

EMBROIDERY IN ANCIENT EGYPT

BY FRANCES MORRIS

THE discovery of fine linen and needles in Egyptian tombs of the First Dynasty (3400 B.C.) which, according to scriptural chronology dates back to the days of Noah, makes one realize that the people of Old Testament times were, after all, human beings like ourselves, with every-day needs that required practical solution. To meet such needs these early Egyptians modeled beautiful pottery, carved exquisite vessels of alabaster and wove linen of the finest texture; but nothing of a decorative quality remains to us save a few archaic line patterns found on some of the vases.

With the dawn of the Christian Era, however, there developed a distinct type of ornamentation generally characterized as "Coptic"; that is, the work of native Egyptians who embraced Christianity as differentiated from the Moors, descendants of the Greek and Roman settlers who embraced the Moslem faith.

A vast quantity of Coptic loom work was unearthed some forty years ago in the cemeteries of Akhmim, a town located on the site of the ancient city of Panopolis, which then, as in modern times, was a center of the weaving industry. The beauty of many of these fragments, some of which reached New York in the Brugsch Bey Collection,¹ indicates that there had developed in Egypt, where the natives were past masters in the craft of the hand-loom long before the arrival of the Greeks and Romans, a well-organized system of workshops maintaining an able corps of draughtsmen and weavers; for in no other way can one explain the complete mastery of technique and the high quality of design found in innumerable examples.

¹ Presented to the Metropolitan Museum in 1890 by George F. Baker, a Trustee of that institution.

These decorative fabrics seem to have developed naturally from the plain linen cloth, the native weaver devising means of meeting the popular demand for ornament by adding first a shuttle of a single color, as in the classical period, and later increasing the number to produce polychrome effects.

Bands of these color weaves were employed extensively in wearing apparel, as is evidenced by complete garments that have survived the ravages of time. Two splendid examples of these Egyptian tunics are preserved in the Metropolitan Museum with the *clavi* and *orbiculi* (shoulder-bands and medallions near the lower hem) done in tapestry. In this work the threads of the warp apparently were left devoid of weft threads in the space required for decoration, and the color worked in later either by shuttle or needle, the result produced corresponding in every respect to the Gobelins technique.

Two exceptionally fine fragments of these early Christian weaves are shown in the Coptic Room of the Metropolitan Museum. The first of these, a small tapestry panel, such as was sometimes placed at the back of a tunic between the shoulders, has for its subject a bacchanalian scene with Dionysos, maenads and satyrs; this dates from about the third century A.D. The figures, which are placed on a background of natural linen thread, are worked in a deep purplish brown, possibly a variant of the Tyrian purple. The interest of the piece, however, centers in the delicate tracery of fine white thread worked in an outline stitch that accentuates the details of the pattern; for while this tracery may in some instances be the work of a free shuttle, in this case it is, without question, done with a needle.

The popularity of mythological subjects in many of these weaves is explained by the fact that in the early days of the Christian Era, Panopolis had a Greek population that largely outnumbered the Egyptians, and the native religion had, as a result, been supplanted by the paganism introduced by the foreign element. Greek and Roman deities were the order of the day and foremost among them in popular favor was Dionysos, a hero extolled alike by artist, sculptor and poet.

The familiar characters of the bacchanalian feasts of ancient Rome are preserved to us in its sculptured marbles and terra-cottas, and the



HELLENISTIC TAPESTRY
ABOUT III CENTURY A.D.



ROMAN BAS-RELIEF IN TERRA COTTA

imprint of that voluptuous atmosphere is reflected in the art of the Roman colonies. Thus we find the same subjects availed of by the designers of decorative weaves in Akhmim, and while the Egyptian fabric has much in common with the Roman terra-cotta shown in the accompanying illustration, the subject is handled with much more delicacy and refinement, the figure of Dionysos showing none of the vulgar brutality of the clay model. The figures of the maenads, however, are almost identical with those of the bas-relief and are not only strongly reminiscent of those found on engraved gems of the period, but as well reflect the art of the Pompeiian wall-paintings. As compared with the woven fabric, the terra-cotta in its entire composition suggests a riot of action entirely lacking in the scene depicted by the more limited art of the weaver. The swishing draperies that lash the poised form of the dancer, the muscular body of the Bacchante, its tortuous lines accentuated by the swirling panther skin, which as it swings taut from the shoulders of the drunken figure seems almost alive in the menacing attitude of the cruel mouth and outstretched claws, all mark a more elastic mode of expression. The whole group pulsates with the life it portrays, and the sculptor in this plastic medium, unhampered by the technicalities of the weaver's art, has proved himself a master in the vivid expression of action.

The second piece is a remarkable bit of embroidery from the same source and dates from the sixth to the eighth century A.D. While the fragment is badly worn and the colors dimmed, sufficient of it remains to indicate its general character. Like the Alexandrian silk weaves of the period, it has for its subject the warring horsemen found in Sassanian art, with the symbolic beast and serpent motif representing the eternal conflict between the forces of good and evil. The group of figures is framed with a circular band of lotus flowers and the whole is worked in the long and short stitch with very fine silk in shades of dull brown and olive with touches of black. In its original state this medallion doubtless ornamented the tunic of some patrician resident of the ancient metropolis, when silk was still a luxury indulged in only by the rich.

In these two examples from the tombs of Egypt, a striking illustration is afforded of the meeting of two distinct fields of art, the Hellenistic and the Near Eastern, influences that laid the foundation of mediaeval



COPTIC EMBROIDERY VI-VIII CENTURY A.D.

art in Egypt and that are reflected in the silk weaves of Alexandria, whose looms, built on the same simple lines as those of the earlier centuries, nevertheless produced royal fabrics worthy of a king's burial.