ELIZABETH, QUEEN OF ENGLAND

English, 16th century, National Portrait Gallery, London.

ENGLISH DOMESTIC EMBROIDERY AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

by

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THE exhibition of English Domestic Embroidery held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art last November has been discussed already in various publications, but inasmuch as certain members of the Needle and Bobbin Club were actively interested in the success attained by this historic event, a few additional notes may be welcome.

Documentary evidence of needlework produced in England during the Middle Ages survives today in ecclesiastical vestments preserved in church treasuries and museums; but secular work of that period may be said to be non-existent, unless the Bayeux Tapestry may be classed as such.

In approaching the subject of English embroidery one's mind involuntarily turns to this piece which, though closely associated with English history, has for many years been claimed by French scholars to be a work produced in Normandy. Recently, however, untiring research on the part of English archæologists has again brought this discussion to the fore; and the evidence accumulated seems to lend weight to the theory that this embroidery was designed and worked in the south of England rather than in the north of France.[1]

Centuries prior to the Norman Conquest English women had been renowned for their skill in needlework; and that some had apparently attained almost professional standing is indicated by the record that Deubart, Bishop of Durham (c. 800) granted the lease of a farm for life to the embroideress Eanswitha in return for which she was to repair and renew the embroidered vestments of the clergy. But aside from the

[1] Maclagan, C. B. E., Eric: *The Bayeux Tapestry.* London and New York, 1943.

fact that English needlewomen of that age were undoubtedly capable of having embroidered this historic piece, the draughtsmanship of its pattern is distinctively English as also are many of its details. What is more there are English words in the inscription that most certainly would not have been employed by a Norman.

Another work of this period similar to the Bayeux Tapestry in the character of its subject is a piece said to have been given to the church at Ely by AElfleda, a high-born Saxon lady of the tenth century who had portrayed on an embroidered curtain the daring deeds of her husband who had been slain by the Danes.[2] Universal interest in needlework seems to have prevailed throughout this era; the inmates of monasteries and convents turned their pious attention to the embellishment of church vestments that were designed and in some instances worked by churchmen who, like the Archbishop Dunstan (925-988) not only were versed in church history but likewise skilled in draughtsmanship and handicraft. In the realm of court circles, where queens and noblewomen employed themselves with secular work, there were some like Edith, queen of Edward the Confessor, who embroidered the robes of their liege lords, while others, religious devotees, applied their skill to ecclesiastical embroidery for presentation to the church.

. An interesting reference to secular work of this period, one of the few instances where embroidery is mentioned in connection with costume, is found in the will of Matilda—queen of Edward the Conqueror—to whom for many years was accredited the embroidery of the Bayeux Tapestry, wherein it is stated that this queen bequeathed to the abbey of the Holy Trinity at Caen, an abbey which she herself had founded, an embroidered tunic "worked at Winchester by Alderet's wife."[3] That a piece of English embroidery should have been so honored by a Norman queen attests how highly it was esteemed.

At the time of the Norman Conquest, however, England's ecclesiastical embroidery had not yet arrived at its great period (1270-1330) when popes and prelates of continental Europe coveted a gift of *opus Anglicanum* from Britain's rulers, where well-filled coffers furnished the rich materials used in these sumptuous church vestments. English court life at this time was gradually becoming more luxurious due in part to the

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[2] Palliser, Mrs. F. B., in *Encyclopædia Britannica,* Ninth Edition, Vol. VIII, *Embroidery,* p. 149. Philadelphia, 1878.

[3] Kendrick, A. F., English Embroidery. London, n.d., p. 13.

alliance of Edward I (1272-1307) with Eleanor of Castile whose *avant couriers,* Spanish grandees, introduced elaborate furnishings for the adornment of their apartments. This in turn was followed by the marriage of Edward II (1307-1327) with Isabella of France whose sumptuous wardrobe of "dresses of gold and silver stuffs" reflected the same extravagant mode of life.

The decline of the great period of English embroidery came toward the close of this reign at a time when court life was honeycombed with conspiracy. With the death of the deposed king the crown passed to his son, Edward III (1327-1377), whose claim to the French crown through his mother led to the outbreak of the Hundred Years War between France and England; and to these troublous times were added the horrors of the Black Death which ravaged England from 1349 through 1369.

Nevertheless it was in these years of unrest that the groundwork of England's later economic life was being laid. By the twelfth century London had already attracted trade from all parts of the world. Italian merchants traveling to the Far East obtained silk for its markets, and England's ships returned to port laden with every variety of rich merchandise; for the great period of English embroidery was an age of chivalrous knighthood that demanded sumptuous habilaments for the luxurious taste of its kings and nobles.

