

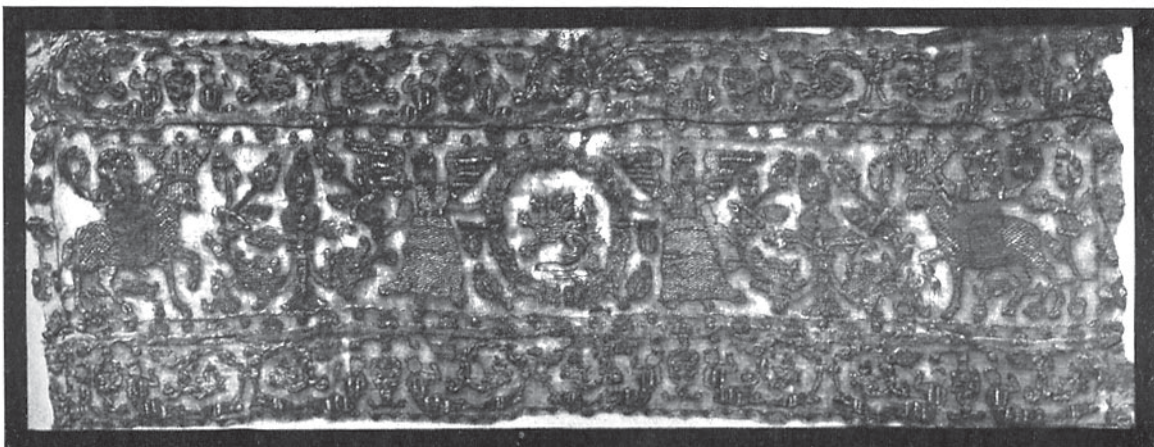


## The Collection of Monsieur G. Seligman      By Ronald Clowes

IN the dreary ages of mediævalism, when the shadow of the sword lay over the lands, and learning and culture were driven to seek refuge in monastery and convent, art flourished triumphantly—art that in its way was more intense in its expression of personality, more fervid and exalted in its aims, than the more bounteous output at the present time. It was not restricted—as is largely the case nowadays—to painting and sculpture, but found its chief expression in beautifying the ordinary objects of everyday life, in illuminating missals and books, and in needlework. To needlework, indeed, was confined almost the entire expression of the artistry, devotional feeling and creative instinct of womankind. The talents which now find vent in literature, painting, sculpture, science, politics, and a hundred fascinating pursuits, were then confined to this single narrow channel. The result is that the needlework of the dark ages was not a mere handicraft, but a fine art, and one in which great originality and profound technical skill were not unfrequently shown.

Most of the finest pieces have been absorbed by the larger museums or remain in the possession of

the religious institutions for which they were originally wrought; but that a few—and these not among the least noteworthy—have come into private hands is shown by the fine collection of Monsieur G. Seligman, of 3, Avenue du Parc Monceau, Paris, which contains many pieces of unsurpassed interest. Chief among these is perhaps the beautiful chasuble of English workmanship, of about the end of the thirteenth or beginning of the fourteenth century, a period in which the English work was at its highest repute. So much was it esteemed that Pope Innocent IV., about 1246, is said to have despatched missives to most of the heads of the Cistercian monasteries in England instructing them to send him gold embroideries wherewith he might adorn his chasuble and cope—a request which was not over cordially received, owing to the valuable nature of the gift he required. What is perhaps the finest specimen of needlework in the South Kensington Museum, the Syon Monastery Cope, belongs to this period. With this piece the work on M. Seligman's chasuble has many striking resemblances; the embroidery is equally beautiful, while, unlike the Museum example, it is in a perfect state of preservation.



EARLY EMBROIDERY OF HUMAN FIGURES

BYZANTINE INFLUENCE



GERMAN NEEDLEWORK IN COLOURED SILKS. GEOMETRIC DESIGNS SHOWN IN LACIS.  
HERALDRY AND LETTERS OF LATER WORK SUGGEST THAT THE FRAGMENT IS PART  
OF AN EARLY SAMPLER





THE CORONATION OF THE VIRGIN      A FRAGMENT OF ENGLISH EMBROIDERY OF ABOUT THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY, SOMEWHAT SIMILAR TO AN EMBROIDERED ORPHREY ATTRIBUTED TO A SUFFOLK NUN

