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ENGLISH DOMESTIC NEEDLEWORK OF THE XVI, XVII, AND XVIII CENTURIES

A Loan Exhibition

November 5 — December 2, 1945



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
FIFTH AVENUE AND 82 STREET, NEW YORK

ENGLISH DOMESTIC NEEDLEWORK OF THE XVI, XVII, AND XVIII CENTURIES

The present loan exhibition of English domestic needlework is the first major show of its kind ever held in this country, and it comprises some two hundred and fifty distinguished items from American and English collections. The embroideries thus assembled range in date from the middle of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth and include a great diversity of types and objects. Costumes and costume accessories, bookbindings, cushions and pillows, bed hangings and coverlets, carpets, wall hangings, table covers, pictures, boxes, baskets, and samplers are represented by numerous interesting examples. Furniture enriched with needlework may be seen in such varied forms as chairs, tables, mirrors, sconces, and screens. A small collection of contemporary books with engraved designs of the sort which served as inspiration for the English needleworker is also shown.

The exhibition is installed in the three galleries known as D 6 and two adjoining galleries, J 8 and J 9. In a general way it is arranged chronologically so that the visitor will first come upon the work of the Elizabethan period and, proceeding through the exhibition, arrive eventually among the embroideries of the Queen Anne and Georgian eras. But the varied character of the material made it necessary now and then to depart from a hard and fast chronological arrangement in the interest of the appearance of the galleries.

SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Elizabethan needlework is understandably rare in comparison with that of later date, but the exhibition nevertheless includes many notable examples of this period. Cushion and pillow

covers, table carpets, and wall and bed hangings—among the most important types of Elizabethan embroidery that have come down to us—are well represented. A unique pair of cushion covers with scenes of the Sacrifice of Isaac and the Judgment of Solomon, lent from Hardwick Hall by the Duke of Devonshire, are of great historical as well as artistic interest. They are described in an inventory (1601) of the effects of the duke's ancestress, Bess of Hardwick, one of the most celebrated characters of her day. Her fourth husband, the Earl of Shrewsbury, was for nearly twenty years the custodian of Mary, Queen of Scots, who lived with the Shrewsburys at Hardwick. Both the queen and the countess were indefatigable needleworkers and the house still contains numerous examples of embroidery dating from their day. One of the finest sixteenth-century pillow covers in existence, worked in black silk on linen in the manner known at the time as "black work," is lent by Sir John Carew Pole, to whose family it has always belonged.

Table carpets are among the most prized survivals of Elizabethan needlework, and that lent by the Victoria and Albert Museum is one of the finest. Surrounding a field with a design of grapes on a trellis is a wide scenic border in which ladies and gentlemen are shown walking near a great country house while various hunting episodes appear in the distance. The entire carpet is in a remarkable state of preservation and vibrant with its original brilliance of color.

Embroidered wall hangings of the Elizabethan era are exceedingly rare, and that lent by Mr. Ernest L. Franklin is the only one of its type known. It is of tapestry size, worked on

canvas entirely in petit point, and depicts a meeting between a group of richly dressed ladies and several gentlemen on horseback. Bed hangings, especially the pictorial valances which hung from the tester, have survived in limited numbers. Judge Irwin Untermyer has lent two of the best, one with scenes from the tragic story of Philomela, the other representing various rural activities, fishing, hunting, and so forth. The Museum's own hanging from Treago, Herefordshire, with its applied floral designs, is one of the finest of this period.

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The passion for embroidering continued unabated into the seventeenth century with no abrupt change in style, so that it is frequently difficult to say whether an embroidery was made in the late Elizabethan or the early Jacobean era. Within this transitional period fall several groups of costume accessories which should be of considerable interest to designers. Among them are men's and women's caps and gloves, and an intriguing collection of little bags in such perfect condition that they must have been carefully treasured from the very beginning.

But the most appealing contribution of the century is probably the needlework picture which began to be popular in the reign of Charles I (1625-1649). The exhibition contains some sixty seventeenth-century pictures of high quality and varied subjects. Many are from the collections of Judge Untermyer and Mrs. Myron Taylor, both of which are very rich in this interesting pictorial phase of English embroidery. If attention is to be called to any one of them, it should probably be the unique picture entitled *A Musical Party*, which both technically and artistically is one of the finest achievements in the realm of English needlework. Some of the pictures are in the fantastic technique known as stumpwork, a kind of embroidery in relief which may also be seen in the exhibition on such varied objects as boxes, glove cases, baskets, and mirrors.

