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South Staffordshire Enamel – HOW...did they make that? The value of contemporary craftsmanship in revealing (absent) 18th Century metalworking skills in literary sources.

South Staffordshire Enamels, a niche genre of 18th century decorative accoutrements – snuff boxes, candlesticks etc. These items epitomise Midland workshop ingenuity, combining established 'craft' skills with emergent industrial production methods, creating objects for the fashion-conscious Georgian.

Bird-shaped box, double inkwells - how were these objects made? How many times have curators asked that question? Highly complex forms, fashioned from improbably thin copper sheet (0.010inch), covered in layers of lustrous vitreous enamel, relied heavily on the interdependent tacit knowledge of box makers, enamellers and mount turners. Craftsmen in this short-lived trade (circa 1750-1830), appeared reluctant/valued their livelihood, to divulge to third parties their craftsmanship secrets. As a result, the critical process of manufacture, hidden beneath the enamel surface has been hitherto undervalued. A combination of Enlightenment writing - re-presented existing publications, and Victorian/20th-century texts - largely shaped by historical or connoisseurship approaches focused principally on enamel decoration and/or attribution. Consequently, the craftsmanship of the metal sub-structures, upon which the enamel surface relied, appears largely absent from the literature - a significant omission in our understanding of these objects.

This paper presents the case for craftsmanship enquiry within a practice lead methodology, as a method to analyse and reinterpret this literature. Within this paradigm, craftsmanship understanding, acquired in the workshop - as laboratory, has established a deep knowledge of enamel process parameters and material characteristics. This empirical knowledge has then been applied to the comparative analysis of texts and enamel artefacts. Craftsmanship references in 18th century encyclopaedias, treatises, diaries etc.; and 19th/20th century scholarly catalogues, books and papers, are compared with manufacturing clues identifiable in enamel artefacts in collections - V&A, Museum of London, Harris Museum and Wolverhampton Art Gallery.

Examination of the literature has resulted in the identification of three data sets. The first, concerns craftsmanship references specific to the Staffordshire Enamel trade: a lexicon of material and process descriptions; a nomenclature of 18th century terms; and the mapping of the scales, places and people engaged in the trade. The second concerns the wider ecology of allied trades: the identification of tools, process and modes of production in evidence during the period. Thirdly, the context in which the literature occurred; prosopographic analysis of authors, collectors and curators to reveal hidden occurrences, connections, relationships or bias.

Within the journey of craftsmanship, materials are transformed into objects. Comparative analysis of the literature has revealed a substantial knowledge gap concerning the metal craftsmanship employed in painted enamels. Investigations reveal the manifestation of this absence, a product of the biases of past authors, collectors and historians; generated by their personal interest, occupation, or the context or circumstance, in which their 'well meaning' work was undertaken. However, whilst the more 'authoritative' 18th century literary sources, herald little of value with this regard, the investigation has revealed, the more prosaic literature - rooted to the locality of the trade's occurrence - prove particularly relevant. The trade directories and travel diary entries provide 'nodes' of craftsmanship reference, around which new hypothesis on the absent making will be built.