

ART REVIEW | 'TWIXT ART AND NATURE'

Seeing History in the Eye of a Needle

By Roberta Smith

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The exhibition of embroidery at the Bard Graduate Center is both a revelation and great fun. Its subject is one of the most beloved, ancient and widely pursued art forms/crafts/hobbies on earth. Its focus is 17th-century England, the site of one of embroidery's golden ages, it turns out.

A lot happened during this period, especially after 1642. Two civil wars culminated in the beheading of King Charles I in 1649. Then came 10 years of the Cromwells and all that, followed by the Restoration (1660), the Great Plague of London (1665) and the Great Fire of London (1666), which did much to extinguish the Great Plague. Finally a fairly bloodless revolution (1688) was quickly followed by the formation of a constitutional monarchy (1689). Throughout, endless squabbling and plotting and frequent combat transpired between or among monarchs and parliaments; Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Puritans; and Scots, Irish and English. It is a miracle that anybody had time for anything, much less great needlework.

In those times, there seemed to have been nothing that the addition of embroidery couldn't make more beautiful and meaningful, or increase in value and status. Want some pomp for your kingly circumstance? Morally inspiring biblical or mythological vignettes for the manor or cottage? Embroidery filled many needs, and it didn't hurt that the labor was cheaper than the materials.

The exhibition, whose full title is "English Embroidery From the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1580-1700: 'Twixt Art and Nature,'" is the third in an exemplary series of collaborations between Bard Graduate Center students and curators at the Met. Like its predecessors, the show excavates material seldom on view at the museum, constitutes a major event in its art historical domain and comes with a groundbreaking catalog, in this case with six essays by scholars in the field and catalog entries by the students.



A woman's jacket, from around 1616, in linen that was worked with silk, metal thread, spangles, detached buttonholes and satin stitches.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Both show and publication have been overseen by Melinda Watt, assistant curator of the Met's department of European sculpture and decorative arts, and Andrew Morrall, a professor at the Bard Graduate Center. It is the first exhibition of the Met's English embroidery since 1973, and the first large show of its holdings since Irwin Untermyer, a New York judge and dedicated collector, gave the museum more than a hundred embroideries from this period in 1964. This display of 85 works includes 50 pieces from the Untermyer gift.

One of embroidery's great attractions is its self-evident structure. Many of its stitches are challenging beyond belief. That much is confirmed by a video in the galleries and a catalog essay by Cristina Balloffet Carr, a conservator at the Met. The essay's close-up photographs of stitches are magnified 30 times, making it all the easier to appreciate the nearly superhuman evenness of technique that abounds in this show. Metallic threads, glass beads, appliqué, relieflike passages called raised-work and fluttering bits of stripped ribbon (good for tents and flowing skirts) are added options.

But the basic concept of embroidery is like rudimentary geometry. It centers on the merging of two very different dimensions: a flat grid of fabric, and thread, which is an extended line of many colors. This is achieved by the hands, eyes and brain of one person, who attends by one stitch or another to every centimeter of a work's surface. The simplicity and concentration are always felt, no matter how complicated the actual motifs become.

Embroiderers, or broderers (as their guild was then called), could be professional or amateur; they all tended to work from existing images or professionally designed patterns, called blackwork, a few examples of which are included here. Men as well as women embroidered, but mostly women. Especially among Protestant leaders bent on dictating new, austere rules for everyday life, embroidery was celebrated as women's work and actually called "work," as if it were the only option. It was seen as a sure path to and a sign of female piety. It was also part of the domestic comfort that was a wife's primary duty.

In her catalog essay Ruth Geuter modifies the idea of needlework as a kind of brainwashing, intended to instill docility. She points to the preponderance of scenes devoted to biblical heroines like Esther and links them to the times, which often required heroic behavior of both men and women. Protestant admonition aside, women gained new independence during the 17th century. Men were often called away from home, and changing ideas about equality, tolerance and the rights of religious minorities were at the center of the social turmoil.

Progressing generally from the court to the home, the exhibition starts with some royal regalia and two cameos of Charles I, who became a cult figure after his death. Based on engravings of well-known portraits by Van Dyck, they were worn as keepsakes, but also as signs of political allegiance. One that shows the king bareheaded achieves a soft immediacy unlike any other artistic material.

On a happier and more ostentatious note is a wildly beaded tray celebrating the 1662 marriage of Charles's son, the restored Charles II, to Catharine of Braganza. The pair is shown in resplendently detailed attire, his ermine-lined cape included.

Embroidery's central role in the luxury trade is evident in a rare early-17th-century jacket, several caps and purses and five pairs of gloves. Motifs on these items tend toward birds, and scrolling vines and flowers that were probably Moorish in origin. The exception is a pair of gloves whose cuffs alternate narrow images of plants and flowering plants. The flowering ones are each being watered by a large, single, beaded eye-in-the-sky raining tears. Dalí, Schiaparelli and Guston all come to mind.

The embroidered canvas panels depicting biblical and mythological scenes and paeans to nature and its seasons that were usually made for, and in, the home are the show's most beguiling works. Expansive and alive with detail, they benefit from the filling-in that the embroidery process encouraged. Central figures tend to be surrounded by large casts of subsidiary figures, animals and plant life. Perhaps embroidery's point-by-point process assures every motif a life of its own, often on a scale that clashes with much else.

In the panel titled "Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden With Virtues," three very different trees dominate. This is even more the case in "Orpheus Charming the Animals," where the fruits are as large as our hero's head. A panel depicting the judgment of Solomon avoids the problem: floral motifs are relegated to a thick border, strictly separated from the central scene, enacted on a black and white tile floor.

Smaller panels of embroidered satin appear on the sides and tops of small cabinets that are like the compartmentalized jewel boxes of today. Usually made by young girls, they were something of a coming-of-age ritual, although they could require the help of a pattern-maker for planning and of a joiner and a draper for assembly.

Embroidery is a glorious byproduct of sewing, one of the world's most essential crafts. Sewing began sometime in prehistory, probably when pieces of animal hide were lashed together into a crude garment. But humans never cease. The marvels of this exhibition testify to the human need to improve, refine and perfect, turning a means of survival into a sublime vehicle of expression.