listed as being black, crimson, purple, russet and tawny.[[62]](#endnote-62) As the inventory of Elizabeth I’s clothes taken in 1600 indicates, new colours included watchet, hair, cloud, peach, filbert and maiden blush.[[63]](#endnote-63) In contrast, lustre was not explicitly recorded in inventories, but hints can be gained by implication. The materials described, especially satin, metal thread, metal laces, spangles and fringes sewn to textiles all had a lustrous quality that would have been admired. In the case of silver threads, this appeal would have diminished as the metal gradually tarnished.

Looking at certain types of object required particular responses. Some responses were demonstrated by a series of actions which the viewer was to perform as a reaction to what they saw. For example, the cloth of estate was a symbol of royal or aristocratic authority whether the monarch or aristocrat was present or not. On seeing it, lesser mortals were required to acknowledge its presence by raising or doffing their hat, and then to look away respectfully.[[64]](#endnote-64) Other responses were harder to gauge. If the theories about Henry VIII’s tapestry purchases are correct in suggesting that his choices of religious topics supported the break from Rome, then these objects would only have fulfilled their function if those coming to court looked at them, contemplated them and thought about the significance of the stories being depicted.[[65]](#endnote-65) It is quite possible that some people walked by taking little notice and others actively engaged with or rejected the messages about royal authority and the succession.

Beds and their hangings were some of the most important domestic textiles and those owned by the middling sort and above were often decorated with complex embroidered schemes, including Adam and Eve, the Fall and the Expulsion.[[66]](#endnote-66) Biblical themes were popular subjects but they were not alone, as indicated by a bed valance worked in tent stitch dating from c.1580–1610, which was probably British, and which depicts eight women and two men (Fig. 2). One reading of the scene is that four of the female figures represented Sight, Touch, Smell and Hearing. While not a full set of the senses, this suggests that, as at Bolsover, the person who designed or commissioned this piece selected the senses they considered to be most significant. These were placed within a scene that included a young girl, an older man, a jester and a woman on horseback. This valance, placed round the top of the bed-frame, could have drawn the gaze of those who slept within it, those who made it and those who passed through the room, causing them to contemplate the centrality of the senses in married life and in the bedchamber.

[Figure 2 here: ¼ page. Caption:

Embroidered Valance, c.1580–1610, probably British, Canvas worked with wool and silk thread; tent and satin stitches, 53.3 x 172.7 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Accession Number: 64.101.1273.

*Courtesy of www.metmuseum.org.*]

Among other personal textile items, this period also saw a proliferation of prayer books with embroidered bindings.[[67]](#endnote-67) In some instances the binding did not reflect the contents, as in the case of *The Miroir or Glasse of the Synneful Soul*, with a cover design of geometric scrollwork and the initials KP for Katherine Parr, the sixth wife of Henry VIII.[[68]](#endnote-68) In others, the covers were designed to aid contemplation, such as the binding of a 1651 Bible embroidered with figures of Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael.[[69]](#endnote-69) This complex family story could have provoked many lines of thought and the book cover suggests that looking at interiors and the textiles within them with early modern eyes was a complex business. The religious beliefs of viewers would undoubtedly influence how they saw things, while a changing vocabulary of colours could provide added richness to the way they articulated their visual response.

There were several other factors that influenced how a room was perceived. The first was whether the room was viewed during the day or in darkness. Different elements could be seen, and appreciated according to whether they were viewed in daylight, candle, lamp, firelight or moonlight.[[70]](#endnote-70) Metal thread would look bright in daylight and glisten in candle or fire light. While daylight and artificial lighting made it possible to appreciate the textiles, they were also damaging to the furnishings. Consequently, candle sconces often had reflectors, to direct the light and protect the surrounding area from soot and singeing.[[71]](#endnote-71) Window curtains, shutters and case covers all helped to protect textiles from excessive exposure to daylight, which could result in the fading of colours and damage to fibres. Mirrors and mirror-glass used on chimneys, ceilings and walls were also increasingly common in domestic interiors.[[72]](#endnote-72) Whether this was in the form of simple hand mirrors of polished metal or the large, fashionable silvered glass of the mirrors in the King’s Room or the Cartoon Gallery at Knole, these surfaces presented the viewer with an image reflected back immediately to themselves. While the two types of mirror had different reflective qualities, both provided individuals with the opportunity to see their own reflection and that of their clothing, as well as a chance to look indirectly at the room and the things within it.[[73]](#endnote-73) Reflected clothing introduced another element to the material environment, with potentially slightly muted colours and surface textures to add to the system of objects and the dynamic viewing required to appreciate them.[[74]](#endnote-74)

