FIG. 1

BIBLE IN NEEDLEWORK BINDING, "IMPRINTED AT LONDON BY ROBERT BARKER," 1602. FROM THE COLLECTION OF JUDGE IRWIN UNTERMYER.

ENGLISH DOMESTIC EMBROIDERY, ELIZABETH TO ANNE

by

A. J. B. WACE

This is the substance of a lecture given to the Needle and Bobbin Club in New York Judge Untermyer was then present and has since invited the members of the Club to visit his collection, which is one of the best, especially for English embroideries, in the United States. He has now generously allowed several of the important pieces in his possession to be photographed to illustrate this article and to enable members of the Club to re-experience some of the delight which they felt when they enjoyed the privilege of visiting his collection. To him and to the Officers of the Club my warmest thanks are due for all their help and courtesy.—A. J. B. WACE

THE GREAT tradition of English ecclesiastical embroidery came to an end at the Reformation, and with the growth under the Tudor dynasty of a new nobility enriched with the spoils of the monasteries and by the profits of ventures overseas a demand for fine needlework arose for secular purposes.

It must not, however, be assumed too hastily that domestic embroidery was unknown in England before the 16th century. There is evidence that embroidery in black silk was made in England before the close of the 15th century and it thus antedates the arrival of Catherine of Aragon, who by a late and mistaken tradition, unknown to John Taylor who wrote a sonnet on her virtues as a needlewoman in 1640, was credited with the introduction of black work into England. Shirts embroidered in black were worn by Henry VIII and his son, Edward VI, and nobles like the Earl of Surrey, and the portraits of contemporary kings and nobles in France show that a similar fashion prevailed there. Black work, therefore, was not peculiar to Spain. Another sign that domestic embroidery was being practised early in the 16th century can be found in the mentions of samplers. It is recorded that one was bought for Queen Elizabeth of York (d. 1503) and Edward VI even had twelve samplers, worked in black and green. Elizabeth, Countess of Oxford, who died in 1537, made a special bequest of her twelve samplers[1] and so did Margaret Tomson

[1] To her two sisters, "evinlye to be devided betwene them," *Essex Arch. Society, Transactions*, xx, p. 12.

of hers in 1546. The young Princess Elizabeth in 1544 made an embroidered binding for a book, "The Mirror or Glasse of the Synneful Soul," which she had translated as a gift for Queen Catherine Parr. This binding is one of the earliest examples of English secular needlework still in existence and in its pattern of strapwork and of flowers shows that the fashion for these forms of design which were so prominent when the same Princess was Queen regnant had a long tradition behind it.

There are a few pieces of needlework which can be attributed to the end of the reign of Henry VIII or to that of Mary, but the age of Elizabeth is the first period of English domestic embroidery which is amply represented by examples which have survived. All that was made was intended for household use or decoration in some form or other and none was made as art needlework. The earlier work seems generally to have been done in monochrome black (Fig. 2) though this was at times relieved by the addition of gold and silver thread. Soon, however, with the increase in wealth and with the introduction of a higher standard of living, needlework in bright polychrome silk, coupled often with a free use of gold and silver, became fashionable. It should not be imagined, however, that black work immediately ceased to be popular. It is more likely that the decline of black work and the rise of bright polychrome work were both gradual and that the latter became more and more popular as the former fell more and more into disuse. Black work was still in use up to the end of the 16th century. The Queen herself in her portraits is often seen wearing a bodice embroidered in black, though it must be admitted that the black is, as is natural for a Queen, usually enriched with gold. Sir Thomas Lee, in his portrait dated 1594, is seen wearing a shirt embroidered all over in black with a design of flowering scrolls of the type so characteristic of the period. Black work, if it survived into the 17th century, soon ceased under the Stuart kings.

The first large class of embroidery then made is that which can be grouped under the name title of costume. This includes tunics and bodices, headdresses for women and caps for men, gloves and other accessories. The patterns used for these usually consisted of floral scrolls, a form of ornament the history of which can be traced to the borders of illuminated manuscripts of the fifteenth century or even earlier. Among these flowers and their scrolling stems, birds, beasts, and insects of all kinds were introduced and the fancy displayed in these and in the cut of the dresses themselves was among the abuses denounced by Stubbes. A choice ex-