During the reign of Edward III Britain began to turn her attention to the development of her own industries and it was in the year 1335 that one John Kempe of Flanders emigrated to England with a group of weavers, dyers and fullers and established a cloth weaving center at Norwich under the patronage of Philippa of Hainault, the Flemish queen of Edward. A century later Margaret of Anjou, the French queen of Henry VI, who had experienced the desolation of war, tried to interest the English in the manufacture of wool and silk; but the temper of the times was not attuned to peaceful occupation for an adventurous spirit was abroad in the land where prince and peasant alike preferred the hazards of war with its chance of plunder to legitimate sport and lucrative industry.

Such were the conditions prevailing in England during the last quarter of the fourteenth century that closed with the reign of Richard II (1377-1399). The years that followed showed little betterment when religious and secular unrest developed and insurgency, resulting in the execution of conspirators, was the order of the day. Nor was this situa-

tion improved by the results of the disastrous war that deprived England of all of her French possessions save only the port of Calais, to which was added the increasing antagonism prevailing between the houses of York and Lancaster that finally led to the War of the Roses which lasted from 1455 until 1485.

Throughout these tumultuous years, however, the art of illumination that reached a high level in the Psalter of Queen Eleanor (1284) wife of Edward I, continued to flourish; and it is in the borders of foliated scroll design in manuscripts dating from the reign of Richard II that one finds prototypes of sixteenth century embroidery patterns. This point is demonstrated in the beautiful embroidered hood (Pl. I) lent by the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Untoward conditions in a war-ridden country would inevitably tend to disrupt orderly routine in the life of its people and result in a situation readily accountable for a lapse in the continuity of accurate historical data. Unfortunately such a lapse occurs in the history of English embroidery and while its exact cause is still undetermined, the fact remains that the art of needlecraft that attained such unexcelled beauty in mediæval days lay dormant from the middle of the fourteenth century until its revival in the domestic embroidery of the Elizabethan era. During the lapse of these two centuries England had passed through varying phases of internal strife dealing with the religious and political life of its people; but in court circles, here as on the continent, the education of the younger generations followed the same general trend of its established order. Thus, in Elizabeth's girlhood while much attention was given to her intellectual development, certain hours of each day were devoted to domestic interests among which was needlework. The same was true of her ill-fated cousin in the French court where Mary Stuart, married to Francis II, become skilled in needlecraft under the tutelage of the queen mother, Catherine de' Medici, herself an adept in the art. During the reign of Elizabeth there were three women in the royal circle noted for their proficiency with the needle: the Queen herself, Mary Queen of Scots, and her hostess-jailer Elizabeth Countess of Shrewsbury known to history as "Bess of Hardwick."

At the time of the death of Henry VIII Elizabeth was a girl of fourteen, an impressionable age on which the kaleidoscopic marital life of her father could not but have left a disturbing imprint. That such an atmosphere had created a sobering effect on her youthful mind is suggested by

PLATE I. WOMAN'S HOOD.

Late 16th century. Worked in black silk on linen edged with bobbin lace. From the Victoria and Albert Museum.

