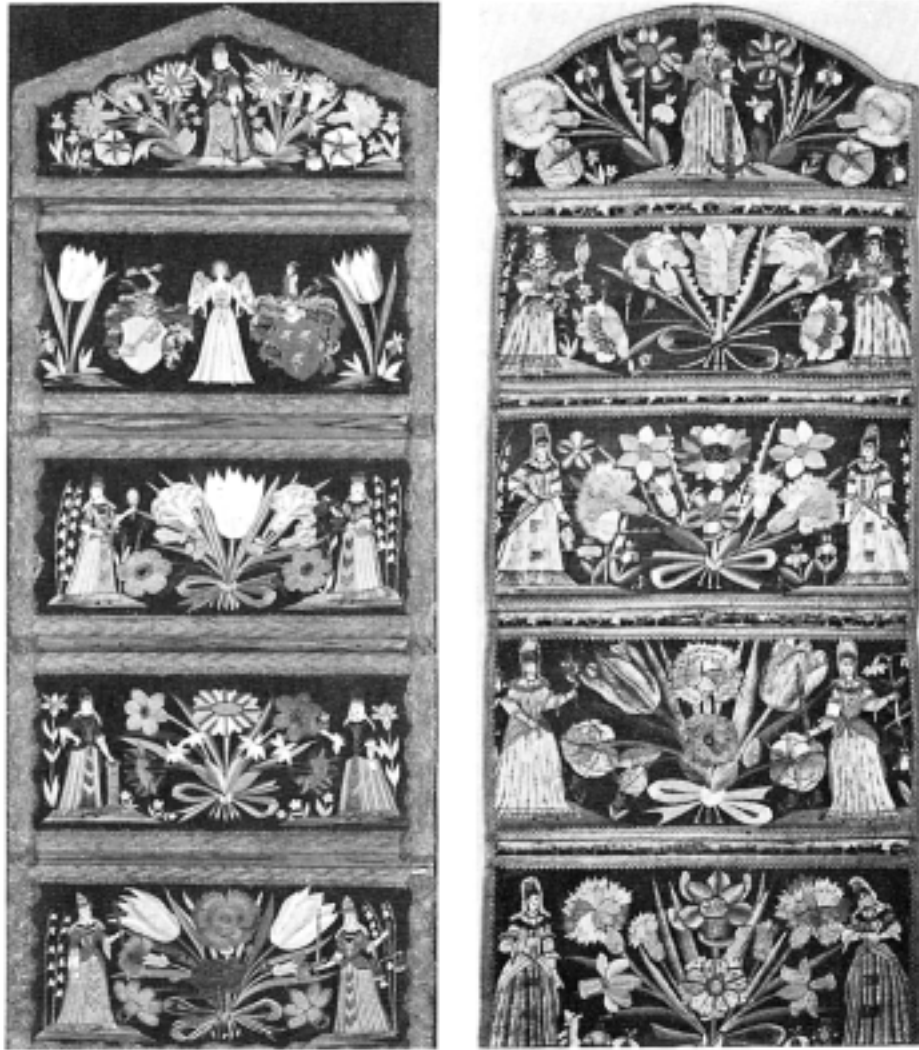


WALL POCKETS FROM THE ENGADINE AND SOME
REMARKS ABOUT SWISS EMBROIDERY IN THE
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

By JENNY SCHNEIDER

WALL-POCKETS were commonly known over large parts of Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They apparently belonged to a well-furnished living room in those times,—not only pleasant to look at, but also very convenient for putting away all sorts of smaller accessories. Wall-pockets have three or four compartments, all rather flat, which probably were used mainly for letters and notes. As the German as well as the Swiss name is not wall-pocket, but comb-pocket, we think that these served also in ladies' dressing rooms, perhaps as some sort of beauty-case to hold various little fashionable trimmings. Looking at the huge number of wall-pockets still existing in collections and museums all over the world, we find them made of different materials—wool, silk, linen and leather. Most of them are embroidered. Here again all sorts of materials and threads can be found, even applied work with gold and silver threads and spangles, pearls and different glass beads imitating garnets and precious stones. The especially fine Italian example in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston is made of silk embroidered with silk floss and metal thread, trimmed with metal spangles and metal lace.¹