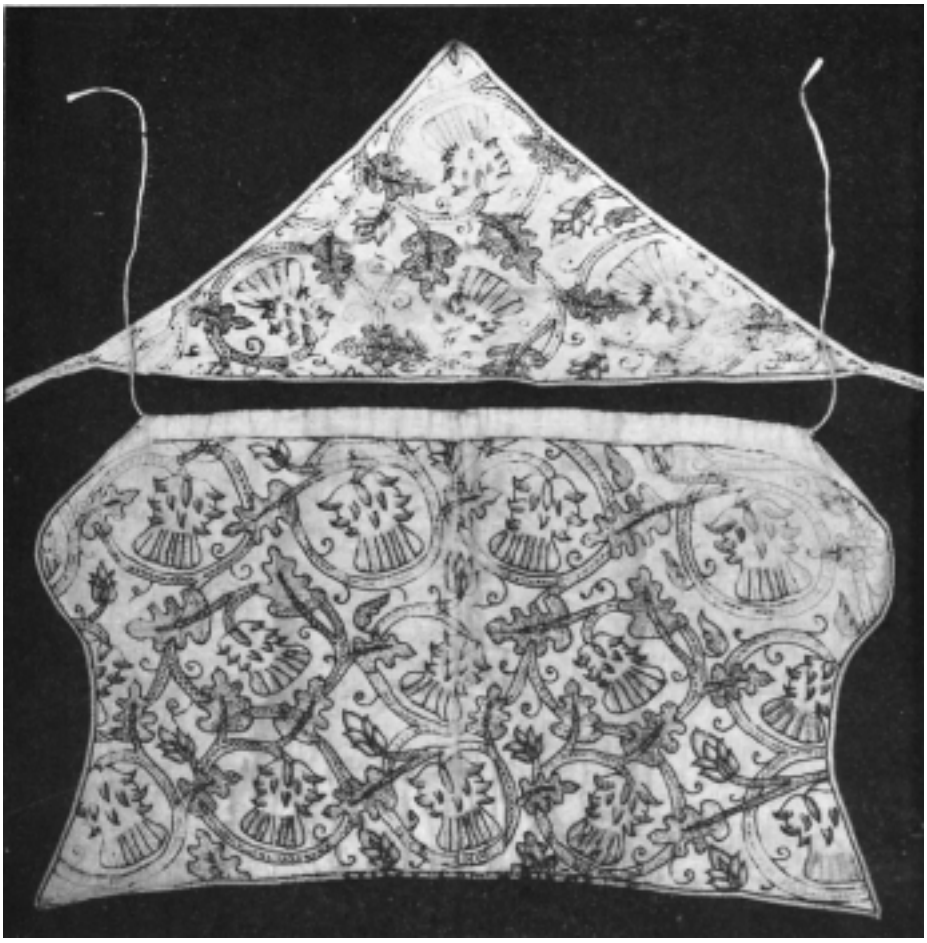

FIG. 2

WOMAN'S HEADDRESS OR CAUL WORKED IN BLACK SILK ON LINEN. ENGLISH, LATE 16TH CENTURY.

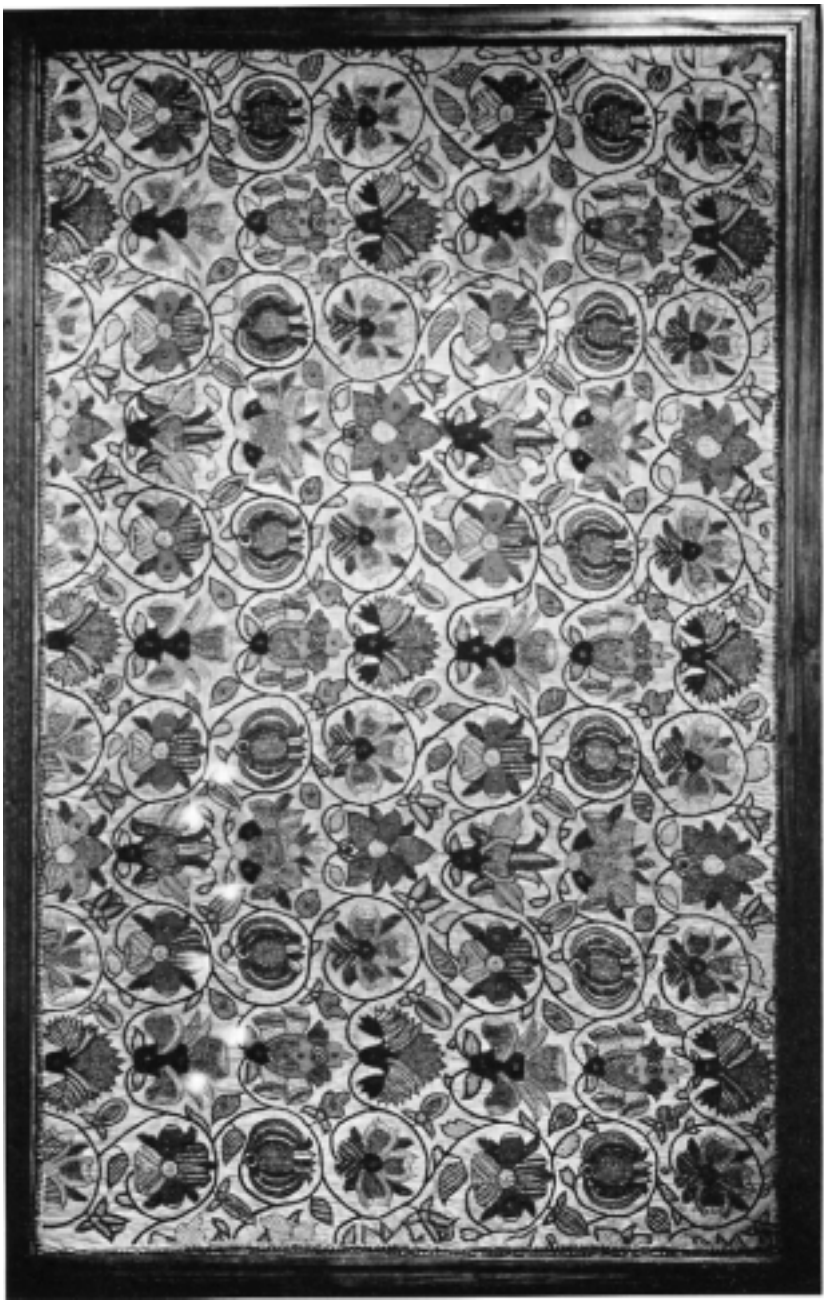

FIG. 3
LONG PILLOW WORKED IN POLYCHROME SILKS. ENGLISH, EARLY 17TH CENTURY.

ample of the application of such needlework to dress is the woman's headdress or caul seen in Fig. 2 with its accompanying triangular piece, the exact use of which is still unknown. This shows a good example of the floral scroll design, and as the embroidery dates before 1603 the thistle pattern can hardly have any connection with Scotland.