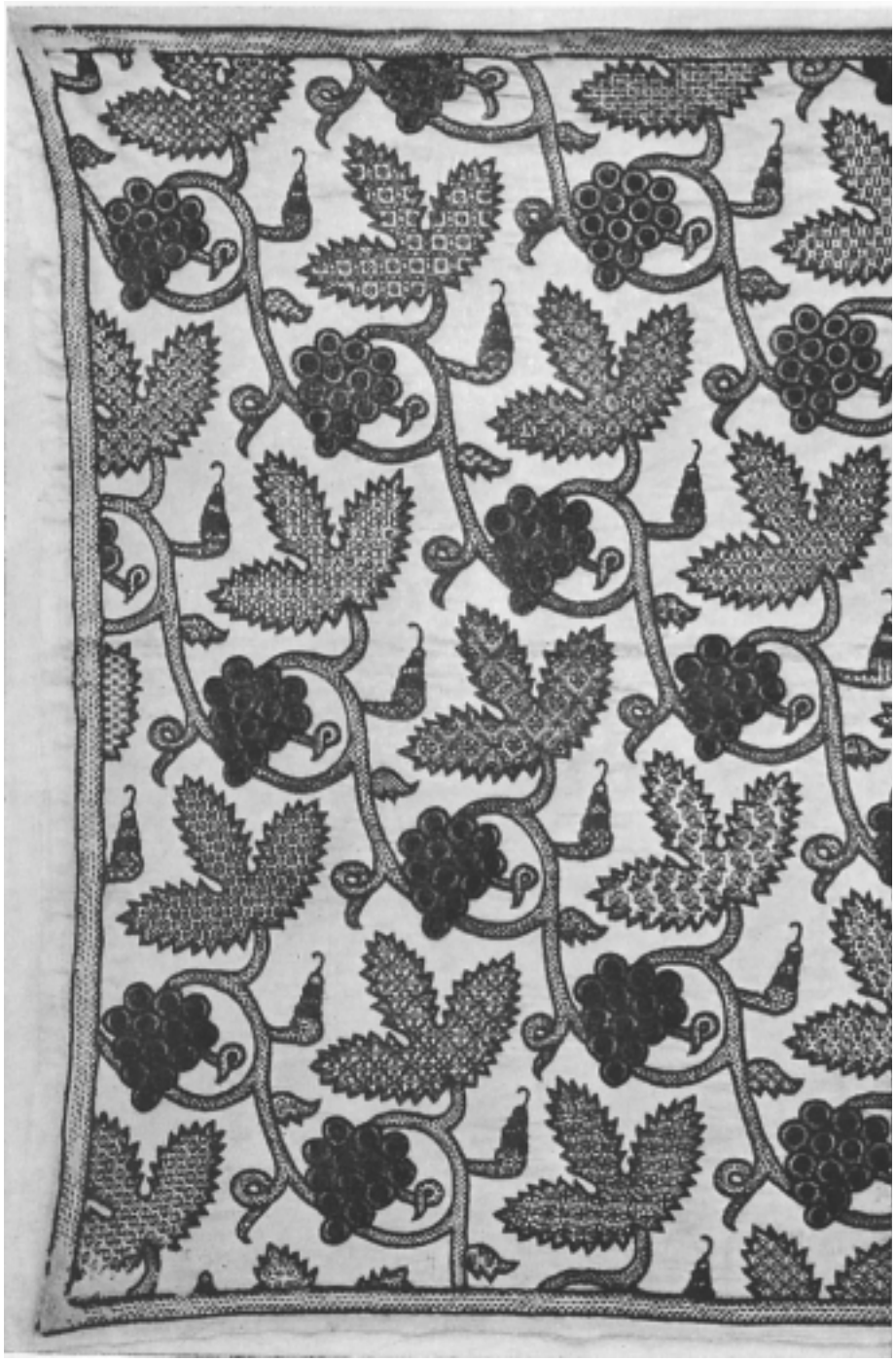

PLATE II. PILLOW COVER (Detail).

Black silk on linen. Second half of the 16th century. From the collection of Sir John Carew Pole at Antony House, Torpoint, Cornwall.

a manuscript in the Bodleian Library at Oxford. This little volume, "The Mirror or Glasse of the Synneful Soul," copied in her own handwriting by the young princess, is dedicated "From Assherige, the last day of the yeare of our Lord God 1544" when Elizabeth was but eleven years of age. The embroidered binding of this volume and also that of another manuscript in the British Museum, said to have been written by Elizabeth in 1545, are reputed to have been worked by her. Both of these books were apparently intended as gifts for Katharine Parr, her father's sixth queen, as the initials K.P. appear in the embroidery.[4] Elizabeth as queen had a wardrobe numbering hundreds of costumes, but of these none has survived. The faded funeral effigy of this once brilliant personage, preserved in Westminster, is said to have been costumed originally in authentic apparel of the queen. Today, however, the pathetic figure suggests little of the regal splendor of the original. A piece in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and illustrated by Kendrick, is a bodice in black work presented to the Viscountess Falkland, wife of the tenth Viscount by William IV.[5] A half-length portrait of Elizabeth at Hampton Court shows her wearing a similar jacket.

This black work as is recorded in many portraits was much in vogue in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Formerly it was considered to be of Spanish origin and a type introduced into England by Catherine of Aragon, the first queen of Henry VIII; but according to Professor A. J. B. Wace [6] black silk embroidery existed in England before the close of the fifteenth century. He also states that black embroidered shirts were worn by Henry VIII and his son, Edward VI, and that, as contemporary portraits disclose, the same fashion prevailed at the French court. A beautiful pillow cover of this work was lent to the Metropolitan exhibit by Sir John Carew Pole, Bt. (Pl. II).

Of the work of Mary, Queen of Scots (Pl. III), the most celebrated needleworker of her day, more remains.[7] Among the embroideries at Hardwick Hall dating from the years when she was under the custody of the Earl of Shrewsbury, probably a large number are the work of this unfortunate queen, and the same may be said of the hangings at Lochleven and Linlithgow castles. During the years of her imprisonment in

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[4] Kendrick, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

[5] *Idem*, p. 78, Pl. XXXV.

