

England, Embroidered Box, #95.14a-bb

Artist Unknown

Date: 1662

Textiles, Textile-Surface Ornamentation



Description:

Raised work (stumpwork) casket depicting the story of Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus; Initialed 'BP' and dated 1662, worked in polychrome silk and metallic threads on white satin and decorated with seed pearls, English; Front King Ahasuerus presenting the royal scepter to Queen Esther; Back The hanging of Haman; Right side the search for a wife for King Ahasuerus; Left side Mordecai honored by Ahasuerus and paraded in royal regalia; Top King Ahasuerus, Queen Esther and Haman at dinner; The casket with two doors opening to reveal curious set of drawers with secret

compartments; the top lifting to reveal a pink velvet interior fitted with two bottles, an inkpot and a pen tray, the back of this lid with brackets for a mirror that now is missing; a second lid at the top opening to reveal a shallow silk-lined tray. A 17th century oak box lined in marbled paper with replaced lock accompanies the casket (95.14cc Traveling Case for Stumpwork Casket)

Here is a picture of the opened box, taken from AMICA Library online:



Current Gallery Label:

Needlework has always been an important art form of England. In the 17th century, a unique style of raised work embroidery was developed and, in its most elaborate form, was used to pictorially embellish decorative boxes used to store one's personal treasures. These embroidered containers were considered so important that cabinet

makers were commissioned to create protective carrying cases so they could be easily and safely moved while traveling.

This piece, one of the finest of its kind, tells the Old Testament story of Queen Esther, whose intelligence and diplomacy saved her people from persecution. The box was added to the institute's collection on the occasion of Mary Ann Butterfield's retirement to honor her work as the museum's textile conservator.

The Art of Embroidery:

The art of embroidery has a long history in England, where the decorative arts have traditionally been held in high regard. In the 17th century, a culturally refined individual was expected to also be an artistically creative person. Often, young girls from wealthy families were trained by professionals and frequently required to create sample pieces incorporating progressively more elaborate and complicated patterns to demonstrate their skills and accomplishments. After several years of training, a girl as young as 12 years old could create exceptional work, and as a sign of accomplishment, she was expected to complete a complex embroidery project. One choice was to create decorative panels that would cover a small multi-drawer cabinet or box used to store special keepsakes.

Crafts that showed off a girl's talents were displayed in the formal sitting room of her family's home, to be admired by potential husbands and their families. By choosing Esther's story for her needlework, the girl suggested that she herself was loyal, brave, and honorable.

Many of the designs for these boxes were inspired by Dutch prints, which were popular in England during this period, as well as special books that contained individual images of plants and animals. These books were used extensively as a design resource to fill any undecorated areas, as the aesthetic of the day abhorred empty space. Another feature of decorative embroidery of this period was as disregard for relative proportion, and thus we may see on the same piece a bird, a lion, and a butterfly, all of which are approximately the same size.

Biblical imagery was frequently chosen as an expression of the needleworker's moral values, and the stories included such heroines as Judith, Abigail, Susanna, and Esther, the heroine of this box, who saved others by their courageous actions. Although the patterns were pre-drawn, and embroidered pieces were sent to a professional for final assembly, the needleworker herself would choose the embroidery threads, materials, and stitches that would be used. The most ambitious projects were those done in raised-work embroidery, which today we often call stumpwork. Stumpwork is a form of embroidery that is characterized by a three-dimensional quality achieved by stitching over padded areas and by incorporating additional elements worked separately in very fine lace stitches and then applied to the design. Often, the embroiderers used a variety of expensive materials, which included silver and gold threads, pearl and coral beads, spangles, sequins, peacock feathers, and human hair.

Esther's Story:

The Book of Esther is one of the five books of the old testament Bible that are read on various festivals during the year. The story is read from the Megillah, a parchment scroll, during the festival of Purim, whose joyful carnival atmosphere celebrates this tale of danger, heroism, and the deliverance of the Jewish people from their enemies. Biblical scholarship has shown that the events depicted in the story of Esther are not based on historical fact. Rather, it dramatizes the tenuous nature of Jewish personal and communal life for thousands of years both in Israel and in the many other countries in which Jews have lived. Since ancient times, this story of deliverance from an implacable enemy has had great relevance in Jewish communities around the world.