It is our intention to present here some very typical Swiss wall-pockets, all very much alike and all doubtless coming from the same valley, the Engadine, an upland valley in the canton of Grisons, nowadays famous for its great resort, San Moritz. This is a part of Switzerland where bright colours are found on everything, more so than in other districts. As we shall see, not only furniture but also the national dress worn at special occasions was extremely brilliant. The Engadine wall-pockets had three or four pockets, most of them made of a dark material, wool or silk, embroidered with polychrome silks. The coats-of-arms of the owners as well as the date are sometimes on the top pocket, very rarely the initials of the embroideress. The pockets are lined with plain or raw linen, but often also with a printed fabric. We find quite nice decorations such as stripes or little flowers on these linings. Furthermore, the pockets are often bound with a red silk ribbon, and now and then, even with silver or gold lace.



I. Wall-pocket, Swiss, 18th century, Philadelphia Museum of Art.
II. Wall-pocket, Swiss, 18th century, Swiss National Museum, Zurich.

The most beautiful specimen I have ever seen is a wall-pocket in the textile collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (pl. I). It is also one of the largest, measuring 106 cm. in length and 44 cm. in width. There are four pockets and a triangular panel at the top. All is in black taffeta embroidered with polychrome silks and metal thread. The edges are richly bound with metal lace. The composition of each panel is according to a certain pattern and always the same: flowers in the center flanked by allegorical figures. From a series of Virtues, these appear from bottom to top:

- 1) left: Faith (*Fides*)—woman with book and cross
right: Justice (*Justitia*)—woman with sword and balance
- 2) left: Strength (*Fortitudo*)—woman with column
right: Mercy (*Caritas*)—woman with burning heart
- 3) left: Prudence (*Prudentia*)—woman with snake and mirror
right: Temperance (*Temperantia*)—woman with jug and cup
- 4) Angel holding coats-of-arms, one in each hand
- 5) Hope (*Spes*)—woman with anchor.

On panels 1, 2, and 3, enormous flowers, bound together by two-coloured ribbons, fill the center, whilst at the outside, near the applied metal lace edging, slender flowers like little trees complete the composition. In panel 4, there are two gigantic tulips next to smaller pansies. The top panel is filled with roses, pansies, anemones, forget-me-nots and at least four carnations. Carnations are also on some of the other panels. They are typical of the embroideries of the Grisons and are to be found on every embroidery from there.

The Swiss National Museum in Zurich has in its collections nearly the same pocket (pl. II).² On comparing it carefully with the wall-pocket in Philadelphia, one cannot doubt that the same embroideress made both of them. Again this is made of four panels and a top-piece with the same figure of Hope holding an anchor. The edges are bound with a red silk ribbon, and the reverse is lined with a red and black printed cotton. We see from bottom to top:

- 1) left: Patience (*Patientia*)—woman with lamb
right: unknown allegorical figure with no attribute
- 2) left: Faith (*Fides*)—woman with snake wound around a cross
right: Justice (*Justitia*)—woman with sword and balance
- 3) left: woman with glass vase or jug. In the white lines for the embroidery still visible, we recognize some sort of a pillar.

Apparently the woman was intended to be Strength (*Fortitudo*).

right: unknown allegorical figure of woman with no attribute, perhaps Mercy (*Caritas*).

4) left: Prudence (*Prudentia*)—woman with snake and mirror

right: Temperance (*Temperantia*)—woman with jug and cup

5) Hope (*Spes*)—woman with anchor.