[6] Wace, A. J. B., in *Bulletin* of the Needle and Bobbin Club, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1933, p. 13 ff.

[7] cf., Francis de Zulueta: *Embroideries by Mary Stuart and Elizabeth Talbot at Oxburgh Hall, Norfolk.* Oxford, 1923.

PLATE III. MARY STUART.

Portrait by P. Oudry. Original in the Collection of the Duke of Devonshire at Hardwick Hall. Inscription: Maria. D. G. Scotiae Piissima Regina Franciae Doweria. Anno Aetatis Regni 36, Anglicae Captivae 10 S.H. 1578.

England when the Scottish queen was lodged in the various houses of the Shrewsbury estate—Tutbury, Wingfield, Sheffield, Chatsworth and Hardwick Hall, her letters hold many references to needlework. While still at Lochleven in 1567, she petitioned the Lords of the Council for five servants one of whom was to be "an imbroderer to drawe forthe such worke as she would be occupied about."[8] Writing from Tutbury, which apparently was an abode far from comfortable, she refers to her apartment as "of two little rooms so excessively cold especially at night, that, but for the ramparts and entrenchments of curtains and tapestry which I have had made, it would not be possible for me to stay in them in the daytime." Needlework is also referred to in one of the Earl's letters to Elizabeth in which he describes his prisoner's day as follows: "The Queen continueth daily to resort to my wife's chamber, where, with Lady Levison and Mrs. Seaton, she useth to sit working with the needle, in which she delighteth." Through all of these tragic years memories of her youthful days at the French court, where she had become so skilled in embroidery, must have brought solace to many a weary hour.

While the Scottish queen has been described as the most celebrated needlewoman of her time, Elizabeth Countess of Shrewsbury (Pl. IV), her daily companion, would seem to have been equally expert in the art. The three splendid pieces lent to the exhibit from the collection at Hardwick Hall by the Duke of Devonshire, are said to be, in all probability, the work of her hand. Of these pieces the two cushion covers "The Sacrifice of Isaac" and "The Judgment of Solomon" are beautiful examples of Elizabethan work, but not so original as the Heraldic Hanging[9] (Pl. V) which is more distinctively personal in character. In this the armorial bearings would seem to reflect the proud arrogance of this intriguing lady who took for her fourth husband, George Talbot, sixth Earl of Shrewsbury and assured the solvency of the family by marrying two of her children to a son and daughter of the Talbot household[10] (Pl. VI).

Outstanding among the important pieces lent for the exhibit was the famous Calthorpe Purse, dated about 1540 (Pl. VII). One of the gems

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[8] Rawson, Maud Stepney: *Bess of Hardwick and Her Circle,* p. 63 ff.

[9] Kendrick, *op. cit.,* p. 84, Pl. XLVI.

[10] Elizabeth ("Bess of Hardwick") was married successively to John Barlow, Sir William Cavendish, Sir William St. Loe and George Talbot, sixth Earl of Shrewsbury. At the time of her marriage to Talbot she had six children; her daughter, Mary Cavendish, became the wife of Gilbert Talbot and her son, Henry Cavendish, married Lady Grace Talbot. cf., Rawson, p. 6; Kendrick, p. 82.

PLATE IV. ELIZABETH HARDWICK, COUNTESS OF SHREWSBURY.
Flemish, second half of the 16th century. National Portrait Gallery, London.

PLATE V. HERALDIC HANGING WITH THE ARMS OF GEORGE TALBOT, SIXTH EARL OF SHREWSBURY.

Silk and gold thread on canvas. This hanging dates from the period (1568-1587) when Mary Stuart was in the custody of the Earl and Countess of Shrewsbury. The piece is still a part of the furnishings of Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire. It was lent to the Metropolitan Museum for the exhibit of English needlework by the Duke of Devonshire who is a descendant of this famous Countess of Shrewsbury, "Bess of Hardwick."

PLATE VI. PORTRAIT OF A LADY.