The second class includes pillows and cushions of all kinds. For use on beds, especially state beds, pillow beers of linen embroidered either in the black or in the polychrome style were made. These are usually of the shape known as "long" pillows and are about 36 inches long by about 20 inches wide, which was the customary loom width of linen at that time. The example seen in Fig. 3, formerly in the Abingdon Collection, is one of a set of four in brilliant polychrome silks and gold. It again admirably illustrates the floral scroll design and the conventionalization of the pattern is characteristic of the early 17th century into which the Elizabethan style continued. For use in window seats, on oak chairs and benches and for general household purposes two kinds of cushions were made, "long" of the size just mentioned and "short" about 20 inches square. These were usually worked in petit point and the designs covered a wide range which the famous collection at Hardwick (all called *quitions* in the inventory made in 1601 for the will of Lady Shrewsbury) illustrates excellently. The subjects there include: classical, such as the Rape of Europa, or Phaëthon; Biblical, such as the Sacrifice of Isaac; armorial, with the arms of Lady Shrewsbury surrounded by flowers; pictorial, such as a picture of Chatsworth House; or purely floral, powdered with flowers which resemble those that appear in the illuminated borders of the charters granted by Queen Elizabeth; in herbals, and other contemporary designs. The bed furniture included curtains and spreads represented by a few examples, mostly incomplete. These were of linen or more rarely silk and powdered with embroidery in the same manner as the tunics or bodices. Sometimes for state beds furnishings of velvet were made, to which were applied a series of separate devices, beasts, birds, flowers, plants, etc., usually worked in petit point. The most famous example of this is the fine bed-spread at Oxburgh associated with Mary Queen of Scots.[2] Chairs also were upholstered with velvet and applied work in the same manner *en suite* with a state bed.

The cushions for household use were accompanied by large table cov-

[2] F. de Zulueta, *Embroideries by Mary Stuart and Elizabeth Tudor at Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk*, Pl. A

ers worked on canvas or open-meshed linen with silk or wool in a canvas stitch, petit point or cross stitch. A good example of these, which, unfortunately, has been remade, is at Hatfield and there are three complete examples in the Victoria and Albert Museum. These were made to fit the long narrow oak tables then in use and often had the coat of arms of the head of the family in the centre, set so that it would face towards his place in the centre of the upper long side of the high table.

The last group of embroidery, characteristic of this age, consists of the valances made for the four-posted tester beds of oak then fashionable. Valances of this type were made on the Continent as well as in England, so that it is not always possible to decide whether or no any particular example is English, especially since for various reasons there has been a tendency to claim almost every valance of this type as English. The question is the more difficult because the pictorial designs which were almost invariably used for such valances, whether English or Continental, were based on drawings or engravings of Flemish style. There are, however, some sets which have good reason to be accepted as English. They are worked in silk and wool, usually in petit point and in sets of three, two long valances for the sides of the bed and one short one for the foot of the bed. The head of the bed being against the wall did not need a valance. They are decorated with pictorial subjects telling stories, Biblical, such as the Story of Rehoboam, or classical, like the Story of Cyrus, by the method of continuous representation against rich landscape backgrounds. The characters are dressed either in contemporary or in conventional costume. An excellent example is provided by the two valances illustrating part of the story of Philomela (Fig. 4). There was presumably a third valance giving the conclusion of the tale. In one valance Tereus is seen in the act of cutting out Philomela's tongue. In the other Philomela is represented at work embroidering her story on a piece of linen and this shows how Elizabethan women worked their embroidery on a frame of the usual type held in the lap.

A new style of embroidery did not at once make its appearance in England on the death of Queen Elizabeth and the accession of the Stuart dynasty. There was of course a change, but it was gradual and it is clear from the evidence of portraits that the embroidered dress of Elizabethan times survived well into the reign of James I. By degrees, however, embroidery for dress gave way to rich figured silks.

Needlework still continued in use for accessories of dress such as the

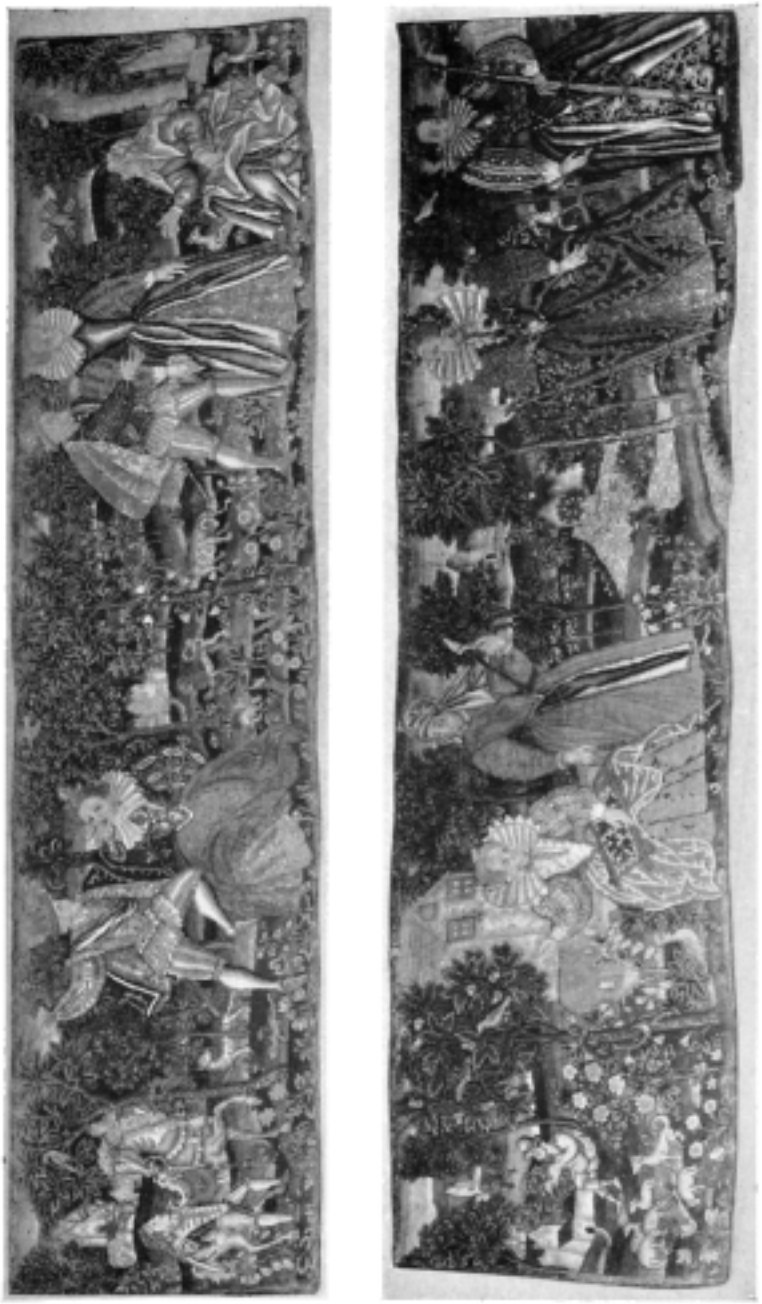

FIG. 4
PAIR OF VALANCES WORKED IN *PETIT POINT*. "THE STORY OF PHILOMELA." ENGLISH, LATE 16TH CENTURY.