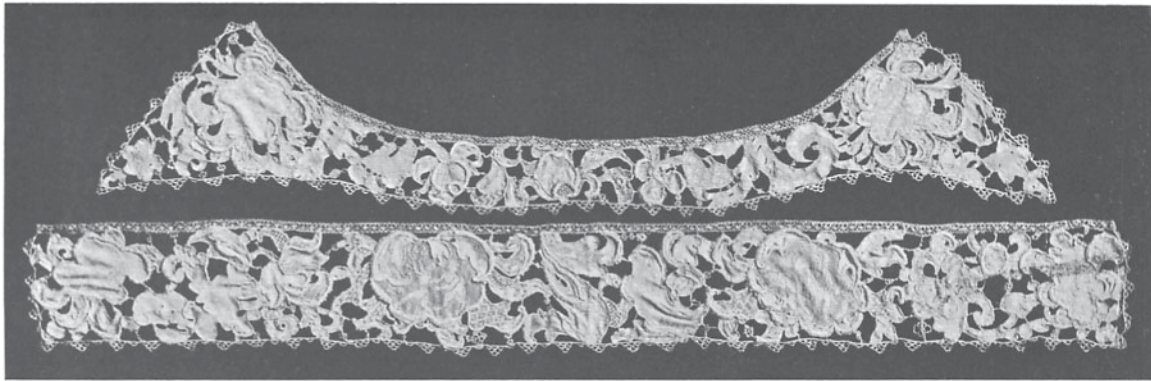


## The Connoisseur

It must be remembered, when considering the ornate ecclesiastical embroideries of this period, that, even in the days when they were wrought, they were esteemed as most precious possessions. The saying about the gallants of Queen Elizabeth's court, that they often carried a manor on their backs, might with even greater truth be repeated of the great dignities of the Church, when on occasion of high religious festival they wore these sumptuously adorned vestments. These were worked, not by humble sempstresses, but by the great ladies of the land; queens and princesses not disdaining to ply their needles to produce for the

match man's triumphs in the plastic and pictorial arts, we must not turn to woman's efforts in the same field, but to the superb embroideries, of which this chasuble of M. Seligman's is one of the finest examples remaining to us.

The embroidery on the back of the garment is wrought on a gold ground in the form of a cross, from the foot of which ascends a Jesse Tree, the interwindings of its two branches forming the frame-work in which the needle has been plied to produce in coloured threads a series of pictures which in their delicate colour quality, their tonal effect, and their