The allegorical figures on both pockets are so very much alike that they must have been copied from the same engraving, perhaps a series of prints up to now unknown to us. In any case, the women, dressed in the elegant fashion of about 1685-1715, all wear the famous so-called *fontange*. This means that their hair is arranged in the style of those years. The idea of the *fontange* came from France, and all elegant ladies had to wear highly mounted hair stiffened and kept in shape by special thread constructions. With this went a sumptuous dress with some sort of a mantle gathered up in front to show the beautiful dress. Sleeves, of medium length, had lots of ribbons above the elbow as well as ruffles (*manchettes*) of lace, the so-called *engageantes*. The waist was very small and often closed over an embroidered stomacher. A 50-cm.-long steel like a fishbone extended downward from the breast in front to give the figure a stiff and immovable support. The mantle was gathered up at the hips and drawn backward, whilst the dress showed horizontally applied fringes and ribbons. The neck emerged from a wide collar so that gold and silver chains could be seen. We doubt whether in Switzerland anyone really used to wear the dress described above. It is more likely that the embroideress portraying the lady on the wall-pocket took her ideas from prints and books and not from real life. We may suppose that the embroideress even had the same sheets in front of her when she did the two separate wall-pockets, because panel 1 of the pocket in Philadelphia with Faith and Justice is exactly the same as panel 2 in Zurich. The same holds true for panel 3 in Philadelphia and panel 4 in Zurich with Prudence and Temperance. And last, there is a striking resemblance between the figures of Hope in the top panels, standing on a little hill, carrying the heavy anchor in her left hand and pointing with the other hand towards the flower.

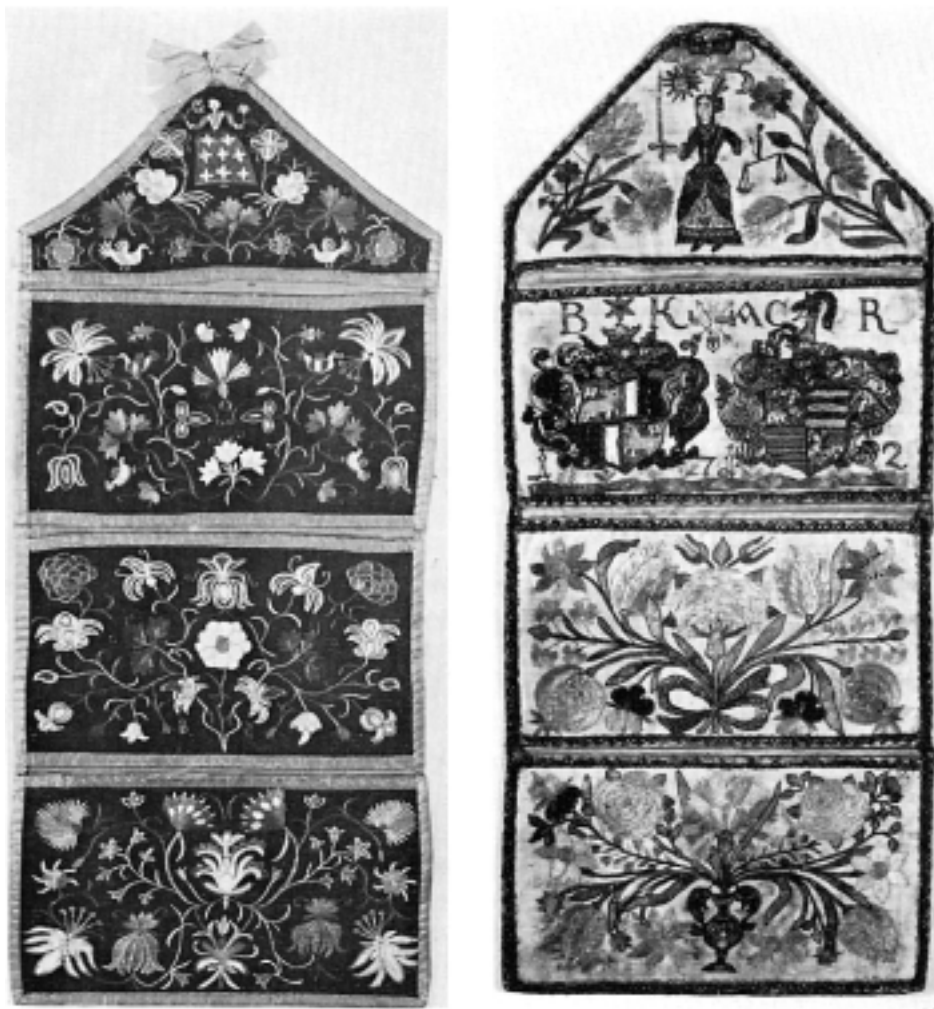
A comparison between the different bouquets of flowers again shows so much correspondence that we must believe that the embroideress worked with the help of prints; for instance, those in the *Florilegium Renovatum* by Johann Theodor de Bry, 1641, or the pages from the *Florilegium* by Emanuel Sweerts. Anyway, carnations were highly fa-



