

ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON

AN EMBROIDERY IN RELIEF

THE embroidered altar frontal illustrated on the opposite page is a piece of extraordinary interest and merit. Worked in silk, wool, silver and gold thread, the original, now in the Archaeological Museum at Barcelona, is seven feet long and about two and a half feet high. The central panel with a fearless and stylish St. George mounted on a black charger and about to spear the dragon while the princess prays for her deliverance, bears unmistakable similarities to Flemish embroideries, tapestries and paintings of the middle of the fifteenth century. The coiffure and crown of the princess recall the Virgin in the Ghent altarpiece, while the trees with long trunks, clumpy foliage and oversized leaves are paralleled in many Tournai tapestries. The same may be said of the architecture and the costumes of the spectators on the left. Two side panels with arabesques and military trophies which are of later date have been omitted in the reproduction on the opposite page.

The most interesting feature of the embroidery, aside from its beauty of execution, is the technique. For most of it is worked in relief—the St. George, his horse, the trees, the skulls and bones, reminding one of a painting of the same subject by Carpaccio, and lastly, the venomous dragon itself. Such work is the predecessor of seventeenth century English stumpwork. But, whereas English stumpwork is well-known and much written about, the similar work of earlier centuries has been neglected in the literature of the history of embroidery. Of its origin we know little but it is constantly described in the inventories of the fifteenth century. It must have been well-known even at that time for examples of an earlier date still exist, as for instance, two aumonières of the fourteenth century now in the Cluny Museum, and a mitre in the Treas-



ST. GEORGE AND THE DRAGON. ALTAR FRONTAL, EMBROIDERED IN RELIEF. PROBABLY FLEMISH, MIDDLE OF THE XV CENTURY. ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM, BARCELONA

ury of Halberstadt. From the fifteenth century, many other pieces exist, although this altar frontal is the most outstanding and ambitious example known. Many of the other pieces are of German provenance and were used to decorate ecclesiastical vestments. Two parts of a band, each with a kneeling angel with a round button-like face of singular charm, are preserved in the Louvre. A mitre, similarly worked, with the Annunciation on one side and Mary and Joseph adoring the infant Jesus on the other side, is preserved at Neufchatel.¹

Aesthetically, such embroidery in relief is a tour de force—certainly the dragon in the Barcelona altar frontal makes one feel that one has suddenly been transferred to a natural history museum—but the work probably appealed to the realistic tastes of Flanders and Germany in the fifteenth century. At least, this early stumpwork has as much if not more character than the better known Stuart examples and surely it merits the attention and research of historians of embroidery.



DETAIL OF A VALANCE, EMBROIDERY IN RELIEF. ENGLISH, LATE XV—EARLY XVI CENTURY, METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

¹All the examples mentioned, except the altar frontal, are illustrated in *La broderie* by Louis de Farcy, vol. 2, pls. 26, 41, 55, and 59.