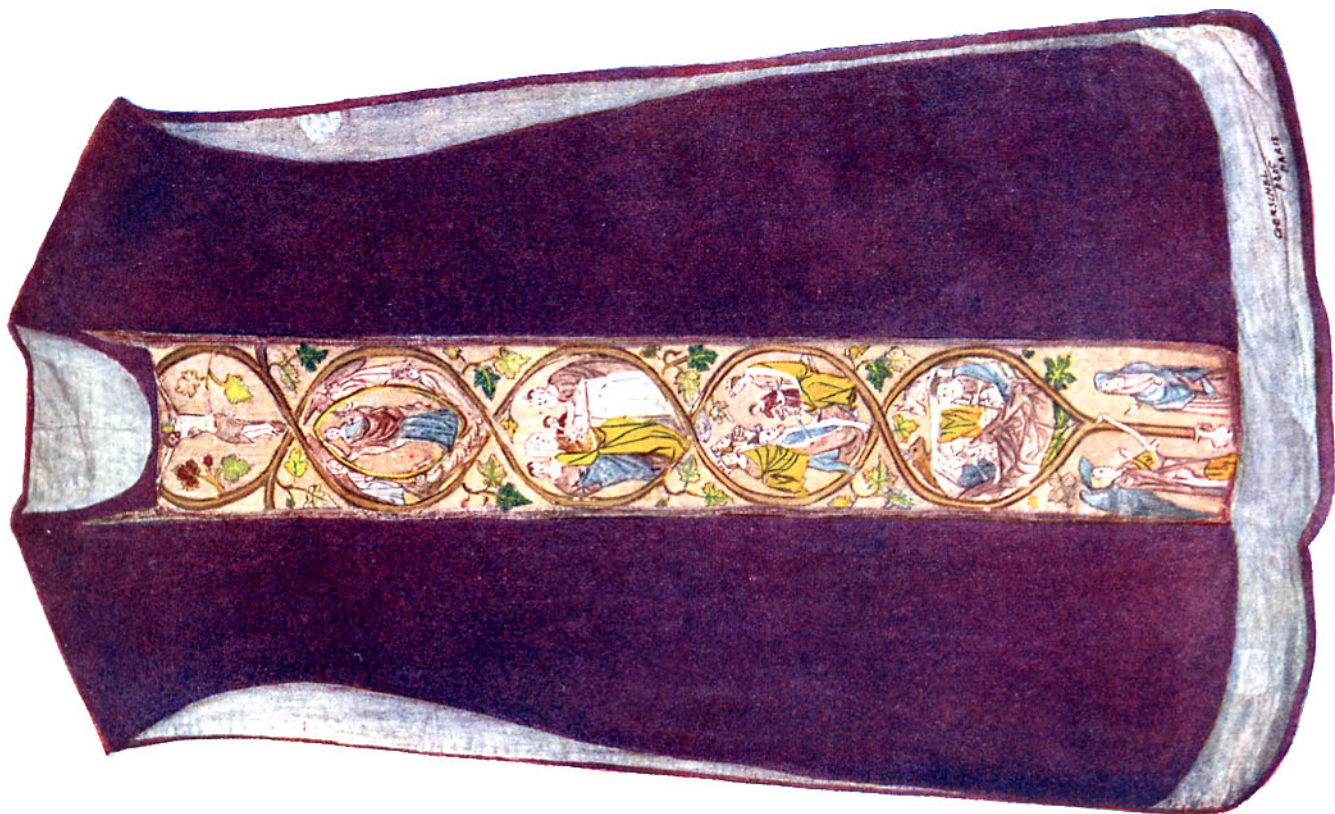
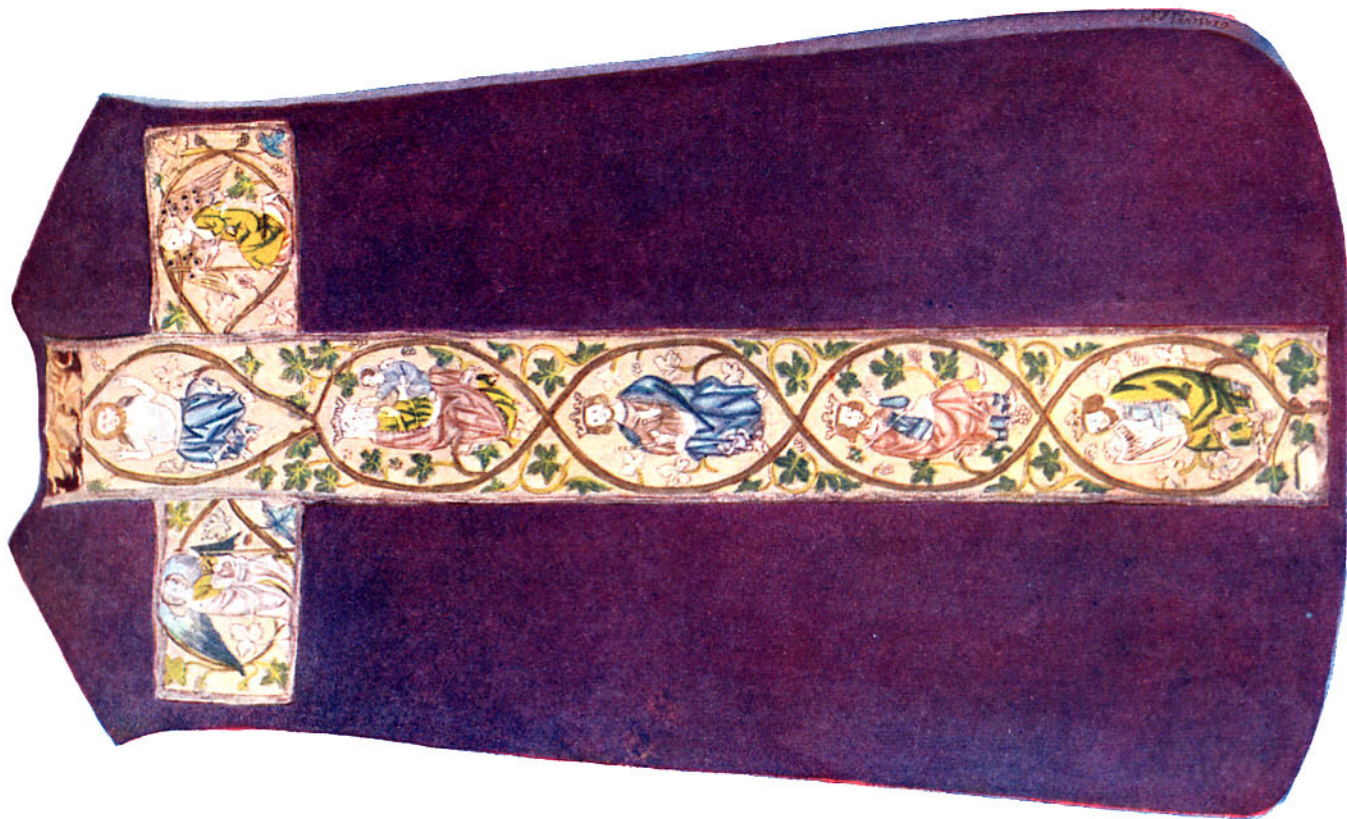
VENETIAN ROSE-POINT LACE COLLARS

