

Highlights Release

Opus Anglicanum: Masterpieces of English Medieval Embroidery

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1 October 2016 – 5 February 2017

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Episcopal shoes from the tomb of Archbishop Hubert Walter, 1170-1200

© Canterbury Cathedral



These shoes were among the clothing in which Hubert Walter, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1193 until his death, was buried in Canterbury Cathedral in 1205. The prestigious materials and skilled workmanship used to decorate these shoes, including interlaced bows, rosettes, fleurs-de-lys, mythical animals and cabochon jewels, reflect his status as a highly influential statesman as well as Church leader.

The Clare Chasuble, 1272-94

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London



This chasuble was commissioned by Margaret de Clare. Margaret and her husband Edmund had close links to the royal court. He was a member of the Plantagenet dynasty, while the Clares were one of the most powerful families in England. The blue ground is a kanzi, a fabric of silk and cotton made in Iran – this is the only known example of its use in England at this time. This chasuble demonstrates the important role that aristocratic and royal women played in the making of luxurious English embroideries.

Seal-bag, about 1280

© Westminster Abbey



This seal-bag is associated with a charter of Edward I, which confirms possessions and privileges for Westminster Abbey. It is the only example of wool inlaid work preserved from medieval England. The seal-bag is decorated on both sides with the arms of England. Three golden lions are shown on a red ground, framed by a red and white foliage scroll. Appliqué and inlaid work was a relatively quick way of making heraldic embroideries to meet the ever-increasing demands of the royal court.

The Syon Cope, 1310-20



© Victoria and Albert Museum, London

One of the treasures of the V&A's collection, the Syon Cope (a semi-circular cloak worn during church ceremonies) depicts scenes including The Virgin's Death, Funeral, Assumption and Coronation. It is unique within surviving opus anglicanum, as its background is not worked in metal thread, but in green and red silks. However, gilded silver thread has been used extensively for garments and other details, while the body of the crucified Christ stands out in contrasting silver thread. A kneeling figure, possibly the donor, appears on the front.

The Bologna Cope, 1310-20



© Museo Civico Medievale, Bologna

This cope was made at a time when English embroiderers created their most ambitious works. It probably belonged to the Dominican Pope Benedict XI, and was donated to the Convent of San Domenico in Bologna. The entire visible surface is embroidered, completely covering the linen ground fabric. Both from a stylistic and iconographic point of view, the scenes are closely related to English manuscript illuminations of the first quarter of the 14th century. This detail shows the Harrowing of Hell – Christ's triumphant descent into the underworld in the time between his Crucifixion and his Resurrection.

The Steeple Aston Cope (detail), 1330-40



© The Rector and Churchwardens of Steeple Aston (Oxfordshire), on loan to the V&A

The gold and silk embroidery of this cope survives today as it was cut up and reassembled as altar furnishings. Its precious materials and skilled workmanship suggest that the cope was created for a wealthy patron, and it was later passed on to the small parish church of Steeple Aston, where it was recorded in 1844 as 'a very valuable relic of the olden time'. The detail here depicts a winged angel on horseback playing a lute – it is considered to be the earliest depiction of a lute in English medieval art.

The De Lisle Psalter (detail), ca. 1320

© The British Library Board, Arundel 83



This depiction of the Virgin and Child within an architectural framework has close links to panel paintings of the period. The artist, who is known as the ‘Madonna Master’, has been connected to paintings on the bishop’s throne at Westminster Abbey. The artist may also have designed embroideries including the John of Thanet Panel (1300-19), also on display in the exhibition.

The Toledo Cope (detail), 1320-30

© Toledo, Tesoro de la Catedral, Museo de Tapices y Textiles de la Catedral



This cope is a particularly rich example of opus anglicanum, produced at a time when the artform had reached its zenith in medieval Europe. The exhibition marks the first time this exquisite embroidery has returned to London since it was made nearly 700 years ago. The three metre wide cope is richly decorated with foliage, grotesques, masks and birds, while its iconography focuses on the Virgin Mary, as well as apostles and saints, many of whom were particularly venerated in England. Most of the saints are shown trampling on their tormentors.

This detail depicts Edward the Confessor and refers to the foundation of Westminster Abbey.