The Book of Esther is a dramatic, romantic novel set in the court of Ahasuerus, King of the Persian-Median Empire around 400 B.C. The story involves four main characters of the Royal Court: King Ahasuerus, Haman, his chief advisor, Esther, a young Jewish maiden who is chosen to be his new queen, and Mordechai, Esther's cousin. At the beginning of the story Mordechai is honored by Ahasuerus for saving his life. However, when Mordechai angers the powerful Haman by refusing to bow down to him, the arrogant advisor convinces the King not only to order Mordechai's death, but to also kill all the Jews of the empire and take their property. Esther's Jewish identity had been kept from the King, but in this crisis Mordechai convinces her that she must intercede on behalf of her people. Esther acts courageously and succeeds in exposing Haman's evil plot. Esther and her people are saved, and Haman is hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordechai.

While the story of Queen Esther and Purim had and continues to have a special relevance to the Jewish people, it gained popularity with many Christians during the 17th century when it became a frequent subject in paintings, textiles, and other art forms. The story of a loyal, strong queen who dares to stand up to an evil advisor was a prevalent theme in many royalist circles, especially in England after the revolution led by Oliver Cromwell in which the monarchy was abolished and King Charles I was executed. Esther was seen as a model of piety and bravery, not to mention beauty. Her tale was one that clearly resonated with the makers and consumers of seventeenth-century embroidered furnishings, and her story is the single most popular biblical subject rendered in seventeenth-century English embroidery.

Details of the Box:

Five major elements of this narrative are represented on the embroidery panels of this beautiful work of art. The story begins with a side panel that shows Mordechai dressed in the King's robes and crown riding through the streets of the capital city of Sushan led by a herald who sings his praises for having saved the King's life. The next part of the story can be seen on the opposite side panel that shows Haman riding up to the gates of the King's palace where Mordechai sits, refusing to pay homage to the Royal Advisor.

It was after this insult that Haman brings about his plot to destroy the Jews. The front panel depicts the dramatic scene in which the King extends his golden scepter to Queen Esther who kneels before him in supplication to save her people; she is shown kneeling on a ground of embroidered chenille thread. Chenille, which is a woven rather than a spun thread, was first developed in the 17th century. This image of Esther was worked independently and later applied to the surface. The fourth panel on the top of the box shows the banquet at which Esther denounces Haman to the King who raises his hand in anger. The fifth and final panel represents the hanging of Haman; the silkworm and leaf were used to fill empty spaces.

The artist or artists who created this embroidery masterpiece embellished the narrative scenes with complicated architectural renderings and a marvelous garden of trees, shrubs, and flowers alive with a menagerie of insects, birds, and animals, including the lion and unicorn that represent British royalty. Many different stitches and kinds of materials were used in the box, for example, the king and queen have little wooden hands and wear crowns set with pearl beads. The more materials used, the more successful was the embroiderer.

Possible Tours:

Thinking Outside the Box
Women in Art
Biblical Themes
Home Furnishings
Secret Places

Possible Questions:

What would you store in a box like this?
Where would you display it?
What kinds of hand-made decorations do people make for their homes today? Who makes them? Does anyone you know do this kind of hand work?
What kinds of stories would you tell through pictures on a box like this?

Resources:

Arts ConnectEd
Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History
[WWW.archimuse.com/papers/amicoALJ/amicoALJ2002.html](http://www.archimuse.com/papers/amicoALJ/amicoALJ2002.html)
Teaching the Arts: <http://artsmia.org/education/teacher-resources/fivefacts.cfm?v=2>

Submitted by Lin Stein, July, 2011

On the following pages are enlargements of details.

Enlarged, close pictures of embroidery detail from box:



snail



ladybird



butterfly



small blossoms



small blossoms



small blossoms



pomengranates



unicorn



lion

