



English Embroidery from The Metropolitan  
Museum of Art, 1580–1700

## 'TWIXT ART AND NATURE

December 11, 2008 – March 15, 2009

THE BARD GRADUATE CENTER FOR STUDIES IN  
THE DECORATIVE ARTS, DESIGN, AND CULTURE



From December 11, 2008, to March 15, 2009, The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture is presenting *English Embroidery from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1580–1700: 'Twi'xt Art and Nature*. This is the third exhibition resulting from a collaboration between the Bard Graduate Center (BGC) and The Metropolitan Museum of Art (MMA).

The exhibition, a key component in the BGC's History and Theory of Museums concentration, draws from the Metropolitan's preeminent collection of embroidered objects made for secular use during the late Tudor and Stuart eras. The use of embroidery as a decorative technique for household furnishings and fashion accessories reached a pinnacle in England during this period; both professional and amateur practitioners excelled in creating objects that employed popular contemporary motifs and narratives skillfully interpreted by thread and needle. Many of the objects in *English Embroidery* feature designs and patterns that reflect the religious ideals of the time, as well as ideas about female education.

These embroidered objects have usually been regarded as a discrete body of work, removed from any sense of their original settings and contexts. One of the principal goals of this exhibition is to reexamine the aesthetics and social usages of these technically complex, thematically rich, and compelling objects in light of new scholarship. The significance of the embroideries within the social and cultural economy of 17th-century domestic life is examined by juxtaposing them with contemporary prints, books, and decorative arts.

The project is co-curated by Melinda Watt, assistant curator in the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the Metropolitan Museum, and Andrew Morrall, professor at the Bard Graduate Center; and is overseen by Nina Stritzler-Levine, director of exhibitions at the BGC.

Stuarts. Among the ceremonial objects in this section are a spectacular bag made to hold the Great Seal of England and lavishly embroidered bibles. A number of embroidered portraits are displayed, including a unique Elizabethan portrait of a woman, possibly Queen Elizabeth herself, and a finely worked portrait miniature of Charles I, based on an engraving by Wenceslaus Hollar. This latter work testifies to the existence of the cult of the "Martyr King" that arose after Charles's execution in 1649. Another featured object is a beaded and embroidered basket with representations of Charles II and Catherine of Braganza, made in celebration of the royal marriage and the restored monarchy.

The overarching theme of the second-floor galleries is the use of embroidered objects within the domestic setting. There are three specific themes: the role of embroidery in the education of girls and young women, the survival of rare and precious accessories of dress, and the production and function of domestic furnishings. The display of the stages of girlhood education demonstrates the historical process by which these techniques were learned, developed, and employed. On display are several samplers representative of the types created in the mid-17th century and a rare workbag dated and initialed by a 10-year-old in 1669, as well as exemplary literature advocating needlework skills for the well-bred young woman and pattern books from which designs were taken. A technical section makes use of the latest macro- and x-ray photography processes to reveal the complexity of embroidery techniques and the variety of constituent materials in a manner never before realized in exhibition form.



The display of objects related to education and technique is followed by a display of fashion accessories from the early 17th century. The role of these accessories in the contemporary culture of gift giving is examined, and several pairs of elaborate gloves and one rare complete garment, an embroidered jacket from about 1616, are highlighted.

Continuing the theme of objects made for domestic use, the second floor concludes with domestic furnishings produced at both the amateur and professional levels. Small decorated cabinets and caskets, mirror frames, and cushions all played a role in bringing comfort and color to the home at a time when many furnishings were still transported from one home to another and most upholstery was not fixed. Two of the Met's most spectacular cabinets, as well as two equally elaborate mirrors, are shown here.

The third-floor installation explores in detail two of the most popular themes in the pictorial embroidery of the period: stories drawn from the Bible and the depiction of nature. The objects here underscore the centrality of the Bible in contemporary domestic life and reflect the use of exemplary biblical heroines as models of virtuous behavior in the upbringing of young women. The story of Queen Esther, in particular, held special resonance for women on both sides of the conflict during the English Civil War. Finally, a selection of embroideries is used to highlight the importance of the natural world in the decorative conventions of the time. Depictions of the Garden of Eden, scenes from everyday life, and representations of the seasons, the senses, the four continents, and classical pastoral show the variety of approaches to the natural world—literal, symbolic, affective, and allegorical—that existed side by side in the 17th century.

