



MEDIEVAL CHASUBLE  
SOUTH KENSINGTON MUSEUM

# BULLETIN OF THE NEEDLE AND BOBBIN CLUB

## CHURCH EMBROIDERY

By HARRIET PHILIPS BRONSON

**W**HAT differentiates ecclesiastical embroidery from secular? Most of the modern embroidery seen in churches is rigid and spiritless, and conveys no meaning whatever to the average worshipper, if it is not actually distressing to those who possess any artistic sense. That this should not be true, none will question; that it is so is doubtless because the fundamental principles of church embroidery have gradually been ignored, and work which can only be done by artists has been placed in the hands of shops which advertise "Church Furnishings" and produce atrocities.

Embroidery is generally described as "the ornamentation of textiles by means of the needle"; and this has been practiced upon clothing and household objects from primitive times, possibly originating in Phrygia, and coming on to us through Greece and Italy. We read in Exodus that Aaron's robes were embroidered, and also the hangings of the Tabernacle, but just what is here meant it is impossible to determine.

Christianity inspired new thoughts and designs, but utilized the most beautiful stitches and methods of the past in expressing them. From the beginning of the Christian Era we find the best work of each period on the clerical vestments and adorning the altars. No expense was deemed too great for the beautifying of the church, and gorgeous materials and much time went into the work. Embroidery was done by monks as well as nuns, and was also the chief occupation of the women in feudal castles. Time was of no value to these women; the men were continu-

ally absent fighting, books were few, so to what better use could their time be put than by spending years upon one piece of embroidery for Holy Church!

In Saxon times England was already famous for her embroidery, and equally during the Norman rule. The great monasteries and convents were the centers of this work, but other schools were established and long flourished at Ely and other places.

The so-called "Great Period" of church embroidery was that during which the English work, or "Opus Anglicum," led that of Christendom: from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Centuries. The work of these years was so valued on the Continent that Popes paid vast sums for it, and the cathedrals of Italy and Spain have ever considered copes and other pieces of this period among their priceless treasures. As a splendid example we cite the "Ascoli Cope." This superb vestment was stolen from the Cathedral of that city in 1902, and two years later acquired by the late Mr. J. P. Morgan, and presented by him to the Italian Government. The whole surface of this cope is covered with couching in a quaint manner now seldom used, no ground material being visible. Originally this was lavishly ornamented with pearls, which unfortunately were torn from it during the Napoleonic wars.

The most famous piece of embroidery in existence also belongs to this period: the "Syon Cope." The name is derived from the convent at Syon, Isleworth, near Twickenham. When the nuns were driven from this House in the early days of Queen Elizabeth, they carried the cope with them in their wanderings through Flanders, France and Portugal to Lisbon, whence they returned to England in 1830. In 1864 it was acquired by the South Kensington Museum. This marvelous piece of design and needlework is made of linen, the entire surface being covered with stitchery of silver, gold and floss. The body of the cope is interlacing barbed quatrefoils outlined in gold, embracing scenes from the Life of our Lord, the Blessed Virgin, St. Michael and the Apostles. The intervening spaces are occupied by angels. The broad orphrey, morse and narrow semicircular edging are decorated with heraldic shields and emblems embroidered in cross-stitch. This cope is in a state of excellent preservation.

It is worthy of note that while embroidery took precedence of paint-

ing and sculpture during this period, the same subjects were often availed of in illuminating, an art which shared with it the honors.

After the middle of the Fourteenth Century a marked decline is visible, and this continued until the Reformation closed the Religious Houses and destroyed priceless treasures. On the Continent, Spanish work attained great importance, and many costly vestments are seen in museums and churches; their distinguishing characteristics being the short, thick set figures (in contrast to the abnormally tall, slender figures of the English Gothic work), and the wonderful effects produced by the high cushioning, or padding, of the embroidery. (The best English work was generally flat.) The whole impresses one more with its costliness than with the spirit and charm of the English work. Somewhat the same general statement might be made regarding the French and Italian work, each in its own style. The mediaeval chasuble shown is one from South Kensington Museum. In true Gothic fashion, the pattern was entirely ignored in cutting and piecing the damask. The orphrey is embroidered in a variety of stitches.