use of the clergy in their holy office garments even more regal and costly than any they could ever hope to wear. The talents, which, had they occurred in later generations, would have given us the pictures of another *Vigée le Brun*, *Rosa Bonheur*, or *Angelica Kauffman*, were all turned to the designing of these wonderful fabrics and their consummation with the needle. In them we see the fruit of the artistry of innumerable generations of women, who worked not for gain or mundane reward, but from pure devotion, inspired by the idea that in making glorious the garments of God's representatives on earth they were labouring directly for God. Nor can their labours be said to be unworthy of the lofty motives which inspired them. Most of them have perished; but the few of the finest which have survived the corruption of the moth and the hand of the spoiler are perhaps the greatest examples of artistry wrought by woman's hands. In sculpture and painting, and to a great extent in literature, it cannot be said that women have produced anything which is absolutely unique; they have done much great and good work, but if the whole of it was eliminated, the range of painting, sculpture, and literature would scarcely be narrowed. Wherever they have gone, man has been before them; but in needlework—and almost in needlework alone—they are supreme. To

decorative feeling, are as supreme achievements in this phase of art as the altar-pieces of *Duccio* are in pictorial art. Lest this eulogy should seem over great, one must realise not only the limitations imposed upon the craftswoman by the materials in which she worked, but also the state of contemporary arts in England at the commencement of the fourteenth century. Architecture alone was flourishing; of pictures in the modern sense of the term there were none; and even in Italy, where modern painting was born, *Giotto* and *Duccio* were only beginning to unwrap it from the swaddling bands of Byzantine tradition. Only in the beautiful illuminated missals of the period was there any prototype for the exquisite artistry of the designs. Decoratively as they are executed, there is a naïve realism in their conception, while the artist has not feared to bring into them an amount of explanatory detail which would make their subjects perfectly understandable to the most ignorant of the congregation to whom the priest ministered.

On the back of the chasuble the bottom figure represents *King David* with his harp; next comes *Solomon*, and above him *Saul*. Then there is the *Virgin and Child*, and crowning all, the representation of *God the Father* attended by kneeling angels. On the front are embroidered the chief events in the life of *Christ*, beginning with the *Annunciation*, and then in order





CHASUBLE, ENGLISH WORK, *circa* 1300





ENGLISH EMBROIDERY OF ABOUT THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