III. Loose panel of wall-pocket, Swiss, 18th century, Swiss National Museum, Zurich.

voured, also tulips, daffodils, anemones, pansies and roses. On both pockets the bouquets are bound together by a ribbon bow of polychrome silk. Typical is the effect made with a light and a dark shade. Next to the enormous flowers there are small pansies just to fill the gaps. And on both pockets are huge lilies-of-the-valley next to the female figures. Even minor details correspond exactly; for instance, on the top panel the roses seen from the back, and then those dark and light striped anemones with the petals curled at the tips. One can go on mentioning all sorts of details as proof that the same prints were sources, not only for the figures but also for the flowers.

The technique used by the embroideress was as follows: first, a drawing was made in white ink on the black taffeta. Then came the silk embroidery in satin stitch. Details such as the hair, the curls of the lamb and the hearts of the flowers are in knot stitch. For jewelry and belts metal thread was couched down. Each panel was embroidered separately before the whole pocket was put together. Fortunately the Swiss National Museum in Zurich has a single panel illustrating this (pl. III).³ Black taffeta laid over linen is embroidered with polychrome silk. On the right half the outlines of the design in white ink are clearly to be seen, as the embroideress had not filled in all the outlines. Again she used the same



IV. Wall-pocket, Swiss, 18th century, Swiss National Museum, Zurich.

V. Wall-pocket, Swiss, 1712, Swiss National Museum, Zurich.

print for Hope, the elegant lady of the 1690's, holding the anchor and pointing at the anemone with the curled petals. Red and red and white carnations as well as the roses seen from the back are here again.

The wall-pockets described above are not dated, but we think that they were embroidered during the first half of the 18th century, more precisely around 1710-1730. The Rätisches Museum at Coire (Chur), the main town of the Grisons, has among its collections several interesting wall-pockets, although they are not as beautiful as those in Philadelphia and Zurich. One example in black wool has flowers in appliqué instead of silk embroidery. Another with roses, tulips and carnations is dated as late as 1774. Another comb-pocket, now in the Swiss National Museum, must have been embroidered around these years (pl. IV).⁴ It is the simpler type with only three pockets, but again of black taffeta bound with red silk ribbon and covered all over with polychrome silk embroidery. The flowers on all panels are bright and decorative but not at all naturalistic. Besides the carnations, hardly any of the flowers can be identified. The symmetrically arranged bouquet in the center has been replaced by slender scrolling branches, symmetrically spaced flowers of various kinds set among them. Several little birds are to be seen, and in the top panel, an amusingly proportioned woman with a flower in each hand shows nothing of the elegance of those fashionable ladies we have seen before. At the bottom of the second pocket the embroideress has signed her work by embroidering her initials *B Z* in silver thread. This is very rare and has not been found on other pockets so far.

There is another pocket in the Swiss National Museum consisting of three panels embroidered with polychrome silk originally on white taffeta. This has worn off, so that the white lining shows—not too bad a contrast with the embroidery (pl. V).⁵ The trimming is made of silver lace set on a now completely faded silk ribbon, once of a bright pinkish red. The reverse is a plain pink cotton. The composition of the panels is the usual one we have seen before. Again the middle is clearly marked, in the bottom panel by a vase of flowers and in the middle panel by some sort of a bouquet tied with a large ribbon bow. The flowers too we have met before: carnations, tulips, roses and rosebuds, daffodils, forget-me-nots and pansies, whilst the pomegranates on panel 2 are new to us. At the bottom a rather well-drawn little vase gathers the different flowers together within its narrow mouth. The decoration of the vase bespeaks the humorous imagination of the embroideress, for she gave it a human face which even sticks out its tongue! The top panel again contains a single female figure amidst all sorts of flowers. Now it is not