Dated 1590. Fitzwilliams Museum, Cambridge, England. The features of this unknown lady bear a strong resemblance to those in the portrait of Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury, whose daughter, Mary Cavendish, married Gilbert Talbot and whose son, Henry Cavendish, married Lady Grace Talbot. Either of these ladies would have been privileged to use the heraldic device, the Talbot dog, that appears in the upper left-hand corner and in the embroidered bodice of the lady in the painting.

of the Victoria and Albert collection, this purse has 1,250 stitches to the square inch and is the earliest example of tent stitch in the collection. It is worked in polychrome silk on linen. The piece is designed with four shield-shaped sides which bear the following coats of arms: 1. Sir John Calthorpe and Anne Wythe (early fifteenth century). Inscribed: "JHN C. . . . HEIR JHIS WYTHE." 2. John Calthorpe and Elizabeth Wentworth (late fifteenth century). Inscribed: "CALT AND WENTWORTH." 3. John Crane and Agnes Calthorpe (early sixteenth century). Inscribed: "IOHN CRANE AGNES CALTH." 4. Sir Henry Parker (d. 1553) and Elizabeth Calthorpe.[11] Of especial interest among the pieces sent over from England was a set of four pillow covers from the collection of the same museum.[12] These fine panels, worked in dark blue and dull crimson silk with details in silver gilt on linen, portray sixteen scenes from biblical history: The Creation of Adam, The Creation of Eve, The Fall, The Expulsion from Eden, Adam Delving and Eve Spinning, Sacrifices of Cain and Abel, Murder of Abel, Noah Building the Ark, Animals Entering the Ark, The Flood (Pl. VIII), Noah's Sacrifice, Noah's Drunkenness, Building of the Tower of Babel, Expulsion of Hagar, Sacrifice of Isaac, and Jacob's Dream. It may be that most of the patterns for these covers were derived from contemporary Bibles; the water detail in the Creation of Adam panel, however, corresponds closely in drawing to a woodcut from "A Choice of Emblemes, and other Devises," illustrated by Kendrick.[13]

Two important signed pieces from the Victoria and Albert collection were featured in the Exhibit. One, the Mary Hulton Cushion Cover shows in the center the crowned arms of England on a shield with the initials I.R. and the name of the worker in the lower corners (Pl. IX). The caterpillar and the snail motifs, so popular in Stuart embroidery, appear here among the branching floral scrolls.

The other signed piece, formerly in Corby Castle, is the work of Edmund Harrison, a famous master of needlecraft in the employ of Charles I, and one of the most important members of the Broderers' Guild. The subject is "The Adoration of the Shepherds" and on the back of the canvas is the inscription: "Edmund Harrison, Imbroderer to King

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[11] Nevison, John L.: *Catalogue of English Domestic Embroidery,* Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1938, pp. 98-99.

[12] Idem, p. 20, Pl. XIV-XV.

[13] Kendrick, *op. cit.,* Pl. XXXVI.

PLATE VII. THE CALTHORPE PURSE.

Polychrome silk on linen. Worked in tent stitch, 1,250 stitches to the square inch. About 1540. From the Victoria and Albert Museum.

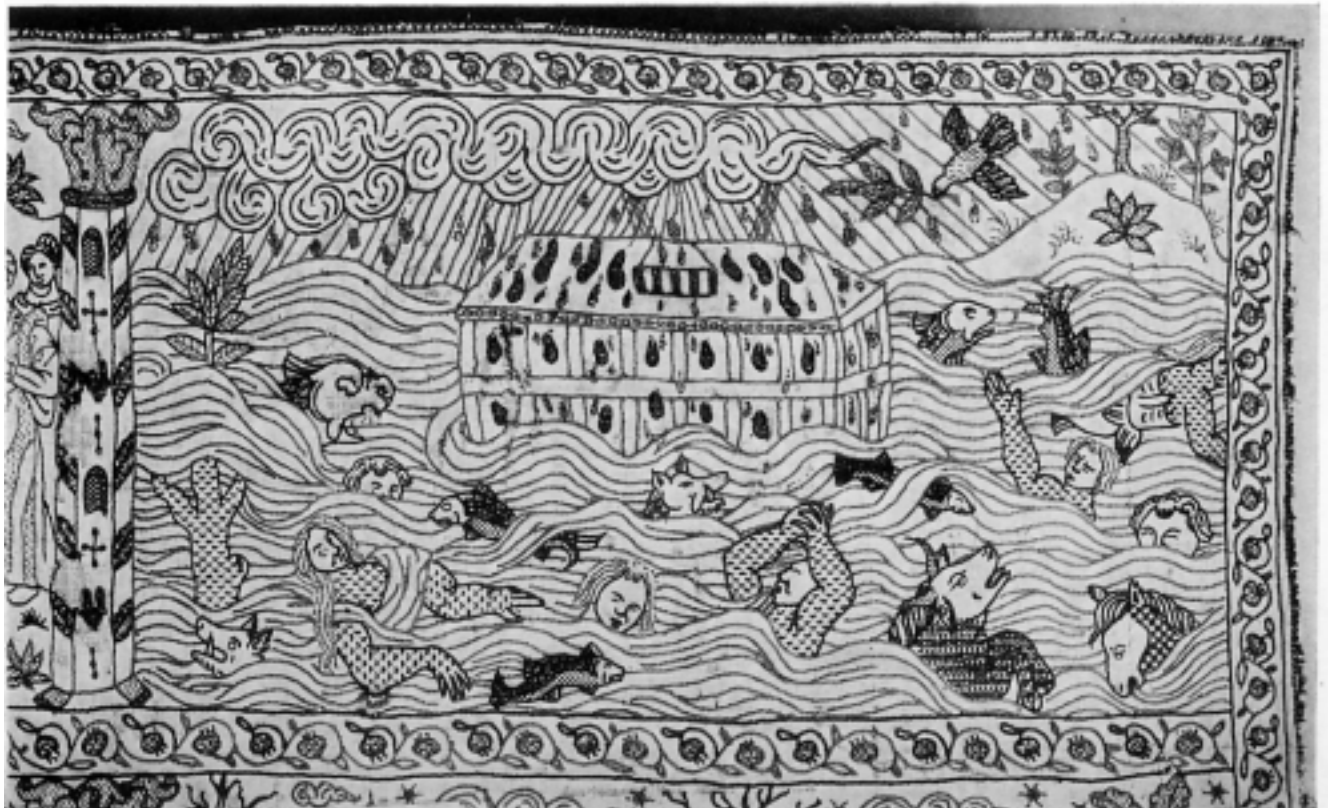

PLATE VIII. PILLOW COVER. "The Flood."

Early 17th century. One of a set of sixteen scenes from biblical history. Worked in silk and silver-gilt thread on linen. From Rycote House, Oxfordshire, the seat of the Earl of Abingdon. The Victoria and Albert Museum.

PLATE IX. CUSHION COVER WITH ARMS OF JAMES I.

Silk, silver-gilt thread and wool on linen. Signed by Mary Hulton. First quarter of the 18th century. From the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Charles made theis Anno Doni. 1637." In this piece the figures are worked separately in silk and metal thread on linen and applied without padding and the faces are worked in very fine split stitch (Pl. X).

To Her Majesty, Queen Mary, the Metropolitan Museum was exceptionally indebted for the loan of an eighteenth century quilt beautifully worked in a variety of lace and embroidery stitches. A rare example of skilful needlecraft (Pl. XI).

Another piece distinguished by its technique and color, was the quilt (Pl. XII), lent by the Victoria and Albert Museum, which was an heirloom in the Dolben family. This lovely example of eighteenth century work is designed with a floral border and a central motif worked in polychrome silks and silver-gilt thread on white satin. It was given as a wedding present to the Rev. Sir John Dolben, Bt. of Finedon Hall, Northamptonshire, and his bride, Elizabeth, daughter of Baron Digby of Geashill, on the occasion of their marriage at Sherbourne Castle, Dorset, on July 28, 1720.

To Judge Irwin Untermyer, outstanding among collectors of Elizabethan embroidery and for many years a member of the Needle and Bobbin Club, the Museum was indebted for the loan of over a hundred pieces. Of these it was difficult to select one that might be of greater interest than another; but the handsome mirror (Pl. XIII) from this collection possesses great distinction as a piece in perfect preservation and of exceptional decorative quality; it is only one of many treasures in Judge Untermyer's superb collection.

Exquisite taste characterizes the collections of Mr. and Mrs. DeWitt Clinton Cohen. Mrs. Cohen, who has been a member of the Board of Directors of the Needle and Bobbin Club from the early years of the organization, has centered her attention in the field of needlework; and in no American collection is there a more beautiful variety of embroideries and the delicate accessories of the art than those which have been so carefully selected by these discriminating enthusiasts. One of the choice pieces in their collection is the book illustrated on Plate XIV.

From the group lent by Mrs. Myron Taylor, who is also a member of the Club, the beautifully worked picture portraying "The Judgment of Solomon" (Pl. XV) represents the phase of Stuart embroidery that preceded the exaggerated type of stump work familiar in needlework of the period. The piece shows a great variety of stitches, other than the fine

PLATE X. THE ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS.

Signed by Edmund Harrison, embroiderer to Charles I, and dated 1637. The figures are worked in silk and in metal threads laid horizontally and couched in the manner of *or nué*. The foundation of the piece is linen. From the Victoria and Albert Museum.

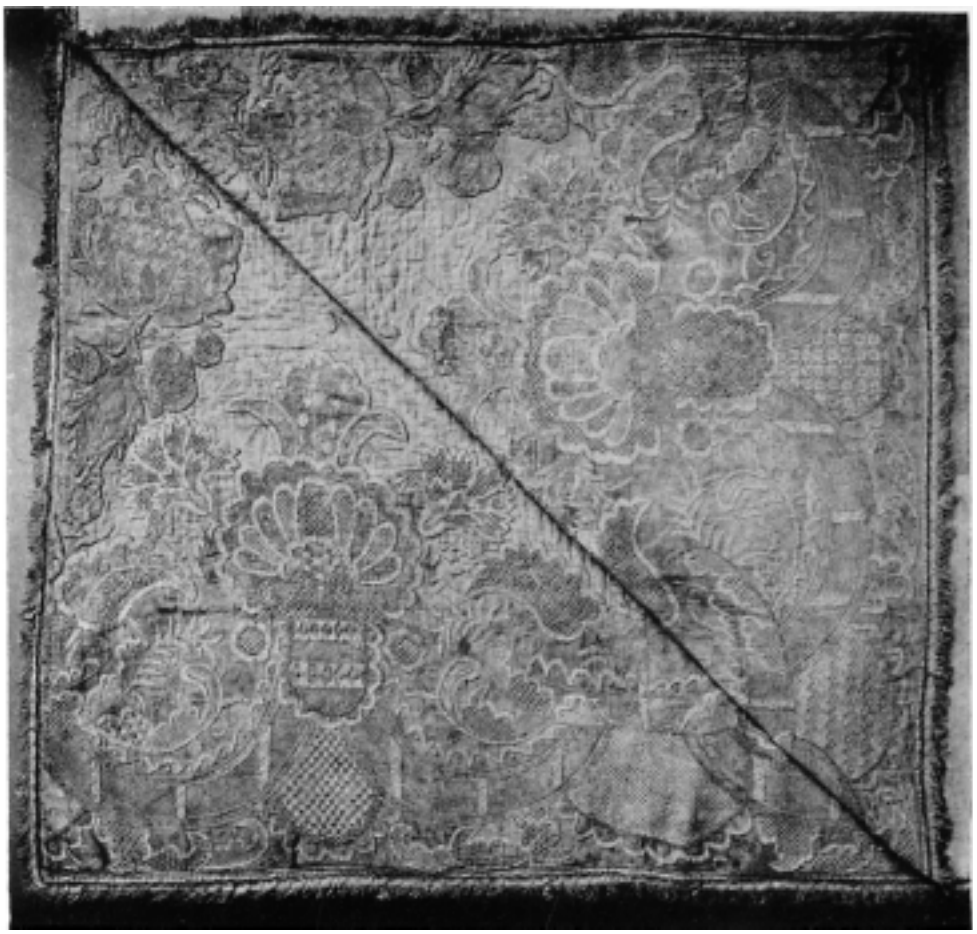

PLATE XI. QUILTED COVERLET (Detail).

With details in embroidery and lace stitches. Middle of the 18th century. From the collection of Her Majesty Queen Mary.

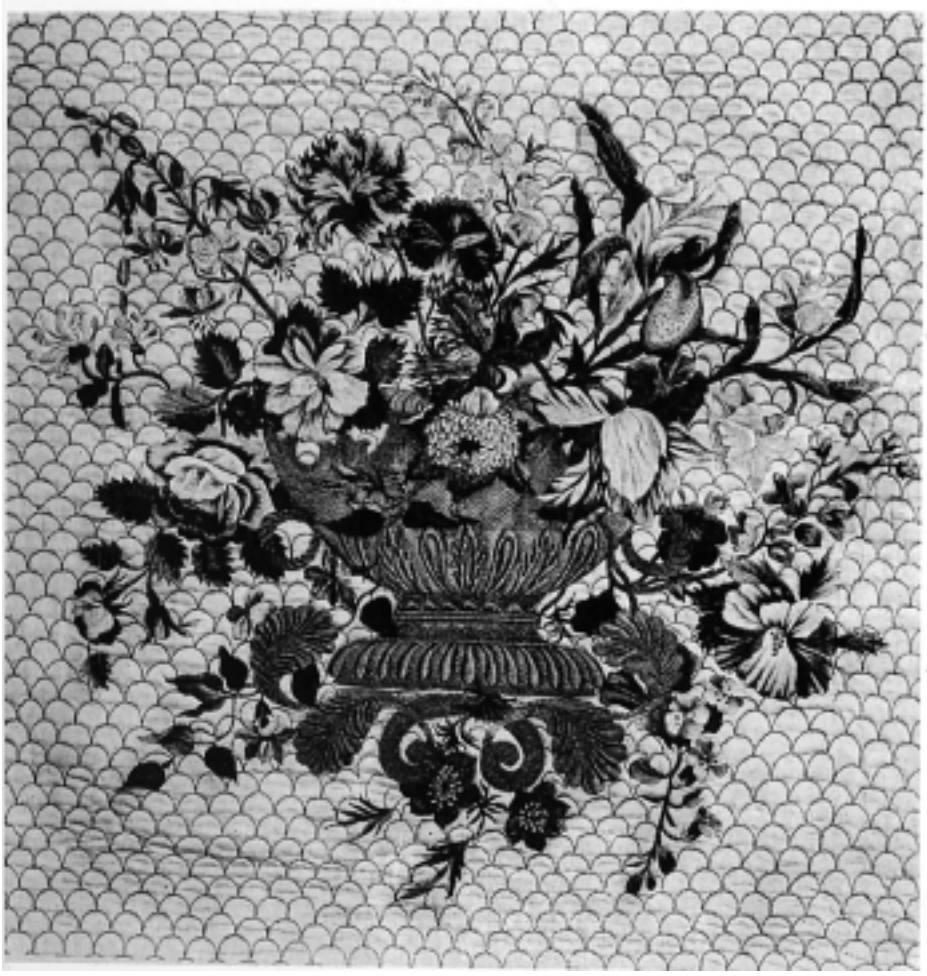

PLATE XII. CENTRAL MOTIF OF THE DOLBEN QUILT.

A satin coverlet embroidered in polychrome silk and silver-gilt thread, presented to the Rev. Sir John Dolben, Bart. and his bride, Elizabeth, daughter of the fifth Baron Digby of Geashill, on the occasion of their marriage at Sherborne Castle, Dorset, on July 28, 1720. The Victoria and Albert Museum.

PLATE XIII. MIRROR.

Frame of carved and gilded wood with insets of embroidered panels worked in colored silks and pearls on white satin. Third quarter of the 17th century. From the collection of Judge Irwin Untermyer.

PLATE XIV. BIBLE WITH EMBROIDERED COVER.

Printed in 1614. White satin binding worked in silver thread and bullion enriched with seed pearls. From the collection of Mr. and Mrs. DeWitt Clinton Cohen.

PLATE XV. THE JUDGEMENT OF SOLOMON.

Needlework picture worked in polychrome silk, silver thread, bullion and purl on canvas. Middle of the 17th century. From the collection of Mrs. Myron Taylor.

PLATE XVI. MINIATURE PORTRAIT OF CHARLES I.

Second half of the 17th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

PLATE XVII. GLOVE WITH EMBROIDERED GAUNTLET.

The gauntlet of white satin is embroidered in silk, silver and silver-gilt thread and bullion, enriched with seed pearls, gold lace and spangles. Late 16th or early 17th century. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum.

tent stitch, and has details in silver thread, bullion and purl. Charles I, as Solomon, is, of course, the central figure.

The pieces from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum record two distinct phases of the art: the exquisitely worked miniature of Charles I (Pl. XVI), and, in the costume class, a pair of seventeenth century gloves (Pl. XVII) presented to the museum by Mrs. Edward S. Harkness, a member of long standing in the Needle and Bobbin Club. These gloves are of unusual interest in the design of the embroidered gauntlets which shows as one of the motifs, a weeping eye. While the eye motif is not unusual—it appears in another instance in the embroidered gown of Elizabeth in the Zuccaro portrait at Hatfield House—the exact symbolism of the weeping eye as here shown, is yet to be determined.[14]

That this historic display of English Domestic Embroidery held a strong appeal for the American public is evidenced by the throngs that filled the galleries during the short period of its duration. It opened on the afternoon of November fifth, with a preview for the members of the Needle and Bobbin Club, and continued until December second, during which time 26,621 visitors paid homage to the skill of Britain's needlecraft. The Club is honored to have had a part in so distinguished an occasion.

Museums and private collectors cooperating with the Metropolitan in the exhibition were as follows:

ENGLISH LENDERS

Her Majesty Queen Mary
The Duke of Devonshire
The Marquess of Salisbury
The Viscountess Esher
The Lord Sackville
Sir John Carew Pole, Bt.
Ernest L. Franklin
The Victoria and Albert Museum

[14] Morris, Frances: *Bulletin* of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Vol. XXIV, No. 2, 1929, p. 46.

AMERICAN LENDERS

J. P. Argenti
Mme. Jacques Balsan
James W. Barney
Mrs. J. Insley Blair
Mr. and Mrs. DeWitt Clinton Cohen
Mrs. Edsel B. Ford
Mrs. Edgar J. Hesslein
Mrs. Brooks Howe
Mrs. Lytle Hull
Mrs. Myron Taylor
Judge Irwin Untermyer
Mr. and Mrs. George D. Widener
The Folger Shakespeare Library
The Pierpont Morgan Library