FIG. 5

GLOVE WITH EMBROIDERED GAUNTLET EDGED WITH SILK AND METAL BOBBIN LACE. ENGLISH, 17TH CENTURY FIRST HALF.

FIG. 6

PURSE WORKED IN *PETIT POINT* WITH STEMS IN METAL THREAD. ENGLISH, 17TH CENTURY, FIRST HALF.

gauntlets or gloves (Fig. 5), purses (Fig. 6), knife cases, pincushions, and the like. These latter are usually exquisitely worked in silk, gold and silver with geometric patterns sometimes combined with flowers.

Embroidery also was employed for the bindings of valued books, especially Bibles, prayer books, and the like. An example of this is given in Fig. 7, a work dated 1616. Here the design follows the floral scroll tradition of the Elizabethan period and shows how the one period gradually developed into the other.

For bed furnishing complete sets of curtains and valances were made for the four-poster oak beds with testers and these are the most characteristic form of Stuart embroidery. They began during the first half of the seventeenth century and after its close evolved into the bed curtains of the eighteenth century. A complete set consists of four curtains, two wide and two narrow, and six valances, two long and one short for the edges of the tester, and three more similar for the lower part of the bed. The narrow curtains consist, as a rule, of two widths of stuff and measure from 36 to 40 inches in width. The wide curtains contain four widths and are thus twice as wide as the narrow curtains. The embroidery is worked in wool (crewel) on a twill woven with a linen warp and a cotton weft. The earlier patterns are medallions or flowery scrolls resembling those of the 16th century, but rendered in a 17th century manner, and the colours used are either monochrome or else confined to a succession of shades of one colour, green for instance. In the later curtains the patterns are of an acanthus type or, especially at the close of the century, of oriental trees and exotic foliage among which Indian or Chinese motives, birds, beasts, human figures, etc., are freely introduced. The colours are brilliant and varied, as befits the patterns, imitating those of printed, embroidered, or painted Indian and Chinese stuffs, whence they drew their inspiration. These Stuart curtains (which are sometimes misleadingly called Tudor and sometimes Jacobean) are common and many fine specimens exist, though complete sets in untouched condition are rare. One such complete set may be seen hung on a bed of the period in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Bed-spreads similar in style and colour to the bed curtains are occasionally found, but they are rare and many of those now called bed-spreads have been made up from curtains. Work bags similar, both in materials and in style, to the bed curtains, are also known though they are not often found.

To most collectors and students the Stuart period is best known by the

FIG. 7

"THE BOOKE OF COMMON PRAYER WITH THE PSALTER OR PSALMES OF DAVID. IMPRINTED AT LONDON BY ROBERT BARKER, PRINTER TO THE KING'S MOST EXCELLENT MAJESTIE." DATED 1616. NEEDLEWORK BINDING IN *PETIT POINT*. HEIGHT, 13 INCHES; WIDTH, 9 INCHES; THICKNESS, 3½ INCHES.