Finally, interiors were more fluid than inventories, paintings of interiors or rooms within surviving houses might suggest. The style and quality of furnishings might change with the seasons, and their location could alter depending on whether the family was in residence or not. Once a room was furnished for a particular event or period of time, certain pieces such as wall hangings would provide a consistent framework for other textiles that would come and go. The latter could include damask table cloths, napkins and towels used for dining as well as the clothing worn by the people found within these spaces. This fluidity also extended to who had access to a particular space and why. Very few people apart from Mary Queen of Scots and her closest attendants would have looked up inside the canopy of her bed of state to see ‘the quines matie pertrayed kneeling before the cros and hir crowne and hire scepture laying at hir fite and haulding hir hands to heaven’.[[75]](#endnote-75) In other words, context was very important to how the early modern interior and the textiles within it were viewed. Or more specifically, the contexts of reception were highly significant. Mary Queen of Scots had to be very careful about the messages she conveyed, even in a private space such as her bedchamber, while on the other hand this was the very space where she felt she could make such a statement to her servants and to herself.

Seeing as Social Judgement

There were other ways of thinking about the word ‘seeing’, in particular seeing as a way of making a judgement or assessment, and this section will consider several of these. First, royal furnishings, especially those associated with the king’s bedchamber, could be claimed as perquisites and the recipients could display them in their own homes as evidence of their proximity to the Crown. Charles Sackville, mentioned above, acquired many items including the state bed that was probably made for James, duke of York, as James’s marriage bed for his wedding to Mary of Modena in 1673. It was a sumptuous piece of furniture that may have been the work of Jean Peyrard, upholsterer to Louis XIV of France, and symbolised Sackville’s reward for loyalty to William, Mary and the Anglican cause.[[76]](#endnote-76)

Second, the use of coats of arms, initials and badges on furnishings could be seen as expressions of an individual’s and a family’s identity. All of these formed parts of a heraldic visual vocabulary that could be read on varying levels by those with the appropriate expertise.[[77]](#endnote-77) A Tudor rose would have been recognisable at most levels of society, and the liberal use of ES, for Elizabeth of Shrewsbury (better known as Bess of Hardwick), inside and outside Hardwick Hall was a clear statement of ownership, but reading a coat of arms required specific knowledge. For instance, not everybody would understand that the crescent moon cadency mark over the Cavendish arms on a needlework hanging at Hardwick denoted that Henry Cavendish was a younger son, or that the arms on the silver candle sconces dated 1685 at Knole referred to the sixth earl of Dorset and his second wife, Lady Mary Compton.[[78]](#endnote-78) Third, textile furnishings could provide evidence of the monarch’s authority over his or her subjects, as demonstrated by Henry VIII’s seizure of furnishings belonging to Thomas Wolsey, Thomas Cromwell and Edward Stafford, duke of Buckingham.[[79]](#endnote-79) Many of these pieces had been personalised with their former owner’s initials and badges and as such they would have been readily identifiable to those visiting Greenwich, Hampton Court and Whitehall.[[80]](#endnote-80) Henry VIII had access to craftsmen who could have replaced these arms with his own. By choosing not to, these objects acted as a reminder to those who saw them of what happened to those who crossed the king.

Fourth, furnishing textiles acted as expressions of status, inherited wealth and disposable income and as such they were assets that could be realised during the owner’s lifetime or at their death. As a result, high quality textiles retained their value and while new items were prized, old pieces were to be found in homes at all levels of society.[[81]](#endnote-81) These included items handed down within a family as well as second-hand pieces. For instance, pieces of tapestry were bought on Cardinal Wolsey’s behalf from probate sales of fellow clerics, including William Smith, bishop of Lincoln, and Cardinal Bainbridge, archbishop of York.[[82]](#endnote-82) Bess of Hardwick went one step further and recycled former liturgical textiles bought by her third husband Sir William St Loe to make Hardwick Hall’s first set of appliqué hangings depicting the Virtues.[[83]](#endnote-83) By converting these former liturgical textiles into domestic items she would have conveyed a complex range of messages, including her support for the Elizabethan church, her thriftiness and her knowledge of print sources that depicted women with many of the qualities that Bess sought to exemplify.

