

Opus anglicanum - 'work of the English'

A pair of English embroideries decorated with images of the Crucifixion and standing saints
England, probably London

c. 1490



123 x 64 cm (cruciform panel); 123 x 48 cm (straight-sided panel); Embroidery of silver-gilt metal-wrapped thread and coloured silks on linen. Some restorations to the figures' faces and to elements of the architectural surround, particularly the darkest (black and dark brown) threads. Couching threads strengthened or replaced in areas. The outer gold-thread braid a modern addition.

Provenance

The Adler Collection, until;
Their sale, Sotheby's London, 24 February 2005, lot 67

Description, Iconography, Materials

The shapes of these embroidered panels (also known as orphreys) indicate that they once decorated the front and back of a medieval chasuble, a type of sleeveless liturgical vestment worn by members of the clergy as they perform Mass (fig. 1). They are remarkably vivid and colourful examples of a type of liturgical embroidery specialised in by English workshops towards the end of the fifteenth century and more commonly described today as *opus anglicanum*, the Latin term for 'work of the English'. It is how English embroideries (both religious and secular in design) can be found documented in a number of important medieval sources from continental Europe, including in the inventories of great cathedral treasuries, the collections of the Catholic popes, and those of the

nobility and monarchy of France. For example, according to the thirteenth-century chronicler Matthew of Paris, Pope Innocent IV had a particular passion for English embroideries. By the time our panels were produced, in around 1490, *opus anglicanum* was being bought in high volume by English churches too, and powerful religious figures such as the archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal John Morton (c. 1420-1500), are known to have commissioned large suites of vestments for distribution to favoured churches and monastic foundations.

Our two panels differ in shape from one another, with a cruciform panel that would have adorned the back of the chasuble, and a narrow, rectangular counterpart made to cover the chest. The former of the two depicts the figure of Christ crucified on the cross between two angels who hold out chalices in order to collect the blood running from his nail wounds. Below him in individual architectural compartments are the Virgin, shrouded in an ermine-lined mantle, and Saint John who holds his hands clasped in a mixture of prayer and grief. Above Christ's head is a large, white, haloed dove, holding the titulum inscribed with the traditional letters INRI [Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews] in its claws. Its counterpart panel is embroidered with single figures standing, like Mary and John, in individual niches, and holding attributes that identify them as Saint James (with his pilgrim's hat and staff) at the top, and Saint Andrew (with his x-shaped cross) at the bottom. The central figure is somewhat androgynous in character, but may be intended to represent Mary Magdalene (holding an ointment pot with which she anointed Christ's wounds).

The vivid, shimmering effect made by the silks on both panels was achieved by laying unwound threads, also known as floss, across the surface of a stiffened linen support before couching them down in a few sporadic places, so that the fibres appear to float and billow from the surface. This was a time-saving exercise adopted by embroiderers of *opus anglicanum* in the latter half of the fifteenth century, but one that simultaneously created dazzling results. The silks and gold threads that cover every inch of these panels were ingeniously worked in ways that create incredible variations of texture, colour, and lustre. As a result, light flashes across their shimmering surfaces, which flare and recede as they move.

Layered vestiges of eighteenth and nineteenth century silk fabrics hidden under both panels' wide gold braiding, along with the shape of the cutaway neckline visible along their top edges, reveal the secrets of a long history of alteration and reuse, and though they are over 500 years old, it is clear that they remained in service well into the modern period.

Context and dating

Chasubles are made for use during the Mass, and routinely incorporate imagery intended to expound upon the themes recounted by the priesthood during such ceremonies. As a result (and in a tradition that continues to this day), many medieval chasubles depicted the scene of the Crucifixion, the iconographic significance of which was brought into sharp focus during those moments when the priest physically turned his back on the congregation in order to prepare the Sacraments on the altar (fig. 2). As the priest enacted the liturgy and raised the chalice of communion wine above his head, the embroidered angels who are shown collecting the blood running from Christ's wounds in similar vessels are there to suggest that we would have been witnessing the very moment of transubstantiation, when the wine is miraculously transformed into the Saviour's blood.

English embroideries of the late fifteenth century were made in great numbers, and represent the last great manifestation of English church embroidery before the Reformation, when Henry VIII's conflict with the Church of Rome, and the subsequent reforms imposed upon the Church of England first by him and then his zealous son Edward VI, led to the widespread destruction of ecclesiastical furnishings and liturgical textiles. Surviving accounts detailing the forced removal of vestments, altar cloths and other textiles from their treasuries, to be sold off and cut up for reuse, or worse, burnt for their precious metal-wrapped threads, make for heartbreaking reading.¹

The techniques used in the decoration of our embroideries, and the stylistic treatment of their figures and architectural motifs, are closely related to a number of late fifteenth-century examples fortunate enough to have survived. Amongst these, a full cope at Arundel Castle incorporates very similar fleurs-de-lys at the top of each of the ogival arches on its orphrey panels, along with a similar format of crenelated architecture and blocky, faceted supporting pillars (fig. 3). We know from the rebus incorporated onto its red velvet that it was commissioned by or for John Morton (the same patron mentioned above) and was one of a number of luxury English embroideries owned by this wealthy ecclesiastic. Since Morton became a cardinal in 1493 and included a cardinal's hat in his rebus following this appointment, it must date to before this moment due to the absence of this motif, and it is likely that our panels were made at a similar moment in time.²

¹ Kay Staniland, *Medieval Craftsmen: Embroiderers*, London, 1991, pp. 68-69.

² C. Browne, G. Davies and M.A. Michael, *English Medieval Embroidery: Opus Anglicum* (New Haven and London, 2016), p. 263.



Fig. 1
Master of Saint Augustine
Scenes from the Life of Saint Augustine
c. 1490
152.1 x 163.8 cm; Oil, gold, and silver on panel
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Cloisters Collection, inv. 61.199



Fig. 2
Master of Aachen
The Mass of Saint Gregory (detail)
c. 1500
162 x 83.5 cm; Oil on panel
Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent, inv. RMCC s6



Fig. 3
Detail of a cope
England
Before 1493
Arundel Castle, on loan from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Arundel and Brighton