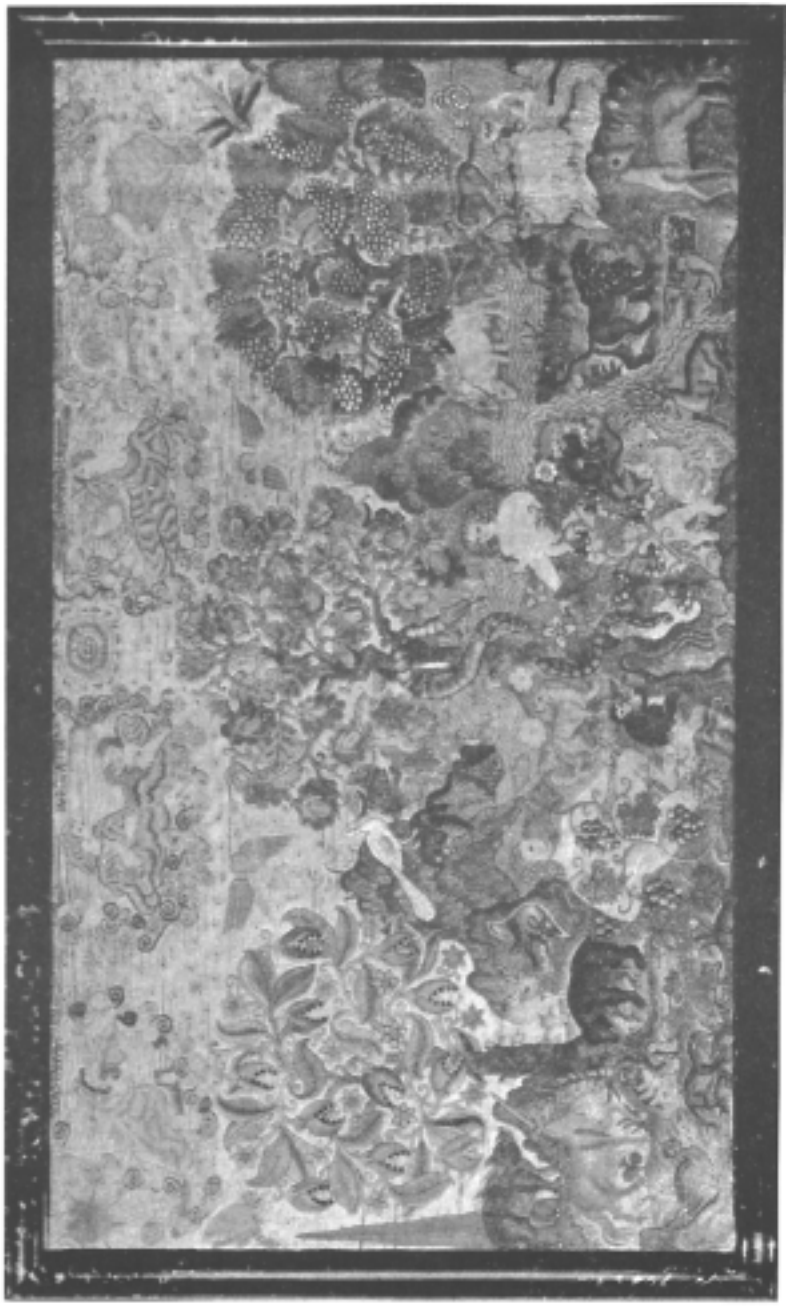

FIG. 8

NEEDLEWORK PICTURE, "ADAM AND EVE." ENGLISH, EARLY 17TH CENTURY.

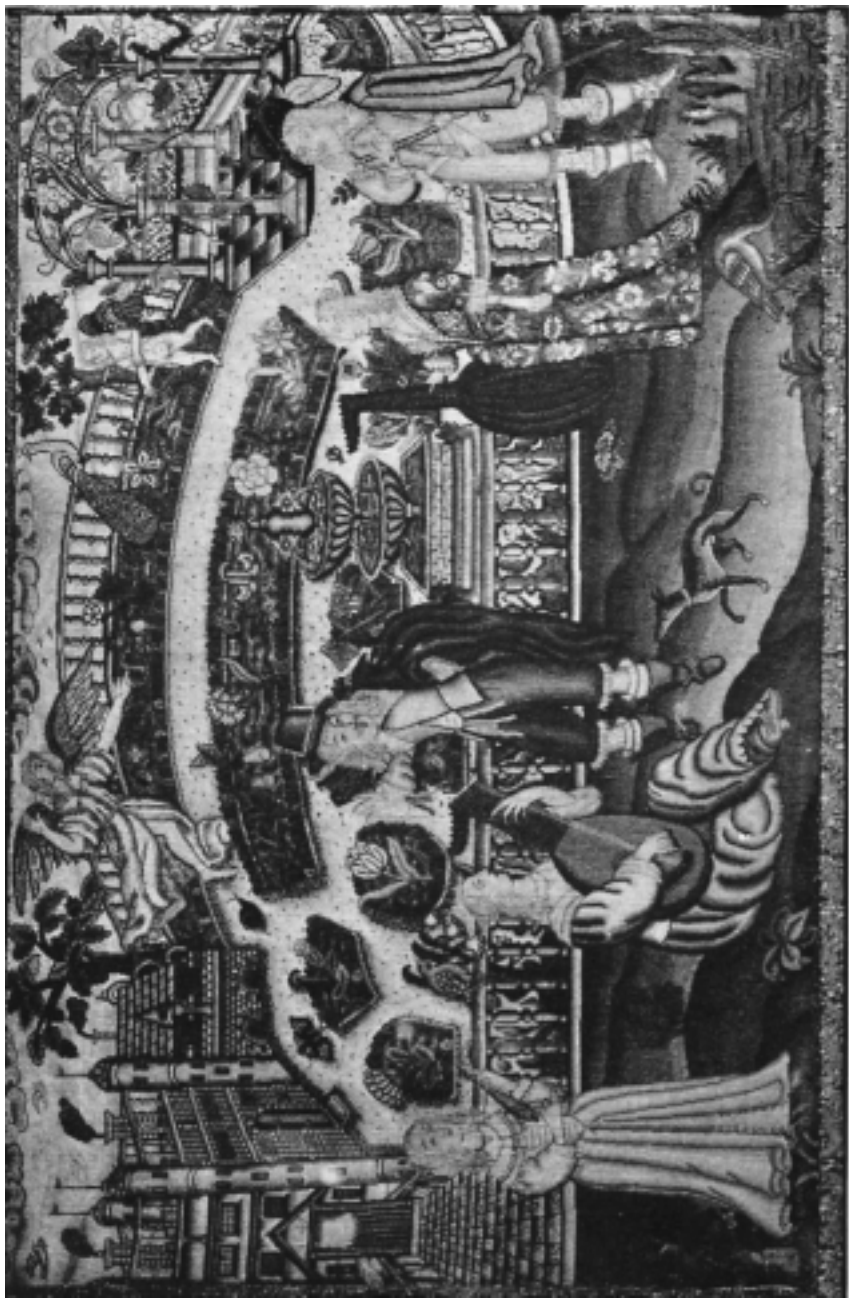

FIG. 9

NEEDLEWORK PICTURE, "A MUSICAL PARTY." ENGLISH, PERIOD OF CHARLES I, 1625–1649.

needlework pictures, which with their almost infinite variety of stitch and subject, are certainly most attractive. Some of them, especially the earlier examples, usually worked in petit point in silk and wool, were used to cover small cushions or sometimes apparently work-bags. The later pictures, especially those in stump work, were presumably made as pictures alone. The subjects are as a rule Biblical, mostly from the Old Testament. The embroidered picture, once in Mr. Percival Griffiths' possession, seen in Fig. 8, illustrating the story of Adam and Eve, splendidly exemplifies the style of the early 17th century. The rendering of the trees and animals in the Garden of Eden is especially good and the addition of allegorical figures of Constancy, Innocence, Concord, and Peace in the sky, makes it quite exceptional. Classical subjects occur and personifications of the Seasons, the Continents, the Elements, and the Virtues were also popular. Sometimes historical events such as the Spanish Armada and the Gunpowder Plot were drawn upon and in one case on a casket, the engraved frontispiece to the *Reliquiae Sacrae Carolinae* has been copied. The designs, like those of flowers and birds and beasts and insects, were taken either from the pattern books such as those issued by Shorleyker or John Taylor, or else from the printed sheets of patterns, both plain and coloured, issued by publishers like Peter Stent, several of whose advertisements have been preserved. Many of the pictures are dated and many also bear the initials or names of their makers. One of the best needlework pictures of the period of Charles I is reproduced in Fig. 9. This, which was once in Mr. W. J. Holt's collection, is remarkable for the exquisite fineness of the embroidery and for the charming rendering of the romantic subject, a musical party in a terraced garden. Another characteristic piece of the same period is the Bible cushion cover in Fig. 10. Embroidery for ecclesiastical use of this date is not often seen and this excellent piece of *petit point* work must, from the sacred monogram, have been specially made for the church. The birds and the sprigs of flowers which compose its decoration are probably worked after designs in the pattern books or on the pattern sheets then current.