**THE EXHIBITION** *English Embroidery* comprises approximately 80 objects from the MMA's collection of embroideries and comparative supplemental material from the Museum and other institutions and private collectors. The exhibition is presented on three floors of the BGC and is organized in sections that explore thematic and typological characteristics of the embroideries. Original printed images and texts, combined with high-quality photo reproductions, help the viewer contextualize the embroideries in a way that has not been attempted previously. There is also a special animation component, consisting of three digital videos that demonstrate stitch techniques, to enhance visitors' understanding of this art form.

The exhibition aims to further historical understanding of the material by combining historical interpretation with the best in museum practice. Each section illustrates the specific social and cultural meanings of the forms and subject matter, and shows how the themes employed in needlework reflected values of domestic harmony and new ideals of social grace and gentility.

The introductory section on the first floor is centered on the theme of royalty and serves to provide historical background for the visitor. It contains courtly ceremonial objects, as well as domestic pieces, which reinforce the importance of the idea of monarchy to court and country throughout a period in which stable rule under the Tudors was followed by civil war, regicide, and the eventual restoration of monarchy under the



(Top) Panel depicting a musical garden party, mid-17th century; (middle) Miniature portrait of Charles I, c. 1650–65, based on a 1641 engraving by Wenceslaus Hollar; (bottom) Pair of gloves, second quarter 17th century



**THE CATALOGUE** The accompanying publication, published and distributed by Yale University Press, has been edited by co-curators Melinda Watt and Andrew Morrall and contains a complete catalogue of the objects in the exhibition as well as six essays. It is one of the most extensive examinations of embroidery from this period published in the United States. In addition to the curators, contributors include Kathleen Staples, author of *British Embroidery: Curious Works from the Seventeenth Century* (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1998), whose essay addresses the production and usage of embroidered furnishings; Susan North, curator of 17th- and 18th-century dress at the Victoria and Albert Museum, who has written an essay on fashion accessories; Ruth Geuter, a leading expert on pictorial embroideries, who offers an essay on the social dimensions of the embroidered biblical narratives; and Cristina Carr, associate conservator at the Metropolitan, who presents an illustrated technical dictionary of materials unique to these objects.

**RELATED PROGRAMS** An array of lectures, panels, and other offerings will be presented in conjunction with *English Embroidery from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1580–1700: 'T'wixt Art and Nature*. For further information, please call 212-501-3011 or e-mail [programs@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:programs@bgc.bard.edu).

**EXHIBITION TOURS** Group tours of *English Embroidery* may be scheduled Tuesday through Friday between 11:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., and on Thursdays until 7:00 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. For further information, please call the Bard Graduate Center Gallery at 212-501-3013 or TTY 212-501-3012, or e-mail [galleries@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:galleries@bgc.bard.edu).

**LOCATION** The Bard Graduate Center is located at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue, in New York City. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Thursday from 11:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Admission is \$3 general, \$2 seniors and students (with valid ID), and free on Thursday evenings after 5:00 p.m. For further information about the Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit [www.bgc.bard.edu](http://www.bgc.bard.edu).

**SUPPORT** *English Embroidery from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1580–1700: 'T'wixt Art and Nature* is made possible through generous grants from the Coby Foundation, Ltd., and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation.



(Front cover) Casket with scenes from the story of Esther, third quarter 17th century; (top) Cabinet depicting the life of Joseph, third quarter 17th century; (above) Beadwork basket, 1662–70; (back cover) Panel depicting the twelve months, mid-17th century

The BGC/MMA collaboration was inaugurated in 2001. Prior to mounting each exhibition, the BGC, in conjunction with the MMA, holds a series of courses in which a small group of graduate students learn aspects of researching, planning, designing, and installing exhibitions of decorative objects. Class sessions are held in the storerooms of the MMA, where curators lead scholarly discussions and students work intimately with the objects considered for display. Research in these courses is ultimately utilized in the exhibition catalogue, exhibition labels, and/or gallery guides. Other classes are held at the BGC and examine topics related to general museum practice, including developing and proposing the exhibition concept; identifying and arranging for the borrowing of objects; writing a script, captions, text panels, and other interpretive materials; and accommodating transport, installation, and conservation requirements. This current academic initiative, coordinated by Deborah L. Krohn, associate professor at the BGC, offers a unique opportunity to heighten awareness and develop a critical understanding of textiles.

## BGC

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