

A panel of crimson silk velvet
Italy, perhaps Venice
c. 1470s



108 x 60.2 cm (including both selvedges). Cloth-covered mounting board 118 x 70.3 cm. The width of the velvet without selvedges is 57.2 cm, with each selvedge measuring 1.5 cm. Velvet of crimson silk with a single-height cut pile.

Condition

Some crushing to the pile, and some small areas of weakness which have been strengthened and stabilized during conservation.

Provenance

Collection of Charles Ratton (1895-1986);
 With Galerie Ratton-Ladriere until 2021

Fortunately for us this long section of deep crimson velvet, the shape of which suggests it was removed from a chasuble or other liturgical vestment, is large enough that it communicates with great clarity the entirety of its original design, and even retains both of its two wonderfully vivid green silk selvedges. Its main design consists of repeating rows of large and rhythmically spaced flowerhead motifs which appear as if floating at the centre of rotund cinquefoil leaves, which touch and jostle with those immediately adjacent to them. But while at first glance the composition appears to comprise a simple repeat pattern of flowers within leaves, numerous subtle discrepancies between each row of motifs enliven the design – for example the shapes of the flowerhead motifs and the arrangement and direction of the petals sprouting from each of them. Additionally, alternating with every two main rows of motifs are thin, single-stranded vines, which arc across the design and sprout smaller flower-heads at their uppermost points.

The rounder of the two main leaf forms closely hug these vines, so that each leaf appears to grow sinuously and without interruption into a blossoming flower.

While motifs on voided velvets of this type are typically described as ‘pomegranate pattern’, they have much more in common with thistles, poppy-heads or artichokes, and in early Spanish inventories they are even described as ‘pine cones’ (*piñas*).¹ Today, the whole class of velvets to which our panel belongs are described as *ferronnerie* or *a inferriata*, because their finely delineated voided patterns look like ironwork. Many surviving inventories list large panels or lengths of fabric like ours amongst the material goods associated with marriage trousseaux; its large size and regular shape suggest that it was used either for a full-length garment or as a furnishing fabric. In either case, the use it has sustained over time has worn away the red silk wefts in its voided design, but in so doing has serendipitously increased its legibility and contrast with the rich crimson pile of the surrounding areas.

The width of the pattern on this example measures 60.2 cm, which is smaller than the Venetian *braccio* of 63.8 cm but larger than the Florentine *braccio* of 58.362 cm, which complicates things. The vivid green, single-colour selvedge running down both edges of the fabric has been linked with Venetian workshops, and was introduced by the city’s silk weaver’s guild in 1457 as a mark of quality, indicating that the silk had been coloured using the finest crimson dyes obtained from imported cochineal from Armenia.² However, our velvet lacks the single metal-wrapped thread typically woven through the centre of the selvedge.

The Venetian painter Carlo Crivelli (c. 1430–1495) incorporated a very similar velvet into his famous Camerino triptych of 1482–83, now in the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan (fig.1). Taking centre stage as a cloth of honour that hangs over the throne of the Virgin and Child, it attests to the special status given to Renaissance velvets during the period, and offers strong evidence for dating our example accordingly.

¹ Florence Lewis May, *Silk Textiles of Spain: Eighth to Fifteenth Century*, New York, 1957, p. 219.

² Lisa Monnas, *Renaissance Velvets*, London, 2012, cat. 20, p. 90.

Fig. 1
Carlo Crivelli
Camerino Triptych, 1482–83 (detail)
Tempera on panel, 190.5 × 78 cm
Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan, inv. 155–350–351

