English Medieval Embroidery

Coptic embroidery from 7-10th century found in Egyptian burial grounds—the Annunciation and Salutation. Silk threads on a linen ground primarily in satin and split stitch. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

While the textile arts of Byzantium influenced the skill level, the techniques, and the coloring of medieval needlework, it was the rise in Christianity which provided both the inspiration for new designs and the main purpose that needlework would serve for many centuries.

The very long tradition of ecclesiastical needlework began when early Christians of the Near East expressed their devotion by embroidering cloth to be used by the Church. During most of the Middle Ages—the period from the 5th century through the end of the 15th century—the Roman Catholic Church was the center of power and the unifying force in Western Europe. All the arts, including needlework, were fostered by the Church, which required that the artisans create works solely for the glorification of God.

During the entire medieval period, the needlework designs had a close affinity with the art of illumination—either manuscripts were copied or the same artists were responsible for the designs of both. As the handmaiden to the early Christian church, needlework served magnificently as a means of visually teaching the uneducated followers the mysteries of the new faith.

Although the design sources for the medieval embroiderer were many, the Christian realm in particular yielded an inexhaustible supply of incidents from the Bible, particularly the New Testament, and an iconography composed of apostles, prophets and saints. Others sources included the popular Christian and pagan legends, such as incidents in the life of King Arthur and his knights or the medieval romance of Tristan and Isolde.

The great majority of the needlework produced during the Middle Ages was devoted to ecclesiastical use. Sadly, only a small amount still exists compared to the enormous quantity written records indicate was created. While much would have deteriorated from just the passage of time, liturgical styles changed and the magnificent vestments from earlier eras were cut apart and reassembled into the fashion of the day. Also, much was destroyed to reclaim the pearls, precious jewels and gold threads for other use.
Bayeux Tapestry. Detail of Journey to Normandy—In the Royal Palace of Westminster in 1064, Edward the Confessor, King of England, is talking to his brother-in-law Harold, East of Wessex. After this Harold, holding a hawk, makes for the south coast with his followers and hunting dogs.

Written records indicate that narrative wall hangings depicting historical events were also an important part of the European needlework tradition during feudal times. Of these, only the Bayeux Tapestry survives. Its survival could be due to the fact that it was made with locally-produced linen and wool, instead of the valuable imported silk and silver-gilt used in many contemporaneous textiles.

This medieval monument is valuable not only as an example of early work but also as a document of social history. It is a true embroidery, not a tapestry as its name would imply. Made to hang on the walls of the Bishop Odo Church in Bayeux, France, it is a strip of coarse homespun linen approximately 230 feet long by 20 inches wide (70 meters by 51 centimeters), embroidered in eight colors of wool thread. Most of the hanging is executed in laidwork and couching with details in stem and outline stitch. This diary written with a needle commemorates the Norman Conquest of England, climaxed by the Battle of Hastings in 1066 when William the Conqueror defeated Harold of England. Authorities have never agreed whether it was executed by the English or the French. But there is no question that, as George W. Digby stated: It was designed to tell a story to a largely illiterate public; it is like a strip cartoon, racy, emphatic, colourful, with a good deal of blood and thunder and some ribaldry.
CLARE CHASUBLE, about 1275. One of the oldest pieces of Opus Anglicanum existing. This vestment was reconstructed from another style of ecclesiastical apparel, for chasubles were not used in this early time period. Scenes on this back section: Crucifixion, Virgin and Child and St. Peter and St. Paul. The embroidery is executed in underside-couched gold with a chevron couching pattern, in addition to silk split stitch. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

Our knowledge of precisely how early medieval embroidery was created is frustratingly incomplete. However, the surviving specimens are sufficient to indicate that long years of devoted work were spent on their creation. For example, a record indicates one set of vestments for a Florentine church occupied several persons for a period of twenty-six years. An altar frontal given to Westminster Abbey in the late 13th century occupied four women for a period of four years.

There was great prestige in possessing needlework in this time when there were smaller stocks of material items that could be owned as compared to today. And needlework became an almost indispensable symbol of great wealth and power in both the secular and the ecclesiastical world during the Middle Ages.

For all the beauty found in needlework throughout medieval Europe in the 13th and first half of the 14th century, none equaled the technical skill and design of that produced in England. Referred to as Opus Anglicanum in church inventories on the Continent, this English Work was in great demand by both the clergy and royalty and was exported in ever-increasing quantities. Matthew Paris, a 13th-century historian and illuminator, records that Pope Innocent IV in 1246 much admired the vestments used by some great dignitaries of the Church. When advised that the source for this work was England he responded: Truly England is our garden of delight; in sooth it is a well inexhaustible, and where there is much abundance from thence much may be extracted.
SYON COPE, about 1275-1300. This is a typical Opus Anglicanum design layout for this time period—barbed quatrefoil with the use of chevron patterned underside couching for both the gold threads and the silk background. It measures 9'7" across and 4'8" high (approximately 3 meters by 1.5 meters).