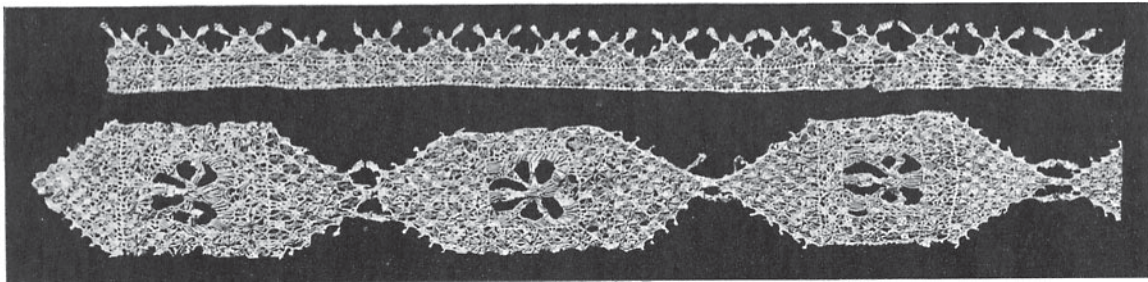


## The Connoisseur

follows the Nativity, the Circumcision, and the Presentation in the Temple. Above these is represented the Virgin surrounded by angels, with the Crucifixion on top. One could linger longer over this beautiful masterpiece, which, considering the richness of its coloration and its wonderful state of preservation, may be claimed as being a unique specimen of English needlework in its greatest period. One's regret that it has been taken from the country of its origin—probably never to return—is tempered by the knowledge that it belongs to an owner who fully appreciates its qualities, and that it is housed with other examples worthy to bear it company. These are many in number, and varied in style and period, for Monsieur Seligman is an enterprising and discriminating collector of many years' standing. To

the palmy period of English embroidery—the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries—when the intense devoutness of feeling which characterised the earlier work had not yet waned, and technical attainment had reached its full maturity. Though the heads—that of the Virgin especially—are somewhat large for the bodies, a common fault of the period, the figures are invested with an almost monumental dignity. The diapered background is highly characteristic.

Also of English workmanship, though belonging to a later period—the beginning of the seventeenth century—is the representation of Balaam and his ass. In this may be noted the development, and one by no means for the better, which had occurred in English needlework during the intervening centuries. The earlier designs had been largely suggested and



VENETIAN LACE OF TWISTED GOLD THREADS

attempt to describe these individually, or even to enumerate them within the short compass of a magazine article, would be an impossible feat, and so only a few of the finer examples, of which illustrations are given, will be mentioned.

Of English origin are the two remarkable pieces of embroidery, the one probably representing the "Coronation of the Virgin," and the other, two figures standing behind a well-spread table. The Gothic canopy surmounting the latter is a form of ornament introduced in the earlier part of the fourteenth century; before that date the subjects were usually enclosed in quatrefoils or circular compartments, sometimes united by twisting snakes or dragons, or by the branches of trees, as in the chasuble already described. The subject of the work is somewhat obscure, but the absence of a halo from the head of the man—a rare occurrence in the embroidery of this period—would seem to point him out as being an infidel. His beard and moustache, which appear to be somewhat coarser in execution than the rest of the work, may possibly be a later addition, for it was characteristic of the embroidery of this period that the faces of the men were almost invariably represented with the upper lip shaven. Not less interesting is the fragment showing the "Coronation of the Virgin," which belongs to

FIFTEENTH CENTURY

inspired by the contemporary illuminated manuscripts, but with the gradual deterioration of the art of illumination and the introduction of figured and ornamented fabrics, which took place in the latter half of the fourteenth century, embroidery sank from its position as one of the greatest of the arts to a mere rival to the craft of the weaver. The designs for embroidery often became direct imitations of woven patterns, and so lost not only their former individuality, but also much of their ornate beauty, and all their epical interest. In the seventeenth century another influence made its appearance with the introduction of tapestry. The designs in needlework were largely wrought to emulate the effect of this fabric; and though Scriptural subjects were frequently chosen for representation, the deep religious feeling which animated the treatment of these themes in the older pieces was absent. This is shown in the example described, a fine example of its time, and masterly in its purely technical attributes, but one in which the desire to imitate the flat surface of a woven fabric has deprived the needlework of much of its distinctive charm, and shows a degeneration from the great period of the art. In fact, skilful as is the manipulative ability displayed, and highly prized as are the finer specimens of the early seventeenth century—among

## *The Collection of Monsieur G. Seligman*

which this must be certainly numbered—it is doubtful if they can be regarded as art in its higher sense, but must be rather looked upon as superb craftsmanship—craftsmanship that could be attained in time by anyone possessing the qualifications of good taste and infinite patience.