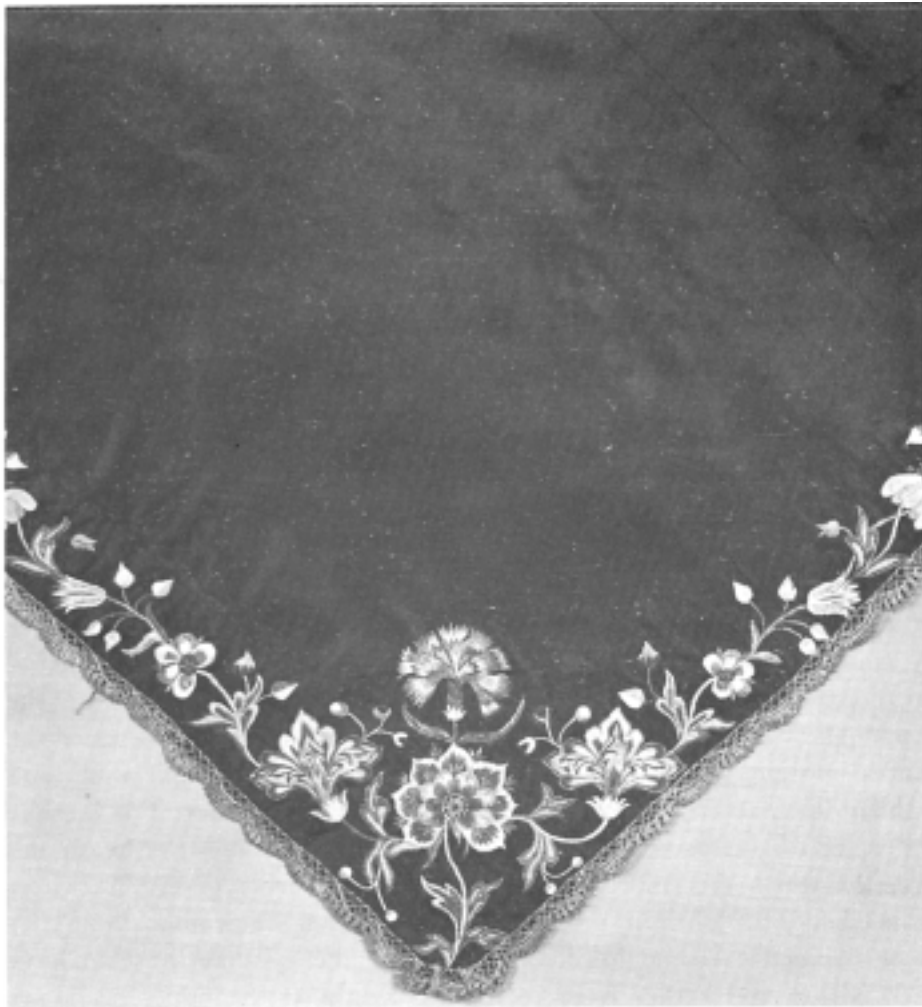
VI. Stomacher, Swiss, 18th century, Swiss National Museum, Zurich.

the allegorical figure of Hope, but Justice holding sword and balance. Her dress is doubtless influenced by the French fashion. Over her a shining sun and a ribbon of clouds mark landscape and sky.

Very important is the panel below this with the coat-of-arms of husband and wife who had this pocket in their household. Probably it was made for a special occasion. Next to the coat-of-arms are their initials. *B K* refers to Bernhard Koehl, a very important citizen of Coire (Chur), who was burgomaster six times from 1690 onwards. His wife's surname was Reydt, the initials of her Christian name *A C* probably stand for Anna Catherina. Her family too was very active in politics. Male members of the Reydt family had also been burgomasters of Coire (Chur). As the pocket is dated 1712, it cannot have been made as a wedding present. More likely it may have commemorated a wedding anniversary. Comparing this pocket with those discussed earlier in the article, we find many details corresponding in technique, composition and style of embroidery. Bernhard Koehl's pocket with its coat-of-arms definitely related to the town of Coire (Chur) illustrates the slight difference between wall-pockets of Coire and those of the Engadine valley, which always had to have a black taffeta ground, whilst others made outside that district were free in the choice of the ground material.