The art of church embroidery was not revived to any appreciable extent until the latter part of the Nineteenth Century; but during all these intervening years an enormous amount of embroidery has been done quietly by convents and individuals, and the churches are stocked with vestments representing unlimited expense, but (with a few brilliant exceptions) the weak point has been design. In the olden times, especially in Florence, the most famous painters were proud to have their thoughts carried out by the embroideress; but recently the idea has gained a hearing that design and embroidery must be the work of one and the same individual, thus reducing both design and execution to mediocrity. If all are to be designers, then design falls to the level of what all can do; whereas, to design anything really good for the church requires:

- 1st—A strong, devotional spirit, which sees but one object—the Glory of God.
- 2nd—A knowledge of the history and traditions of ecclesiastical art and heraldry.
- 3rd—All the study and training, artistically, which it is possible to command.

The designer must never forget that the Altar, and the Sacrifice of the Altar, are the center of all in the Church, toward which all thought is to be directed and all honor paid; and he must know the capabilities and limitations of materials, and not suggest expressing with the needle what is only suited to brush or metal. Color and materials should always be selected with great care, as the texture of a satin or a velvet may change all values.

For the execution, or actual embroidery (I give it second place intentionally, because exquisite stitchery alone counts for little), the spiritual in man demands the best available for the Church. Yet this is not necessarily obtained by financial outlay nor patient work, as absolutely ineffective results are often accomplished that way; and loving toil and devotion (though certainly never without their effect on the individual) produce nothing edifying to others, and supply no lasting addition to the sum of beauty and inspiration in the Church.

These considerations have brought about the acceptance of certain methods of work, which experience has proved are best suited to the Church and the results desired there as "Ecclesiastical Embroidery." Whatever work is done must be deliberate, precise, and perfection is the only end at which to aim. Yet this does not mean that coarse and even inexpensive materials have no place. For dorsals, hangings, and indeed sometimes for Mass Vestments, good color in the right combinations may express far more than infinitesimal stitchery.

The simple banner here shown is an example of modern figure work in the old manner. The ground is green damask with side orphreys of brilliant blue damask, edged with gold and black silk braid. A silk fringe in blocks of the above colors and black, with gold thread in the heading. The figure of St. Francis is applied silk with some embroidery; the birds are embroidered in floss and the halo in gold thread. This illustrates the fact that good effect and feeling may be accomplished with little cost. An embroidered figure always requires time and great skill.

The cope illustrated is modern, but has the spirit of the "Great Period." It is made of a sumptuous gold and cream-colored damask. The orphrey and cross upon the hood of deep rose are embroidered in brilliant varicolored flosses and gold thread. The fringe and tassel are of brilliant colors, gold and black.



BANNER—FOR CHAPEL OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Gold in its many forms, cloth of gold, tissue and threads, have always been the material, most used in Church Embroidery. In a lesser degree, but with great beauty, silver is employed, and flosses of various kinds. The richest damasks of splendid patterns, velvets and brocatelles (material composed of silk and gold) of infinite variety and color are used. With



BURSE  
PELICAN, EMBLEM OF THE BLESSED SACRAMENT,  
IN GOLD THREAD ON CREAM DAMASK

regard to the last point, I may say that nothing like uniformity in the colors was thought of in early times. Whatever was sumptuous and beautiful had its place, and the adoption of the Roman sequence of five liturgical colors, white, green, red, violet and black, as now used in most of the western world, was well defined on the Continent early in the Sixteenth Century; but the general adoption of this practice dates from Pope Pius IX. This sequence was never developed in the Eastern and Russian branches of the Church. This short sketch does not permit of entering into the history of various color sequences in colleges and cathedrals and elsewhere in England and on the Continent, which are now well known by students.



MODERN COPE  
MATERIALS AND DESIGN IN THE MODE OF THE  
"GREAT PERIOD"



The revival of Church Embroidery during the last years of the Nineteenth Century was brought about by many learned men. John N. Comper, Esq., now stands in the forefront of the work being accomplished in England. Dr. Ralph Adams Cram, of Boston, is known on both sides of the Atlantic for his inspiring influence; Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, Esq., and Wilfrid Edwards Anthony, Esq., of New York, and others in this country for their color and design reminiscent of the "Great Period," yet adapted to the needs and spirit of the present.