Finally, men and women did not necessarily look at domestic textiles in the same ways, resulting in gendered ways of looking. As Susan Frye and others have shown, early modern women demonstrated agency through the textiles that they embroidered for their homes and these textiles conveyed messages to other women and to the men of the household.[[84]](#endnote-84) It was not coincidental that one of the most popular images for seventeenth-century embroidered pictures was the scene between Esther and Ahasuerus, in which a wife successfully petitioned her husband.[[85]](#endnote-85) However, Esther was also dutiful towards her husband, a quality that Hannibal Gamon noted in 1627 when he compared Lady Robartes with Esther in her funeral sermon. He stated that she ‘did the Commandement of Mordecay’, in other words indicating that she was an obedient wife.[[86]](#endnote-86) In the same year Charles I bought Jacopo Tintoretto’s *Esther before Ahasuerus* (c. 1546–1547), which may have caused him to reconsider his own marriage, which at that point was less than ideal.[[87]](#endnote-87) Other popular stories, such as the scene of Bathsheba bathing, provided men with the opportunity for voyeuristic looking at images of a naked or semi-clothed woman, so that a parallel could be drawn between David’s gazing at Bathsheba and male viewers looking at the embroidery.[[88]](#endnote-88) While the nudity might catch their attention, they might then be encouraged to consider Bathsheba’s future role as a mother and by extension the role of women within their own families.[[89]](#endnote-89)

All of the examples in this section demonstrate that there were multiple ways in which an interested individual might look at textiles within an early modern interior. These fractured ways of looking made domestic spaces vibrant, changeable and liable to promote a diverse range of responses dependent on factors such as the individual’s age, gender, status, education and religious inclinations – to name but a few.

Conclusion

Mine eyes

Were not in fault, for she was beautiful:

Mine ears, that heard her flattery, nor my heart

That thought her like her seeming.[[90]](#endnote-90)

This paper has played with the different meanings of seeing and looking because sight is more than just the physical act of looking – it has argued for the significance of interpretation and appreciation or what might be termed ‘interested looking’ for the way interiors were viewed in the early modern period. Looking and seeing could be very practical exercises, as reflected in the functional descriptions recorded in inventories. Looking and seeing could also be intellectual games and although domestic textiles were intended to be seen and so had to be pleasing to the eye, some pieces were designed and produced to be looked at and thought about in very specific ways. Seeing and looking were complex acts because while individuals could be trained to look, they still might not all do so in the same way, or their way of looking might be influenced by the particular circumstances under which they viewed the object. Equally, as the decorative schemes at Knole and Bolsover demonstrate, ideas about sight and the senses changed during this period, from a serious moral intention that invited introspection, to something more frivolous and decorative. Both perspectives provided frameworks for how individuals experienced the world. This paper has sought to explore some of the different strategies that individuals employed when they looked at early modern interiors. It has argued that, although these interiors were rarely experienced through sight alon­e, it was the most important of the senses in terms of how most individuals understood and interpreted their own domestic spaces and those belonging to others.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Catherine Richardson and Tara Hamling for seeing this article to completion. Their generosity, skill and care have made it a pleasure to work with them. The comments of the two referees were also invaluable and they have played a key part in shaping this article.

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34. Depictions of the senses were not restricted to textiles – they were found on other types of objects, including ceramics, glassware and floor tiles. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. *Sight*, c. 1500, 274 x 355 cm, Musée National du Moyen Age, previously the Musée de Cluny, Paris. Five of the tapestries depict the five sense and the sixth is known by the words woven in the border, *A mon seul désir*. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
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74. With grateful thanks to Tara Hamling for this observation. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
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87. Jacopo Tintoretto, *Esther before Ahasuerus*, c. 1546–1547, oil on canvas, 207.7 x 275.5 cm, Royal Collection, King’s Gallery, Kensington Palace, RCIN 407247. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
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89. Frye, *Pens and Needles*, pp. 139–40. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline* (Act 5, scene 5, lines 62–65). [↑](#endnote-ref-90)