Turning from the English pieces, though the ones already mentioned comprise only a very small proportion of the total, one is somewhat bewildered by the wealth of treasure from which to make selection. Here, for instance, is a piece of German fourteenth-century needlework, of coloured silk, in a conventional design, less interesting perhaps than a figure-piece, but hardly less beautiful in its decorative effect. The heraldic shields and letters suggest that this is probably a portion of a sampler. The first and third rows are worked in a geometrical design, the upper one showing traces of the gammadion, that modification of the form of the cross found on early Christian monuments. The second row is of twisted silken threads, the dark ground showing up the pattern in agreeable variety of colour. In the fourth row are the letters H A D E V I E I S bordered at either end with crosses, worked in cross-stitch upon canvas; and the last row displays four heraldic shields, the centre space being filled with a peacock, a bird which is frequently introduced in early needlework. Strong traces of the Byzantine influence, which permeated Europe from the eleventh century and onwards, and which even yet is noticeable in modern peasant work, are seen in the highly ornate embroidery of human figures, animals, and flowers. In this the central object is a winged dragon enclosed in a wreath held by two winged and bearded figures with high head-dresses, suggestive of Chaldean monuments. On either side are mounted figures bearing wreaths. The central width is enclosed by a narrower border at top and bottom, showing floral forms and recumbent human figures. The piece was probably designed to commemorate some great deed in the history of an important family, and is of early date.

Of lace some of the most fascinating specimens in the collection are Venetian. This is as it should be, for in Venice, the former gateway of the East, where the inhabitants had acquired something of an Oriental taste for beautiful apparel and sumptuously adorned fabrics, the craft of the lace-maker is supposed to have originated. It developed gradually. In its first suggestions it was more or less a development of embroidery. Though some writers have given lace an earlier origin, its existence cannot be traced further back than the fifteenth century. By the record of contemporary pictures, it is evident that it did not come into fashionable vogue until the latter half of

the sixteenth century, and it was towards the close of this century and the first half of the next that Venetian lace assumed its most beautiful and ornate forms. It was in this period that the geometrical-patterned lace began to be largely superseded by the introduction of curved forms generally wrought in floral designs.

One of these is a seventeenth-century rose-point collar—which is practically identical with one in the museum at New York—a fine specimen of that type whose pattern needs little union with brides—the technical term for the links or ties which hold it together. Those which are there are elaborately ornamented, thus following the practice in vogue in Venice, which gave its lace such a rich appearance. In this example, however, the pattern is chiefly held together by the scrolls. The raised work is in triple tier, picots being sewn upon the thickly padded scrolls, which themselves rest on the ground-work.

The lower strip of rose-point lace is unusual in having needle-point pictures framed in the flower forms. The one on the left, apparently a representation of the legend of Pan and Syrinx, is a marvel of delicate craftsmanship, the action of the two figures being recorded with a realistic power that could not be surpassed in a miniature. The moment chosen is when the nymph, to save her from the embraces of her pursuer, is being transformed into a flowering reed, and shoots and leaves can be seen breaking out from her arms. Pan is shown in the guise of a satyr, his hairy lower limbs and cloven hoofs being rendered with marvellous suggestion of detail. The second picture, whose meaning cannot be interpreted, is equally spirited, the action of the horse being natural and well suggested.

Of Venetian lace, but this time wrought in gold thread, is the fifteenth-century strip, whose intricate geometrical patterning seems an almost impossible achievement in a material so difficult to manipulate. It was the popularity of lace of this costly character which caused the passing of the sumptuary law which forbade the use of gold thread to the lace-workers of Venice, and so brought about the substitution of ordinary thread in its place; a change which in the end was of benefit to the lace-makers' craft, the workers finding that they were able to beautify and elaborate their patterns when executed in the more flexible but less costly materials to an extent almost undreamt of when gold and silver thread was alone in fashion.

The few pieces selected from Monsieur Seligman's collection, though they give little idea of its extent and variety, at least conclusively prove that it includes some examples of quite exceptional interest. Especially





BAG OF ENGLISH WORK

*Circa 1700*

is this the case with regard to the beautiful chasuble already described, which is a specimen of needlework that any museum in the world would be proud to possess and esteem as one of its chief treasures. Though of recent years much has been done to revive the art of needlework, it may safely be said that the triumphs of design and craftsmanship attained during the so-called dark ages will never be repeated. The demands of modern life are too arduous and too insistent to permit the worker to give to the craft

that whole-hearted devotion which rendered the achievement of these triumphs possible. They are the result not merely of consummate skill trained by constant practice into the highest technical attainment, but they are also as much the expression of the artist's personality as the masterpieces of painting, sculpture, and architecture. The hands that guided the needles to perfect these glorious pictures and patternings wrought the souls of their owners into the work as well as the silken and linen threads.