The seventeenth century also produced many beautiful embroidered bookbindings, and a collection of distinguished examples, many of them lent by Judge Untermyer and by the Pierpont Morgan Library, is here to delight the bibliophile.

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

English embroidery of the eighteenth century is represented in the exhibition by a wealth of colorful and luxurious examples. There are, for instance, several of the finest embroidered bed coverlets in existence, including the superb coverlet and matching pillows of satin worked in silk and silver-gilt thread which was given as a wedding present in 1720 to Sir John and Lady Dolben and is now one of the treasures of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Another fine example is lent by Her Majesty Queen Mary.

An attractive phase of eighteenth-century needlework was the embroidered carpet, usually worked in cross-stitch on canvas in floral designs in gay natural colors. The exhibition includes several of these carpets, among which that lent by the Marquess of Salisbury from Hatfield House is perhaps the finest known.

The lover of costumes will be delighted with such items as the fabulous Queen Anne waistcoat of quilted linen embroidered in colored silks and silver-gilt thread recently acquired by the Metropolitan Museum and the superb Georgian dress lent by the Victoria and Albert Museum. Both are unsurpassed in their way. To interest the furniture collector there are numerous fine chairs with needlework coverings as well as card tables, sconces, and screens in the decoration of which embroidery has played its part.

In this brief description it has, of course, only been possible to touch upon a few of the high spots of the exhibition. Upon visiting the galleries, the visitor will find many objects to interest him which it has not been possible to mention here.

The Museum owes special debts of gratitude to Judge Untermyer for lending well over a hundred embroideries from his noted collection, thereby encouraging the Museum to undertake the exhibition; to the Earl of Halifax and members of the staff of the British Embassy in Washington, especially Mr. David Daiches, for their untiring aid in procuring important loans from England; and to Mr. Leigh Ashton, the Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, for recommending generous loans from his museum and agreeing to oversee the packing and shipping of all the objects lent from English collections.

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ENGLISH LENDERS

Her Majesty Queen Mary	The Lord Sackville
The Duke of Devonshire	Sir John Carew Pole, Bt.
The Marquess of Salisbury	Ernest L. Franklin
The Viscountess Esher	The Victoria and Albert Museum

AMERICAN LENDERS

J. P. Argenti	Mrs. Brooks Howe
Mme Jacques Balsan	Mrs. Lytle Hull
James W. Barney	Mrs. Myron Taylor
Mrs. J. Insley Blair	Judge Irwin Untermyer
Mr. and Mrs. DeWitt Clinton Cohen	Mr. and Mrs. George D. Widener
Mrs. Edsel B. Ford	The Folger Shakespeare Library
Mrs. Edgar J. Hesslein	The Pierpont Morgan Library

Embroideries belonging to the Metropolitan Museum are also shown

LECTURES AND GALLERY TALKS RELATING TO THE EXHIBITION

Lectures on Sundays at 3:30 p.m. in the Lecture Hall:

- Nov. 4 THE SPIRIT OF THE XVIII CENTURY, by *William P. Harbeson, Professor of English, University of Pennsylvania*
- 11 ENGLISH EMBROIDERIES FROM HENRY VIII TO DUTCH WILLIAM, by *Leigh Ashton, Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London*
- 18 ENGLISH EMBROIDERIES OF THE GEORGIAN PERIOD, by *Leigh Ashton*
- 25 MUSIC IN THE ENGLISH HOME FROM THE XVI THROUGH THE XVIII CENTURY, by *Beatrice Farwell, with a Program of Madrigals by The Randolph Singers*

Two Gallery Talks will be given in the exhibition galleries on Wednesdays November 14 and 28 at 3 p.m., by Marion P. Bolles, Assistant Curator in Charge of the Textile Study Room

English Domestic Embroidery, a picture book with seventy halftone plates is on sale at the Information Desk. Price \$1.50