With the pictures go the caskets which vary in shape and size according to the taste and ambition of the maker, but conform generally to two or three standard types. These were covered with embroidered panels worked in the same manner as the pictures illustrating either one story or subject in a series of scenes or else displaying a varied set of pictures. Judge Untermyer possesses such a casket which illustrates the story of

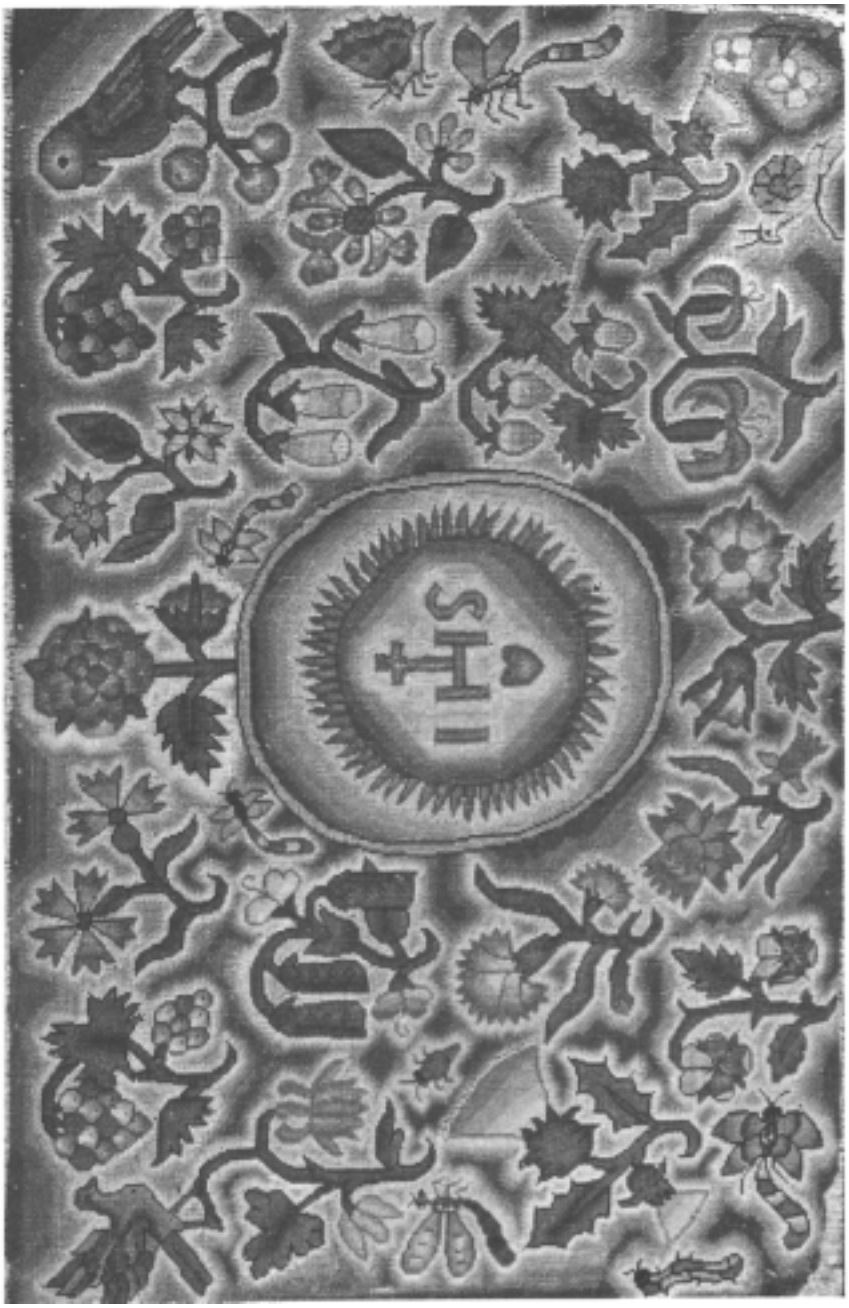

FIG. 10

BIBLE CUSHION COVER WORKED IN *PETIT POINT* ENGLISH, PERIOD OF CHARLES I, 1625–1649.

FIG. 11

EMBROIDERED CASKET, "THE STORY OF ESTHER," IN STUMP WORK AND *PETIT POINT*. ENGLISH, 17TH CENTURY, THIRD QUARTER.

Esther and Ahasuerus, Fig. 11. This is in superb condition and is one of the best specimens in any collection, public or private. The embroidery, the colour of which is most brilliant, follows the traditional designs in depicting the various scenes, but the individual details are most exquisitely worked and perfectly delightful in themselves. These caskets were used by the girls who made them as work boxes, jewel and trinket cases, writing cases, and almost always contain one or more secret drawers for treasures such as jewelery, keepsakes, or perhaps love letters. Most caskets have a movable tray, often adorned with a coloured print of the period ingeniously set reversed so as to be seen best in the looking glass sides of the tray. Two caskets have gardens in their trays and in one case the lid of the casket bears an Arcadian scene of a shepherdess and her sheep in a wooded glade. With the caskets were made pin and needle cushions, pen-holders, souvenirs, and various toys or trinkets in needlework. The girls seem to have made these caskets for themselves as part of their regular training in embroidery and about the same time as they made their samplers, which then became common. With these can also be grouped the mirror frames which are embroidered in a similar manner, and with similar subjects, though there is of course less space for scenes with several figures. The drawing of the designs on some unfinished mirror frames is exquisite.