Fragment depicting a knight on horseback, c. 1320-40

© Stonyhurst College



This figure of a charging knight on a dappled horse was once embroidered on a green velvet ground, now almost entirely cut away. He is shown as if galloping into battle, or a tourney. The embroidery shows the rich heraldic fabrics worn by both the knight and his mount, achieved through the intricate underside couching of silver thread in varying directions. Close inspection

has found that the knight’s tunic is decorated with a rampant lion and the horse-trappings are covered with winged dragons and scrolls. The prominent red crosses (now faded to pink) have led to suggestions that the figure may represent St George.

Part of a horse trapper probably made for Edward III's Court (detail), 1330-40

© Paris, Musée de Cluny



This is one of the largest surviving fragments of what was once a magnificent heraldic covering for a horse. It shows the English royal arms, and was probably made for King Edward III. It is possible that it was made for his appearance at the Imperial Diet (general assembly) of the Holy Roman Emperor Louis IV at Coblenz in 1338.

The Chichester-Constable Chasuble, ca. 1335-45

© Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



This rich red silk velvet chasuble was made during the period when England produced its most ambitious and complex embroideries. It was once lavishly decorated with seed pearls and is intricately embroidered with saints and scenes depicting the life of the Virgin Mary, including The Annunciation. There are a number of similarities between this chasuble and the Butler-Bowdon Cope in the V&A's collection, also on display, suggesting they were made in the same workshop. The similarities include the rendering of the oak-bough arcading with lion-headed supports and corbels and the depictions of seated angels and birds, amongst other details.

Surcoat belonging to Edward the Black Prince, before 1376

© Canterbury Cathedral



This linen surcoat belonging to Edward the Black Prince is the only piece of secular clothing to survive from the 14th century. The Black Prince was the eldest son of Edward III and one of the most successful English military leaders of the Middle Ages.

Traditionally, a surcoat was worn over armour and had no real protective qualities, but served as a way for a knight to display his arms. The now-faded red and blue velvet quartered arms of England and France were originally adopted by Edward III in 1340 when he made claim to the French throne. The surcoat and other funerary achievements have hung at the prince's tomb at Canterbury Cathedral since his death in 1376.

Chasuble, 1398-1420



The embroidered red orphreys, which have been adapted for use on this chasuble of Italian silk, were probably originally part of an ornate secular furnishing, such as bed hangings. The heraldry relates to the Stafford and related families. It includes the chained swan, the device of the powerful Bohun family, which traced its lineage back to the mythical Swan Knight, and was used by a number of Lancastrians. Elaborate embroidered flowers and vines, as well as small rabbits emerging from grassy mounds complete the intricate decoration. During this period, secular textiles were often reworked and refashioned in this way.

The Fishmongers' Pall, 1512 to about 1538



The exceptional quality of this funeral pall demonstrates that English embroidery workshops were still prestigious enough in the early 16th century to attract elaborate commissions. Its decoration clearly signals the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers' identity, including mermen and mermaids supporting its arms, alongside St Peter, the Fishmongers' patron saint. This embroidered detail in gilded silver and silver thread with coloured silks shows a mermaid holding up a mirror; her reflection clearly visible in the glass.

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Notes to Editors

- The exhibition *Opus Anglicanum: Masterpieces of English Medieval Embroidery* runs from 1 October 2016 - 5 February 2017. Admission £12 (concessions available). V&A Members go free. Advance booking is advised – this can be done in person at the V&A; online at vam.ac.uk/opus; or by calling 0800 912 6961 (booking fee applies).
- It is curated by Clare Browne and Glyn Davies with consultant curator Prof. M.A. Michael, Academic Director, Christie's Education, London and Research Fellow, School of Culture and Creative Arts, University of Glasgow.
- The exhibition is accompanied by a new publication co-published by the V&A and Yale University Press. The book is a complete introduction to the design, production and use of luxury embroideries in medieval England.
- A number of embroidery-focused events, short courses and practical workshops complement the exhibition.
- The V&A holds the world's largest collection of medieval English embroidery, both on display in the Museum's Medieval and Renaissance Galleries and available for study by appointment at the Clothworkers' Centre housed in Kensington Olympia.

For further PRESS information about *Opus Anglicanum: Masterpieces of English Medieval Embroidery* please contact Laura Mitchell in the V&A press office on +44 (0) 20 7942 2503 or email l.mitchell@vam.ac.uk (not for publication).

A selection of press images are available to download free of charge from pressimages.vam.ac.uk

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