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Fowler Museum presents an exhibition highlighting Alighiero Boetti's embroideries by Afghan women



Alighiero Boetti, *Mappa*, 1990, Embroidery on fabric, 118.1 x 229.3 cm, Private Collection, Rome.
Photograph by David Regen, New York, © Alighiero Boetti Estate by Artists Rights Society (ARS) and Società Italiana di Autori ed Editori (SIAE) 2011, Courtesy Fondazione Alighiero e Boetti, Rome

From 1971 to 1994, Italian artist Alighiero Boetti (1940–1994) embarked on a series of projects with Afghan embroiderers, creating monumental pieces that would become some of his most iconic works. *Order and Disorder: Alighiero Boetti by Afghan Women*—on display at the Fowler Museum at UCLA from Feb 26–July 29, 2012— is the first exhibition to underscore the production of this *oeuvre* by Afghan women, and features twenty-nine works by Boetti along with documentary photographs of the Afghan embroiderers taken by Randi Malkin Steinberger as well as examples of the traditional styles of embroidery that may have inspired Boetti to this pursuit when he encountered them in Kabul.

When Boetti first traveled to Afghanistan in 1971, he was already regarded as a leading practitioner of *Arte Povera*—a group of young Italian artists who were creating highly conceptual works using unconventional, commonly available materials. Taking up part-time residence in Kabul from 1971 to 1979, Boetti was surrounded in the streets and markets by Afghanistan's extraordinary traditions of embroidery. As early as his first visit, he began commissioning new works in this medium. Boetti and his assistants transferred designs to pieces of cloth that were then taken to the embroiderers. The women's skilled needlework and color choices strongly influenced the final appearance of the works.

Exhibition Overview

Boetti's embroideries fall into three general categories. The most celebrated are his *Mappe* (maps), wall-sized world maps with countries filled in with the colors and symbols of their flags. In 1971 Boetti commissioned women at an embroidery school in Kabul to embroider his first map. He initially intended to make only one, but went on to commission roughly 150 *Mappe* in his lifetime, with no two possessing exactly the same dimensions. Four *Mappe*, remarkably diverse in their colors and reflecting the changing geo-political situations of the different time periods during which they were created, have been brought together for this exhibition.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s Boetti initiated production of the *Tutto* (everything), a sequence of ambitious embroideries featuring myriad interlocking shapes representing diverse objects—sunglasses, a Hindu goddess, a protractor, twins, and more. The *Tutto* advanced an image that had long fascinated Boetti and which he explored in his work as early as 1967: the pack ice at the earth's poles, which breaks into facets when temperatures rise. Some of the largest and most complex *Tutto* took up to ten years for the embroiderers to complete.

A third category of embroidery is colorful grids of letters that spell out phrases (such as "Order and Disorder") amidst otherwise random lettering. These works feature evocative expressions and messages—some in Dari (the language of Afghanistan) and some in Italian—that can be "decoded" by reading the letters in the various directions Boetti arranged them, sometimes in vertical columns, backwards, around the borders, etc.

Documentary Photographs by Randi Malkin Steinberger

Boetti's production in Afghanistan was disrupted by the 1979 Soviet invasion, but in 1985 it resumed in camps housing Afghan refugees in Peshawar, Pakistan. As a European male, Boetti was not allowed to visit the camps. He therefore asked photographer Randi Malkin Steinberger (now based in Santa Monica, California), with whom he had collaborated in Rome, to go to Peshawar to photograph the women at work. In 1990 she was allowed to visit the camps for one day, during which she captured numerous images of groups of women talking and working together on the embroideries as well as the office in Peshawar city where the work was coordinated. Steinberger's photographs constitute the only record of the women at work in the camps, and twenty-five of those images are included in *Order and Disorder*.

Embroidery in Afghanistan

Kabul in the 1970s was the entrepôt through which textile arts from all over Afghanistan were traded. Embroidery was ubiquitous—in the shops and markets, displayed in homes, and worn by the citizens. The exhibition features numerous fine examples of traditional embroidery—elaborate coats, prayer stone covers, bags and other garments and cloths— to give an idea of the visual environment that inspired Boetti to use embroidery as a medium.