Of the Elizabethan age there is one sampler known, if we do not count the lace sampler with the Queen's arms and monogram in the London Museum. Of the early 17th century many samplers are known. These are about 20 inches long, being cut across the width of the linen, and are about 8 to 11½ inches wide. They sometimes bear the initials, not the name, of the worker, and only one has a date, 1630. In them the designs fall into two classes: sprays of fruit and flowers with beasts, birds and insects; and geometrical patterns suitable for covering a ground. The latter are sometimes combined with a floral spray as pattern ready both in shape and size to be transferred to a purse. A typical sampler of the style and dating probably from the reign of Charles I (1625–1649) is given in Fig. 12. Here again the floral sprays and the geometrical designs show the influence of the pattern books. Sometimes heraldic-like devices are introduced and from some of these giving either the monogram or the royal emblems of James I date the samplers on which they appear between 1603 and 1625. In these early samplers designs are not arranged in any set order or according to any definite plan. They are scattered about the

FIG. 12

SAMPLER. ENGLISH, PERIOD OF CHARLES I, 1625–1649.

field as the fancy or convenience of the worker dictated. The earliest dated sampler bears the date 1629, and it and another early example, dated to 1633, both show the later style of sampler which seems to have begun about 1625 and then become increasingly popular as the century progressed so that it ousted the earlier type and developed considerably itself. These later samplers bear a series of patterns worked in horizontal rows right across the sampler and among these pattern bands, alphabets, inscriptions and the like are introduced, especially later in the century. Many are dated and many, too, bear the name and age of the worker, and sometimes the name of her teacher too. At first these samplers, though narrower, are the same length as the earlier ones, but as fashion advanced they grew longer and longer while remaining the same width. One, for instance, is 42 inches long and 8½ inches wide. Thus the early samplers are broad in proportion to their length and the later very narrow. It seems that when a girl began to work, probably about the age of nine, she was set to make two samplers both of the later type, a coloured one and a white one which included also needlepoint and drawnwork. Sometimes, especially at first, the two samplers were made separately. Later it became the custom to make the two samplers as one with the upper half coloured and the lower half white. From the making of samplers the girls seem to have progressed to casket making, bead work, and other embroidery so far as one can judge from the dates on the pieces bearing the name or initials of Martha Edlin.[1]

The needlework pictures were at first in petit point or some flat stitch, to which in some of the earliest examples raised work is added. By the middle of the century raised work had died out and its place was taken by stump work, in which the figures, birds, beasts, fruit, trees, and architecture even, were padded out and worked in separate pieces so that they resemble dolls and doll's furniture applied to a ground. Stump work flourished between 1660 and 1690 and then mercifully its eccentricities fell into disfavour. Raised work or bullion work as it is called when carried out in gold and silver was often employed for the bindings of treasured volumes and many like that in Fig. 1, p. 12, which bears the Royal Arms, were made for royal or noble persons. The embroidery covers a Bible "imprinted at London by Robert Barker, printer to the Queen's most excellent Majestie Anno 1602" and is certainly contemporary work.

[1] *Connoisseur*, LXXXI, p. 215 ff.

The reign of Queen Anne closes the Stuart period and appropriately forms the transition from the later style of the 17th century to the elegances of the Georgian fashions of the 18th century. The Indian and Chinese influences continued to grow in favour through the last half of the 17th century, but declined with the death of William III. Even before his death another innovation had begun. As already mentioned, the 17th century bed furnishings were of linen and cotton twill worked in wool, but not long before 1700 silk came into use for the embroidery, which sometimes was also worked on silk. The curtains themselves seem to have continued to be in wool on the cotton and linen twill, but the bed-spreads were made in the new method. Quilting, too, came into vogue and a set of bed furniture consisted of a set of pillows of varying sizes and a bed-spread quilted with geometric or floral designs in white or pale yellow. Sometimes the quilting was enriched with embroidery and both silk and linen were used as the material to work upon. Apart from these technical changes there is a difference in the choice of patterns, most noticeable in the curtains and the spreads. The florid and bright exotic colouring of the Chinoiserie crewel work bed curtains dies away and instead the curtains are powdered with a series of floral sprays arranged in alternating rows. The thick jungle-like foliage is thinned out to simpler, more graceful and less oriental flowering stems. The spreads bear a central device round which are set a series of smaller devices in a floral or in a Chinoiserie style according to taste. Chinoiserie still survives indeed, but in a less extravagant form, and the designs are smaller and quieter. About the same date began the fashion of making embroidered panels usually in petit point for screens, and these take the place of the embroidered pictures of the 17th century, which now practically disappear. They bear Arcadian subjects in a Watteau-like style and are the first sign of a fashion that lasted till the middle of the 18th century at least. The screen panel in Fig. 13 bears the date 1730 and so emphasizes this point, that work of the Queen Anne style still flourished under George II. This panel is typical of its age for the fine workmanship and colour as well as for its subject which shows a hunt dashing along a river valley below a farm set on a wooded hill. Occasionally screen panels are found worked on silk in a Chinoiserie manner and these sometimes bear representations of blue and white china, either Chinese or Delft imitations of Chinese. Most of the screen panels and the aprons and other needlework which are usually called Queen Anne really belong, like so much

FIG. 13

SCREEN PANEL, WORKED IN *PETIT POINT*. ENGLISH, DATED 1730.