The typical technique of embroidering in the Engadine valley, which we described above is used not only on wall-pockets but also on objects of feminine costume from that neighborhood. There are wonderful bodices of black velvet or wool embroidered all over with the different flowers we have seen before. Of course there are always carnations. This flower is still today the typical flower of the Engadine. We see it growing in small-size gardens and spots well protected against the blowing wind. Looking up at the windows behind the beautiful wrought iron lattices, we often see bunches of carnations pouring out into the sun. In connection with the bodices come loose sleeves, embroidered cuffs, little caps and leather gloves. The gloves are made from lambskin with the fur inside. The outside is painted dark brown or black and embroidered with silver thread. The cut of the bodice has a trilobed ending at the back, unlike all other bodices in Switzerland.

A stomacher in the Swiss National Museum (pl. VI) is a real beauty.⁶ The triangular panel is embroidered with polychrome silks in long and short stitch (*streech-stitch*) on black silk tabby. Looking more carefully at this taffeta ground, we see that the embroideress did not take plain black silk, but probably being a good housewife and not wanting to waste anything, she took a bit of black silk with some white brocaded flowers on it. Very cleverly she succeeded in covering these by embroidering over them or by including them in the embroidered flower arrangement. Three of them can be seen clearly, whilst the fourth shows only in part, being nearly covered by the left wing of the central motive. Another one appears at the top of the right wing, and a third down at the left near the bottom of the stomacher. The lacelike character of this brocaded flower differs from the somewhat heavy impression which the embroidered flowers and branches give. The whole stomacher is very bright in colour with much red. The composition tries to be symmetrical. The flowers are more ornamental than those we have seen before and rather hard to identify; only at the upper seam are pansies and carnations recognizable. The reverse of the stomacher is lined with unbleached raw linen. An ingenious system of wooden sticks gives shape and stiffness. We have found among all our bodices and stomachers from the Swiss mountain valleys that, instead of whalebone, wood has always been used. Of course whalebone was hard to get and far too expensive, so that skilful hands copied the whalebone stays in wood, a material which was cheap and near at hand.



VII. Scarf, Swiss, 18th century, Swiss National Museum, Zurich.

A final accessory of the Engadine costume is a triangular kerchief (pl. VII),⁷—again of black taffeta with two borders embroidered with polychrome silks. The embroideress used the same flowers here as on the wall-pockets, with the red and white carnations again in an important place in the center. It is interesting to note that many gold threads are used in the kerchiefs. One does not actually notice them, but they form the outlines of several flowers as well as their hearts, and sometimes they fill small leaves. Among these black taffeta kerchiefs, we meet now and then with gauzy ones in bright colours with the same polychrome embroidered flower edges. Although the ground material is most delicate, many more silver and gold threads were used on these than on the black kerchiefs.

As a whole, the costume of the women and young girls of the Engadine is marvelously colourful. The kerchiefs contrast beautifully with the bright red woolen dress, the white linen collar and the tiny black velvet cap. The young men wear top hats with black or red coats. It is a brilliant scene on feast days and wedding days when these costumes are worn with their radiant red and many multicolored embroidered accessories in the white snow landscape under a deep blue sky in the sparkling sunlight. Folklore in general and the national dress with its accompanying embroidery develop a very special character in the Engadine.

NOTES

1. The Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club, Volume 49, 1965-1966, p. 35, plate 18.
2. LM 7639, 76 x 31 cm
3. LM 7642, 11 x 32 cm
4. LM 7640, 65 x 29 cm
5. LM 4463, 70 x 31 cm
6. LM 12724, 28 x 23 cm
7. LM 7622, 133 x 85 x 85 cm