About Alighiero Boetti

Alighiero Boetti was born in Turin in 1940. His mother, Adelina Marchisio, supplemented her income as a violinist with an embroidery business. In January 1967 Boetti had his first exhibition in Turin, featuring a wide array of works made from heterogeneous, prefabricated materials. In September 1967 the Genoese curator Germano Celant included him in an exhibition alongside five other artists, labeling their work "Arte Povera."

In 1971 Boetti began to dissociate himself from Arte Povera. Moving from Turin to Rome, he also began visiting Afghanistan regularly and even opened a hotel there in 1971 called the *One Hotel*. In addition to the embroideries produced at his request by Afghan women, Boetti continued making many other types of work while principally residing in Rome. He died in Rome in April 1994 at the age of 54. His work is in major national and international collections.

Presently there is much interest surrounding Boetti's art. He is soon to be the subject of a retrospective at the Tate Modern in London (*Alighiero Boetti*, February 28–May 27, 2012), and another of his *Mappe* will be displayed at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in the group exhibition *Common Places: Printing, Embroidery, and the Art of Global Mapping* (February 18–May 13, 2012). A book of Randi Malkin Steinberger's photographs entitled *Boetti by Afghan People: Peshawar, Pakistan 1990* has recently been published by RAM Publications and images from her

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earlier book, *Accanto al Pantheon*, will be on display at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura of Los Angeles in Westwood in the exhibition *Open Book—"Accanto al Pantheon": Randi Malkin Steinberger's Snapshots of Alighiero Boetti's Studio* (February 25–May 2, 2012).

Additional Information

Order and Disorder: Alighiero Boetti by Afghan Women is organized by the Fowler Museum in association with the Fondazione Azzurra and the Istituto Italiano di Cultura of Los Angeles, and is co-curated by Alma Ruiz, senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and specialist on the Arte Povera movement and Christopher G. Bennett, Boetti scholar and Dean's Post-doctoral Fellow in Art History at the University of Delaware.

Support for the exhibition comes from the Fowler's Barbara and Joseph Goldenberg Fund and the Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director's Discretionary Fund; an Anonymous Donor; Suzanne and David Johnson; the Istituto Italiano di Cultura of Los Angeles; and the Italian Heritage Culture Foundation. Corporate sponsorship is provided by Disaronno.

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This winter the Fowler will publish the book *Order and Disorder: Alighiero Boetti by Afghan Women* (136 pages, 121 color and 9 b/w images, \$25, ISBN 978-0-9778344-8-8, soft cover), distributed by the University of Washington Press. The authors are Christopher Bennett, Roy W. Hamilton (senior curator for Asian and Pacific Collections at the Fowler Museum), Alma Ruiz, and Randi Malkin Steinberger.

The Fowler Museum at UCLA is one of the country's most respected institutions devoted to exploring the arts and cultures of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Americas. The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$10 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.

Related Events

Opening Night: *Order and Disorder: Alighiero Boetti by Afghan Women*

Saturday, February 25, 2012

5–6 pm

Fowler OutSpoken Conversation: Alighiero Boetti's Embroideries

Guest curators Christopher Bennett and Alma Ruiz, and photographer/filmmaker Randi Malkin Steinberger, who documented the Afghan women who embroidered Boetti's works, come together for this opening program celebrating *Order and Disorder: Alighiero Boetti by Afghan Women*. An introductory talk about the artist by Boetti scholar Bennett is followed by a conversation about the exhibition with all three speakers, moderated by MOCA curator Ruiz. Priority seating for members at 4:45 pm.

6–8:30 pm Opening Party

Enjoy an exhibition preview and signature Disaronno Cocktails in the Disaronno Contemporary Lounge, light refreshments by Obikà, Italian wines courtesy of the North American Sommelier Association, Beck's beer, and music by DJ Ofunne, spinning sounds from Afghanistan, Italy, Pakistan, and more. Limited capacity. RSVP required by February 16, 2012: 310.206.7001 or fowlerRSVP@arts.ucla.edu

8–11 pm

After-party buffet at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura of Los Angeles in Westwood. See *Open Book—"Accanto al Pantheon": Randi Malkin Steinberger's Snapshots of Alighiero Boetti's Studio*. RSVP essential; you will receive address and parking instructions: rsvp.iicla@esteri.it

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