Originally a bell-shaped chasuble, it is likely the heraldic orphrey at the top edge and narrow band around the curve were added when it was made into the present cope many years later. The foundation of these bands is rather coarse linen embroidered in plaited cross stitch. The embroidery of the body of the cope is underside couching and fine split stitch. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)
**BUTLER-BOWDEN COPE**, about 1325-1350. Shows the more relaxed design layout of the time period with "arches" rather than medallions, and more graceful figures. The ground is red silk velvet. The design was drawn on fine linen which was placed on top of the velvet, the embroidery was executed through the two fabrics and then the linen was cut away from the stitching. The cope was cut up, used for another style of vestment and then restored to its original shape, missing a few small pieces. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

One characteristic that distinguishes the Opus Anglicanum is a special technique for couching the metal threads. The thread, with its high gold content, was no longer surface couched in the Byzantine tradition, but was attached to the ground fabric of linen, silk satin or silk velvet in a method subsequently referred to as underside couching—also known as point retire or couche rentre. Although the use of the underside couching was not confined to England, nowhere else did it reach the perfection seen in Opus Anglicanum.

To execute underside couching, a fine linen thread was first brought to the surface of the fabric from beneath a double strand of metal thread. The linen thread was placed over the metal, and then returned to the back through the same hole in the fabric, and the needleworker then pulled a tiny loop of metal down and through to the back of the work. This was repeated in a regular sequence so that the bends in the metal thread created by these linen stitches resulted in repeated breaks in the smooth surface of the metal, producing a highly visible pattern. It should be noted that on some occasions silk, rather than metal, was used as the foundation thread for the underside couching, such as in the Syon Cope described previously.
Another special characteristic of Opus Anglicanum is how the figures are handled. They exhibit dramatic gestures and facial expressions, and unusually large black popping eyes, pronounced high foreheads, and often large heads, hands, and feet. All areas of flesh have a dark outline, and the coloring of hair and beards is often unnatural, typically with two contrasting colors used to produce the illusion of curls. The flesh, hair, beards, and sometimes parts of the garments, are executed in silk split stitch of astonishing fineness. The flesh of the face is worked in spiraling rows of split stitch to suggest rounded checks. While only a single value of silk thread is used for the flesh, a dimensional effect is produced by the skillful movement of the split-stitched lines.

Another unique feature of Opus Anglicanum decorative schemes is the use detailed birds and animals, based on contemporaneous drawings. These special motifs are also embroidered in split stitch, which was so incredibly fine in execution that it offered great accuracy in detail and shading similar to that found in the art of painting. This “English Work” was the most beautiful and expressive artwork ever to be produced in England.

Opus Anglicanum was well represented in Rome. Even as early as 1295, the Vatican Inventory listed 113 vestments and church furnishings of this special work, more than from any other country. According to Mrs. Archibald Christie, a renowned authority on English medieval needlework, ten years of full-time labor of a single needleworker would be an underestimate of the time required to carry out the embroidery on any single one of the vestments.
Details of the STEEPLE-ASTON COPE, about 1310-1340. Presently an altar frontal, this piece of Opus Anglicanum was originally a cope. These images show details of the cope’s orphrey. The background of the latter is covered solidly with underside-couched gold passing thread. The design scheme is quite unique: seraphim playing an instrument and astride a horse. The latter are executed in fine silk split stitch. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

Written records indicate that Anglo-Saxon ladies were accustomed to passing their leisure hours by embroidering hangings for their chambers or vestments for the Church, while their husbands were off on military or political expeditions for months at a time. So it is not surprising that years of labor often would be devoted to the execution of a single piece of needlework.

Much medieval needlework was produced in the workshops of religious houses, both convents and monasteries. Although most work executed in these workshops was for ecclesiastical use, some commissioned secular work was also undertaken to produce the modest income necessary to maintain these establishments.
**English Chasuble** about 1330-1350 on a silk velvet ground in excellent condition. Embroidered in silk and gold passing thread in underside couching, split stitch, laidwork and some raised work, with small pearl embellishment. The three scenes—Coronation of the Virgin, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Annunciation—are placed within a graceful framework of intertwining oak branches, the latter decorated with animal faces as well as acorns of pearls. (Metropolitan Museum, The Cloisters, New York)

As the demand for both ecclesiastical and secular needlework increased from the 13th century onwards, the existence of organized secular workshops became important, and the art of the needleworker became a recognized trade. Most Opus Anglicanum was commissioned needlework produced by professional masters of London guilds. (It was due to the vigilance of the medieval craft guilds that high standards in all arts were maintained.) These professionals, who reportedly had to serve a rigid seven years apprenticeship, were originally both men and women.

However, by the 15th century, controls began to favor the male craftsmen of all fields and, although all crafts were still open to women, men were now paid higher wages.

We must rely upon wills and inventories in addition to paintings, illuminated manuscripts, and brass works for our knowledge of secular needlework of this period. From these sources we know that needlework was used extensively for the extravagant decoration of aristocratic costume and household furnishings.

