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It's the British Empire story, after a fashion

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Art installation in form of 1880s frock doesn't skirt issue of how scramble for Africa divided a continent
Picture: Bruce Rollinson

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IT was the empire upon which the sun never set and made Britain the envy of its rivals and the ruler of the waves.

From the heart of Africa to the Canadian wilds, it encompassed one quarter of the world's land mass and population, spanning all far-flung corners of the globe.

Now, an art installation in York has rekindled the vast expanse of the British Empire in the 19th century, and reduced it to the frills and folds of a size eight dress.

The artwork, called Colonial Dress by acclaimed artist Susan Stockwell, is an 1880s style Victorian dress stitched entirely from world maps and detailing the former colonies which Britain ruled over during its days of empire.

The 1880s were a decade marked by the beginning of the "Scramble for Africa", when European countries were rushing to gain power over the dark continent.



And the dress features the African countries which bore the brunt of the unparalleled race to exploit their wealth, emblazoned prominently across its front.

It has gone on display at the Burton Gallery in York Art Gallery alongside other works of empire including Sir Joshua Reynolds' 18th century painting of Captain John Foote, who worked for the East India Company, and Sir Peter Lely's Portrait of Lady Charlotte Fitzroy With Her Indian Page.

Jennifer Alexander, assistant curator of fine art, said: "We are delighted the dress is on display at the gallery.

"It is very unusual and very striking to look at.



“The colours are not what I would expect from a Victorian dress.

“People probably don’t think about the days of Empire very often now as a lot of the individual countries have now gained their independence.

“But it is worth remembering where it all comes from and what was involved in doing that.

“The dress is one of those displays of work where you can draw lots of different meanings.

“I don’t think Susan wants to dictate what people take from it.

“It is to encourage people to think about issues of the British Empire and of colonialism.

“These maps carry their own layers of meaning.

“Over the past five or six years we have had more contemporary art in and it is not new for us to display them alongside historical pieces.

“But this will certainly grab people’s attention.”

The dress, which was made in 2008, uses a wire mesh and glue to hold the maps which range from a number of different eras in place.

In keeping with the Victorian style it features a high neck, three quarter length sleeves, and a frilly skirt – and has Britain over its heart.

Susan Stockwell has earned an international reputation for her large installations made from everyday objects, and Colonial Dress is her second major display in York in recent years.

In 2010, she set up an installation at the deconsecrated medieval church York St Mary’s entitled Flood, made entirely from four tons of recycled computer components.

The huge sculpture, which spanned from the roof to the ceiling of the church, featured a pool of metal and wire pouring down to the stone floor and ended in a mass of dissected computers whose use has been surpassed by new technology.

The artist said the installation was designed as an autopsy of consumer society.

Her portfolio has also included creating sculptures from circuit boards, recycled Chinese notes and the paper used to make teabags.

A spokesman for York Museum’s Trust said: “We knew about Susan’s styles of work from her Flood installation at York St Mary’s last year and we are delighted that she has loaned Colonial Dress to the gallery.”

The work went on display last Friday and will be on show until next year.

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