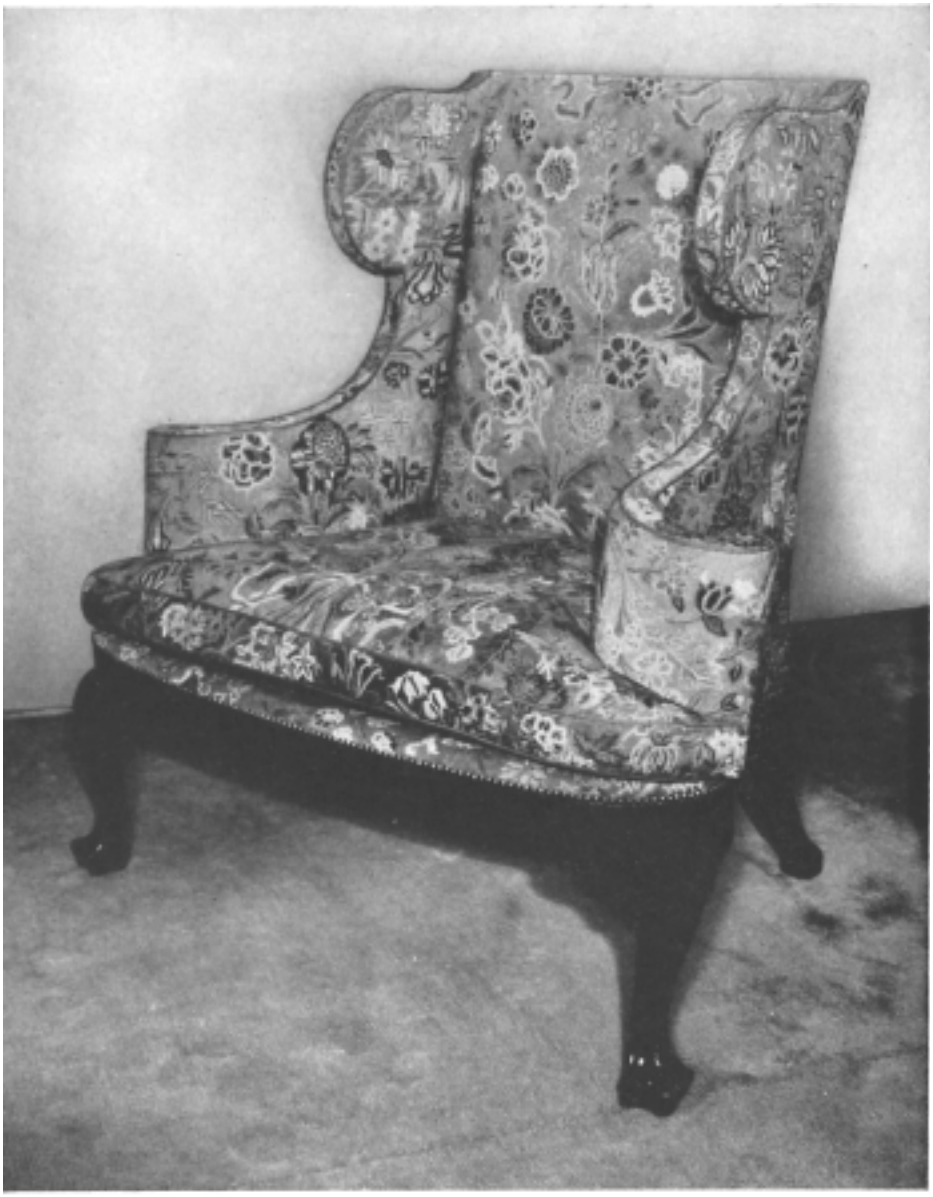

FIG. 14

ARM CHAIR, UPHOLSTERED WITH EMBROIDERY, WORKED IN *GROS* AND *PETIT POINT*. ABOUT 1725, ENGLISH.

else, to the reigns of her successors, the first two Georges. They should, therefore, not come within our scope here, but, since the evolution of style and design was continuous, it is not easy to draw a hard and fast line and early Georgian work has also to be considered. One other use of needlework at this time which begins just before the close of the 17th century must, however, be noticed: its employment for upholstering chairs. For this purpose the work is usually carried out in wool and silk or wool alone in petit point or cross stitch on canvas point. The patterns are at first floral and to some extent somewhat resemble the florid designs on the curtains. Later taste favoured designs in the form of bunches, baskets, or wreaths of flowers.

The wing arm-chair, Fig. 14, which is dated about 1725, is upholstered with its original embroidery which is in brilliant condition and masterly in execution. The whole effect is magnificent and represents a most happy combination of needlework and cabinet making. A popular pattern is the Italian flame work, which first appears in England on samplers of the early 17th century, but is excessively rare in actual embroidery of that date. It reappears on samplers about 1710 and about this time, too, it occurs on furniture, for which it remained a fashionable decoration into which flowers were occasionally introduced, almost till the middle of the eighteenth century. Needlework was also used to decorate many small objects of daily use such as hand screens, needle-cases, pocket-books, purses, and the like. The purse here illustrated (Fig. 15) probably dates from the second decade of the 18th century, and is a fine and typical example of the dainty things the embroiderers worked for their own personal use.

Since other embroideries changed, it is not surprising to find that samplers changed too. The long, narrow samplers of the later seventeenth century were given up by degrees and the sampler became shorter and wider so that it was almost of the proportions of the samplers of the beginning of the 17th century. In the samplers of the early 18th century the patterns are still arranged in a series of narrow horizontal bands and usually contain one or more sets of letters or figures differing in style and stitch. The patterns employed are thinner, more graceful, and more delicate in colour than those of the late 17th century samplers and the lettering is often extremely good.

The history of English embroidery can be carried on to the third of the three Queens regnant who have given their names to great periods in the

general development of life, letters and art in England, but as the industrialisation of the country grew, so the domestic arts, and above all needlework, languished, and the period which runs from Elizabeth to Anne, from Drake to Marlborough, can claim most of what is good in English domestic embroidery.

FIG. 15
PURSE. ENGLISH, DATED 1710–1720.

EMBROIDERED HANGING IN *PETIT POINT*. ENGLISH, PERIOD OF JAMES I (1603-1625). IN THE COLLECTION OF THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART.