

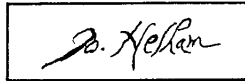
JOHN NELHAM'S NEEDLEWORK PANEL

By Margaret Swain

Blair Castle in Perthshire, the home of the Duke of Atholl, has thirty one rooms open to the public, displaying furniture, paintings, silver, china and textiles used by the family over the past three hundred years. The textiles alone are impressive: bed hangings, chair covers, samplers, costume, and the highly individual collection of embroidery amassed by Lady Evelyn Stuart Murray (1868-1940), who worked the exquisite white panel of the British Royal Arms about 1912.

Earl John's Room contains furniture of the seventeenth century, including a handsome and remarkably complete red velvet bed. On the opposite wall is a well-preserved needlework picture in a black frame. [Plate 1.] Mindful of the other rooms that lie ahead, filled with pieces of absorbing interest, one may be forgiven for according no more than a cursory glance at what appears to be a typical piece of seventeenth century raised work. The panel was given to Lady Dorothea Ruggles-Brise, by her cousin, Frances Murray (1858-1927), daughter of Lord James Murray, and is now back at Blair Castle, the ancestral home of the Murrays, as it had been a Murray possession, though it is not known who worked it.

I have, indeed, looked at it carelessly many times as I hurried ahead, until my attention was drawn to a faint inscription in ink, written along the exposed satin at the base. It apparently read: —



Jo. Helam Suger close grayfriars newgate market.

Where the detached stitches have curled away, the drawing is seen to be in the same ink as the caption.

I wrote immediately to John Nevinson, whose publication of the names of London printsellers in the seventeenth century has transformed our knowledge of how these pictures came to be made. (1) They have been collectors' pieces for many years. Framed and glazed they are exceedingly decorative, and even the most fastidious of antique dealers, who would not normally handle textiles, is not ashamed to display a selected piece or two on the walls of his establishment. They were, however, the objects of somewhat patronising approval, regarded as 'quaint' or 'amusing'. The belief that these crowded panels of unrelated flowers, creatures and insects were designed and drawn out by the needlewoman herself was implicit and strongly held, in spite of the obvious repetition of many of the motifs.

John Nevinson's earlier research showed that, far from being the invention of the needlewoman herself, the designs were well-drawn motifs taken from sheets of engravings sold by printsellers, whose addresses he established in the City of London. This work was reinforced by that of Nancy Graves Cabot (herself a member of the Needle and Bobbin Club) whose unrivalled visual memory enabled her to identify

many of the engravings from which the figures derived. (2) The apparent distortion of these well-drawn designs is due to the complicated stitches, often detached, in metal thread, purl and chenille as well as silk, that were known and used by the domestic needlewoman of the seventeenth century.

It seemed to me important that John Nevinson should know of this picture, signed with the name and address of the man who had drawn it out. I hoped that it might be that of yet another printseller: one who offered drawn out designs ready for working, in addition to his main business of dealing in the prints from which the designs derived.

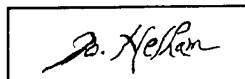
In the meantime, I looked for panels similar to the one at Blair Castle, in the hope of finding others, perhaps even signed specimens. The Victoria and Albert Museum has a picture postcard on sale of one showing a related oval medallion, enclosing the scene of *Susanna and the Elders* (T.50 1954). The oval is embellished with eight scrolls in addition to the leaves and there are pomegranate motifs in place of the leafy flowers at the four quadrants. However, there are the identical two birds at the top and the crouching lion and leopard at the base. The flowers are smaller and the panel two inches wider all round than the Blair Castle example. No inscription can be discerned at the base.

On a visit to the United States, I was enchanted to recognise, on the wall of the Pine Room at Bayou Bend, Houston, Texas, the now familiar oval medallion, almost identical with the Blair Castle picture, enclosing a scene of David and Abigail. In this, Abigail stands upright instead of adopting the humble kneeling attitude usually depicted, but the food and wine she had brought to placate David is clearly shown, laid out on the ground. [Plate 2.] Below are the lion and leopard. The birds above are the song birds of the English hedgerow, the thrush and the wren, in place of the exotic parakeet. The flowers are the same size as those at Blair Castle, but more stylised.

The whole panel is worked with greater precision, but the arrangement bears a striking similarity to the Blair Castle piece.

Another panel was located at the St. Louis Art Museum. The oval, worked in purl, is close to that at Blair Castle. Within the oval, the Queen of Sheba, in a richly flowered gown with detached lace stitch train held by her maid, greets Solomon seated on his throne. [Plate 3.] The Queen's pose is identical with that of the unidentified lady at Blair Castle. There are no animals or birds outside the oval. The flowers: rose, tulip and iris, are more freely drawn. (3) The oval includes the scrolls of the *Susanna* panel at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

John Nevinson now found that my reading of the name and address was inaccurate. Confirmed by other scholars, he read it as:-



Jo. Nelham, Suger Lofe, Grayfriars, Newgate Market

I began a search for other panels with the characteristic foliage around the oval. In the collection of Sir William Plender, in the 1920's, a picture showing an oval medalion encloses the grim scene of Queen Tomyris being shown the severed head of the defeated Cyrus. [Plate 4.] The composition is taken from the design by Rubens, engraved by Peter Pontius in 1630, although the headdresses of the ladies have been somewhat altered in the embroidery.(4)

Another panel belonging to Sir William Plender is illustrated in Seligman and Hughes folio volume *Domestic Needlework* (1926, Plate 79). It shows a similar oval worked in metal purl, with the scene of David and Abigail in raised work. In this, David is mounted, and Abigail kneels before him in the traditional pose. Outside the oval the familiar leopard, lion and stag crouch, but in place of flowers, the four corners show personifications of the Four Seasons. Spring is a seated maiden holding a bunch of flowers, Summer sits beside a sheaf of wheat, Autumn is a man pruning a tree, while Winter is an old man wearing a cap warming himself at a fire. Below the oval the letters A H are worked in seed pearls. The present location of these two panels is unknown to the writer.

Marcus Huish, in *Samplers and Tapestry Embroideries* illustrates a piece of satin (9½" x 8") drawn but unworked, which he rightly describes as 'worthy of careful study'. It is said to be a portrait of the Princess Mary and the Prince of Orange, presumably the mother and father of William III. The design 'has been made with a pointed stylus, the deep incised lines made in the thick material having been coloured black, probably by a transferring medium similar to carbonised paper. The shadows have been added with a brush, evidently wielded by an experienced hand, for not only are they graduated in the original, but there are no signs of any difficulty in dealing with the flow of colour on the absorbent textile.' (5) The drawing shows the Blair leaf and flower frame to the oval, but with the scrolls of the *Susanna* and *Cyrus* panels in addition. The birds appear to be two parakeets, one gazing forward, the other with head turned back. The crouching animals are no longer the lion and leopard, but a unicorn and stag. Unfortunately, the present whereabouts of the panel is unknown.

There is, however, an unworked panel in the Museum of Costume and Textiles, Nottingham. It is skilfully drawn in ink and shaded. The lines are crisp and unwavering. The oval, vertical instead of horizontal, is embellished with the Nelham flowers and leaves, with the pomegranate motif at the sides. [Plate 5] The birds face forwards. There are a unicorn and stag, as well as a dog and fox. The flowers, rose, marigold, tulip and iris, are familiar. The oval encloses a portrait of a seated lady, carrying a tulip.

Another portrait in an upright oval with leaves and flowers of the Nelham type, is in the Metropolitan Museum. The lady wears a wreath of flowers in her flowing hair, and is said to be Elizabeth Coombe 'the most celebrated needlewoman of her period'. Four stylised flowers curve gracefully in the corners. At the sides a small dog gives chase to a hare. The panel is worked with great assurance, and powdered with spangles. [Plate 6] (6)

This links up with an embroidered casket, with an oval of the Nelham type on the lid. Within stands a couple in seventeenth century costume, the lady with a large

tulip at her feet. This casket, dated 1678 with the initials E C in seed pearls, said to represent Elizabeth Coombe, was in the collection of Sidney Hand, Ltd., art dealers in London, before the last war. In spite of her reputation, singularly little appears to be recorded about Elizabeth Coombe.

A portrait in a horizontal Nelham type oval at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, is unmistakably of Henrietta Maria, Queen of Charles I, and mother of Charles II. The modelling of the raised work skilfully depicts her straight nose and drowsy eyelids. The lion and the leopard, worked in lace stitch with beads for eyes, crouch in their familiar poses. In the upper corners, a rose and a pink (carnation) are skilfully worked, the petals detached in a realistic manner. [Plate 7.]

The Fitzwilliam Museum has two other needlework portraits enclosed in ovals, but these lack the stylised flowers and leaves of those so far discussed. They are of interest, however, because although they obviously derive from the same engraving: the hair, comb, jewels and drapery are identical, but the background of each differs. One shows a shepherdess and sheep, the other has small figures including a fisherman.

CONCLUSION

It would be tempting to assume that all the panels here described were drawn in the workshop of John Nelham. Such a temptation must be firmly resisted, however, since so sweeping an assumption is both facile and unscholarly.

The motifs inside and outside the oval medallions, especially the lion and leopard, derive from woodcuts or engravings, and were not the exclusive design of John Nelham. Indeed, as John Nevinson has discovered, John Nelham and his father, Roger Nelham, both left a collection of 'prints' when they died: Roger's so extensive that they were divided between John and his other children. Such prints were freely available to any pattern drawer who cared to buy them.

Huish's suggestion that the unworked design illustrated in *Samplers and Tapestry Embroideries* appeared to be incised led me to explore the possibility that the oval medallion enclosing the different scenes might have been applied by means of a stamp or block. Only the dimensions of the unworked Nottingham panel tallies with that at Blair Castle; the others show marked differences, so this hypothesis had regretfully to be discarded. (7)

Finally, and perhaps most conclusive of all, is the fact that on the Blair Castle panel, John Nelham has signed his name and address. Why has no similar inscription (a useful piece of advertisement) been discerned on any of the related pieces, particularly the unworked panel at Nottingham? Until other pieces are located bearing a name, it cannot be assumed that these panels on satin with oval medallions were, without exception, drawn out in the workshop of John Nelham, though there is a strong possibility that the unworked panel at Nottingham, with the same dimension of the oval, may have issued from the same place.

Much new information has been gained by this investigation, however. John Nevinson's current researches have now shown that the Blair Castle panel did not, as was supposed, emanate from the booth of a London printseller, but was drawn out by a professional embroiderer, a citizen of London, a substantial and respected mem-

ber of the Broderers' Company, and the son of a professional embroiderer. At the time the design was drawn out on the satin, Nelham's workshop 'at the sign of the Sugar Loaf' (a popular sign, used by others) in Newgate Market, was near the old Greyfriars churchyard. After the great fire of 1666, the site of Newgate Market was moved further south, though Nelham retained his shop sign when he moved to the Old Bailey.

We can, therefore, confidently date this panel to the years between 1654, after the death of Roger Nelham, when John took over his father's business in his own name, and 1666, the year that Newgate Market ceased to be at Greyfriars. Indeed, the date may be narrowed even further, to before 1660, the year of the restoration of Charles II and his court to London after the Commonwealth. The lot of a professional embroiderer during the Puritan government of 1649 to 1660 must have been exceedingly bleak, with few if any commissions for ecclesiastical, heraldic or court embroidery. Edmund Harrison, another member of the Broderers' Company, was reduced to penury, and Charles II was petitioned on his behalf when he returned to the throne. John Nelham, like his father, may well have found the drawing-out of designs for the domestic needlewoman a modest way of ekeing out his income and employing his expertise until better times returned with the King and court in 1660.

REFERENCES

- (1) John L. Nevinson 'Peter Stent and John Overton, publishers of Embroidery Designs' in *Apollo* XXIV no. 145, Nov. 1936, pp 279-283; also 'English Domestic Embroidery Patterns of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *Journal of the Walpole Society*, Vol. XXVIII, 1939-40, and *Catalogue of English Domestic Embroidery*; Victoria and Albert Museum 1938.
- (2) Nancy Graves Cabot 'Pattern sources of scriptural subjects in Tudor and Stuart embroideries', *The Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club*, Vol. 30, nos. 1 and 2, 1946, pp 3-57.
- (3) Lynn E. Springer, 'Biblical scenes in embroidery', *Antiques*, Vol. 101, Feb. 1972, Fig. 3, p. 118.
- (4) *Old Furniture*, Vol. II, 1927, p. 118.
- (5) Marcus Huish, *Samplers and Tapestry Embroideries*, 1900, p. 131.
- (6) Y. Hackenbroch, *English and other Needlework in the Untermyer Collection*, 1960, Fig. 95.
- (7) The dimensions ascertained of the interior dimensions of the oval area: —

Blair Castle panel	24.6 x 31.2 cm.
Nottingham panel	24 x 31.2 cm.
Bayou Bend, Houston panel	21 x 28 cm.
Victoria & Albert Museum panel	33 x 42.5
St. Louis Art Museum panel	22 x 28 cm.



1. Needlework picture on white satin worked in silks and metal thread in a variety of raised and surface stitches. Topic unidentified Inscribed at the base in ink: *Jo. Nelham Suger Lofe Grayffriars Newgate Market.* W22" x H 20" (56x51 cm.) 1654-1660.

His Grace the Duke of Atholl, Blair Castle



2. Needlework picture on white satin worked in silks and metal threads in a variety of raised and surface stitches. The scene depicts Abigail offering food and wine to David (1 Samuel XXV 20). Third quarter of the 17th century.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
The Bayou Bend Collection, Gift of Miss Ima Hogg



3. Needlework Picture on white satin, worked in silks, metal purl, pearls and mica, in raised and surface stitches. *King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba* (1Kings x 2). Second half of the 17th century. W16¼" x H 11¾" (41.5x30 cm.)
St. Louis Art Museum (5.1972)
Gift of Mrs. William A. McDonnell



4. Needlework picture on white satin worked in silks and metal thread. The scene shows *Queen Tomyris being shown the severed head of the defeated Cyrus* and is taken, with slight modification, from the engraving by Peter Pontious after the design by Peter Paul Rubens. This picture was in the collection of the late Sir William Plender, Bt., in the 1920's.



5. Unworked satin panel, drawn in ink and shaded, with portrait of a seated female, holding a tulip. Third quarter of the 17th century. Museum of Costume and Textiles, City of Nottingham



6. Casket top of white satin, worked in silks and metal thread, silk wrapped purl, spangle and silk wrapped paper strips. Said to be Elizabeth Coombe, “the most celebrated needlewoman of her time”.
Third quarter of the 17th century W17¼” x H12¾” (43.8x32.4cm)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York (64.101.1326)



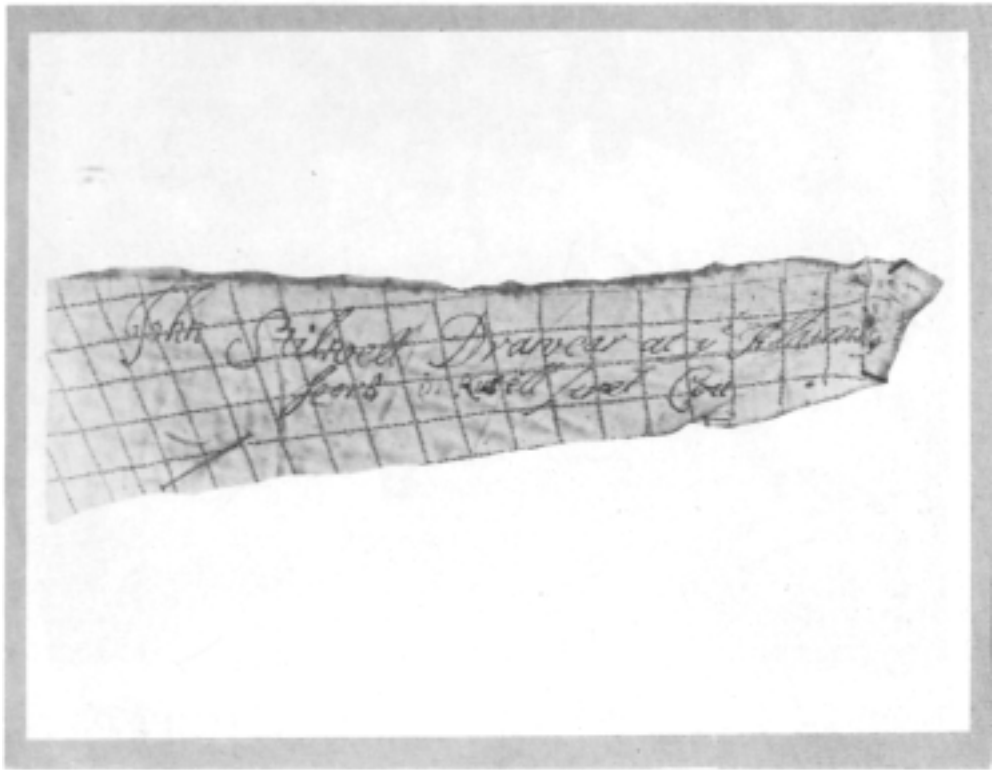
7. Needlework picture on white satin worked in silks and purl with seed pearls in raised and surface stitches. The portrait is of *Queen Henrietta Maria* (1609-1669), wife of King Charles I.

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (T19-1945)



8. Woman's waistcoat. English. Quilted satin worked in silks. Chain stitch. Inscribed on the lining *John Stilwell Drawear att ye Flaming Soord in Russell Street Cou.* . Early 18th century.

*Doris Langley Moore Collection,
Costume Museum, Bath (4750/2)*



9. Detail showing inscription on the lining of Plate 8.