Yet another proof of the extravagance in secular dress is the numerous sumptuary laws which were passed during the late medieval period in an effort to control the outrageous excesses. These laws, however, had little success: *for the esquire endeavored to outshine the knight, the knight the baron, the baron the earl, the earl the king himself, in the richness of his apparel*, according to A.F. Kendrick, a 20th-century needlework author.
Silver-gilt couching techniques. Drawn wire of silver plated with gold, referred to as "silver-gilt" in museums, was the needleworker's basic material throughout the Middle Ages everywhere in the western world. This gilt wire, flattened and wrapped around a silk thread, was very important to the Opus Anglicanum needleworker, for its high gold content made it the flexible material needed for the underside couching technique.

The medieval castle fortress had little furniture and few comforts, so the use of embroidered fabrics for the decoration of cushions, beds and hangings was important. The large, drafty rooms and halls were partitioned with embroidered draperies to afford some measure of privacy. Rich hangings were also placed over tables and benches. There was generally only one chair in a room, and this often stood beneath an embroidered canopy made of silk or other rich material heavily embellished with silk and silver-gilt threads.

Woven tapestries and embroidered wall hangings were not only a luxury during the Middle Ages but also a necessity. It was not until the 15th century that glass was used for windows, even by the wealthy, so these spaces in the castle walls were kept open, to be covered by fabric hangings. (When glass did come into use in England the framing of the windows reportedly was designed in such a manner to permit the glass to be removed and carried about by the aristocrat when he traveled from one residence to another.) Fabric hangings acted also as pure decoration for bare walls; in the absence of hangings, it was the custom to paint large murals of historical subjects on the plastered walls, a tradition which continued into the sixteenth century.

The bed appears to have been the most important item of furniture in the medieval great house. Often of large size, the bed served the double purpose of a place to sleep at night and a place a sit while entertaining during the day. The hangings of the bedchamber, especially of the bed itself, were articles for elaborate decoration. The sets of furnishings included curtains, canopy, and headboard and tester covers. The value of these lavishly-embroidered fabrics was great if their descriptions in wills and inventories is accurate. Chaucer described some English bed curtains in the 14th century as trimmed with cloth of gold and embroidered with flowers, leopards, lions, serpents and figures. As with window glass and wall hangings, the aristocrat's bed furnishings also traveled with him.

The names of the needleworkers are unknown since none recorded his or her name on a piece of work. A few names have been found but only in wardrobe accounts kept by the aristocracy. We do know that it was not unusual for the wealthy to have at least one
needleworker as part of the household staff. In fact, sometimes the affluent household had an actual workshop which consisted of many workers.

**Details of an English panel** which originally was likely part of a frontal, about 1400.

Unlike in Opus Anglicanum, the embroidery is executed on a linen ground, pasted on the back, cut out and then applied to a silk velvet background, this technique losing the graceful design layout found in the earlier work. Silk split stitching is still used but the gold threads are now surfaced couched and relief is created by the use of padding, as in her halo and some facial features. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

By the middle of the 14th century the quality of the English needlework began to decline. Many factors contributed to this deterioration of the once-renowned Opus Anglicanum. The Black Plague of 1349, which took so many English lives, had to have reduced the number of professional needleworkers, which in turn made the great tradition more difficult to pass on.

England had long depended upon other countries of Western Europe for fabrics and many other raw materials. The wars with and between other countries curtailed manufacture and trade so that the English needleworker substituted lesser-quality materials when compared to that which had been used previously. During the 15th century, England was involved in the Hundred Years’ War with France in addition to domestic unrest in England itself; this resulted in great social and economic distress.
Detail of a roundel for an orphrey, maybe as late as the 16th century. Silk split stitching is coarser than found in Opus Anglicanum and some filling is done with satin stitch. The gold threads are surfaced couched and burden stitch with its metal foundation and silk bricking stitches is used for background filling. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London)

The demand for English embroidery was so great that quicker techniques were developed to satisfy the need. The guilds relaxed their strict supervision of the workshops and the practice of destroying substandard work was discontinued. In 1423 the House of Commons petitioned Henry VI to take action on the poor quality of needlework being produced by some workshops. Special ordinances were passed and the guild wardens were instructed to confiscate any work that was below designated standards. However, this seems to have accomplished little, for the quality of the work did not improve; needlework had become more a trade than an art.

On the Continent the new style of work was referred to as “facon d’Angleterre” and by 1350 the term Opus Anglicanum was no longer used. The underside couching technique disappeared and was never to be used again. The metals, which were heavier, were now surface couched. Split stitch became coarser and large areas were apt to be filled with satin, brick, long and short, or in a laid manner rather than with couched silk or metal. Now heavy padding, characteristic of some medieval German work, was used to create the drama. New ornamental Italian and Spanish silk fabrics were available, such as brocade and silk damask. These patterned fabrics required little embellishment, so only portions of the article were embroidered rather than the entire surface as had been the tradition. Even these smaller areas were likely to be executed on linen first and then applied to the silk ground fabric. In this applique technique the figures lost much of the delicate, graceful movement found in earlier work.

In 1485 Henry Tudor defeated Richard III and brought the War of Roses to an end. Henry was crowned Henry VII, the first monarch of the House of Tudor. It was during the reign of his offspring, Henry VIII, in the 16th century that a high standard in needlework was on the rise once again.