Futurescan 3: Intersecting Identities

The Banner as Representation of Identity and Community

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This paper narrates the context for further research into the symbolic significance of the ceremonial banner. It also considers the contemporary St. Cuthbert’s banner and its design development by the author. According to Dobson (1973: 27), by the end of the Middle Ages, St. Cuthbert’s original banner was ‘the most popular – and on the whole the most effective – battle ensign in England’. The Rites of Durham (Fowler 1903: 26) record how it ‘afforded victories’ where it accompanied the armies of Richard II, Henry IV and Henry VIII into battle. The sacred relic was destroyed in the sixteenth century during the Reformation of England.

The parading of a banner to represent a cause or movement draws parallels with the miner’s banner - another significant North East artefact. Once a year, the contemporary St. Cuthbert’s banner, permanently displayed in the Cathedral, witnesses the dedication and blessing of new miners’ banners as part of a service for the Durham Miners’ Gala (DMG). The emblematic power of the miner’s banner to represent the resilience of former mining communities, is borne through the enduring DMG, which has received a revived attendance over the past few years (https://www.tuc.org.uk/ economic-issues/ budget/ 131st-big-meeting.) In considering both the St. Cuthbert’s banner and the resurgence of banner groups in the region, it was important for my own practice to understand historic and contemporary textiles and their ability to connect to a community. Tilley (1989: 189) recognises that material culture can be an individual activity, but that ‘it is always a social production’.

As a result of a cross-disciplinary interest in North East mining banners, academics from Northumbria University’s Faculty of Arts, Design & Social Sciences have initiated a research collaboration to explore a multi-disciplinary approach that embraces methodologies from social science and creative practice. We believe this research has the potential to shed new light on ideas about representation and identity, and offer
opportunities to engage communities in new ways. Our hope is to increase our understanding of how and why banner groups have formed, what the likely impact of that will be on communities, but also to support groups in the development of lasting cultural legacies relating to the meaning they attach to community, banner and miner’s gala.

Keywords:
Banner, St. Cuthbert, Durham Miners, textile design, local communities