

Stitches in Time: Medieval Embroidery

in its Social Setting

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Embroidery was an important decorative element in medieval art, known to exist but often overlooked. The surviving examples of the extraordinarily beautiful works created by the elegant stitches of a multitude of mostly unknown embroiderers over the centuries tend to be casually admired but intellectually overlooked. This survey does not deal with the techniques and methods of medieval embroiderers, but endeavours to draw attention to the place of embroidery as an overlooked component of medieval social history.

Many of us know in passing that embroidery has a long, often untold, history, since the basic human instinct to enrich and decorate one's clothing appears in most early civilisations. Even in our machine-dependent days there are devoted needlewomen who still practise its skills and develop new styles and patterns. Nevertheless, the question legitimately arises as to why this somewhat esoteric and elegant form of needlework should be of any importance to more widely-concerned historians. Embroiderers tend to be casually dismissed as representatives of an outdated craft of no particular relevance to the serious study of medieval history. This attitude was reinforced for a long time by the thought that it was only "women's work," and therefore not of any real importance. Instead, I would suggest that medieval embroidery deserves more serious consideration and recognition of its unusual place as a status symbol in medieval society.

Medieval embroidery was not only beautiful and much prized in its day, but it also had close links with other major medieval art forms such as illuminated manuscripts and tapestries, for there are frequent examples of the borrowing of motifs and designs among the various practitioners. Besides its possible interest for historians of medieval art, embroidery also had a widely-recognised social significance during this period. My particular interest in what medieval women were actually doing, what influence they had and how they exercised it, sparked my desire to explore women's share in medieval embroidery. It seemed worthwhile to discover the uses to which it was put and its contemporary value. Because it was popular through the whole medieval period—and maintained a recognised place into the nineteenth century—embroidery also developed commercial importance as a financially-rewarding occupation for skilled townswomen quite apart from the more leisurely examples provided by ladies of the upper class.

To suggest a wider significance for medieval embroidery requires greater clarity of definition as to what kind of needlework can properly be called “embroidery.” This might seem ridiculously obvious, but the descriptive terms then in use led to frequent confusion between what was “tapestry” and what was “embroidery.” “Tapeta” in classical Latin could mean either “carpet” or “wall hanging.” Medieval Latin extended the various forms arising from that original root to refer not only to carpets and wall hangings but also to figured and decorated cloths with many uses. The term was so used from the twelfth century on. “Broidura,” referring specifically to embroidery, was a later linguistic development and does not seem to have been in use before the mid-thirteenth century, although there are plenty of records of what we would technically call embroidery before then. Since there are so many historical and linguistic examples of this confused usage in Latin, Old French, and English, an exact definition can be helpful:

Embroidery is the art of applying decoration by needle and thread to the surface of a piece of woven cloth, usually called the “ground.” It is an optional decoration worked after the whole weaving process, including the dyeing and finishing, has been completed.¹

This definition distinguishes embroidery from a woven tapestry, however complex or figured its weave, by underlining the basic fact that embroidery was a final addition

to an already woven cloth, be it linen, cotton, canvas, wool, or elegant and extravagant silk and velvet. The fabric had to have already been removed from the loom on which it had been woven before it could be given to the embroiderer to provide the extra decoration. This was originally relatively simple but over the centuries gradually became both richer and more complex.

Embroidered wall-hangings and furniture covers seem to have reached the peak of their popularity before the twelfth century. They became less common as the provision of large, finely-woven, figured and often story-telling tapestries became not only major artistic creations but also important businesses in parts of France and Italy. Tapestries, which had begun to spread widely in the late thirteenth century, continued with unabated popularity into the eighteenth century. Their success in the market helped to solve the problems of medieval nomenclature. The less elegant variety of embroidery which employed canvas or linen as its ground material, and was usually worked with wool in tent- or cross-stitch, had been used primarily for wall hangings and cushions which were then called tapestries. These earlier works were gradually replaced from the late twelfth century on by more available woven tapestries. The Bayeux Tapestry of the late eleventh century is the most famous example of the linguistic confusion between embroideries and tapestries, since its very name denies the fact that it is actually an embroidery worked in wool on linen.

Many discussions of medieval embroidery understandably prefer to take the almost universally-known Bayeux Tapestry as their starting point. Such a decision unfortunately ignores the very long tradition of embroidery in German nunneries. Some anxious eighth-century reformers even argued that the nuns' passion for needlework took time that should have been devoted to pious study, while a ninth-century German abbess was encouraging her nuns to avoid idleness by devoting themselves to making beautiful wall hangings and vestments to decorate their churches.² It would be equally unwise to ignore the superb embroideries provided for the Ottoman Emperors in the tenth and early eleventh centuries, which were inspired by models from the East.

The longstanding Byzantine tradition of fine embroidery on elegant fabrics was known in the west very early. From the fourth century on such fabrics were sent from Constantinople as presents to foreign rulers. The usual decoration of these cloths varied

between religious themes and motifs of animals or human figures. Sometimes the gifts to the most distinguished recipients were even dispatched from the Eastern Imperial workshops. It is known that the Byzantine princess, Theophanu, brought textiles from her homeland with her when she and her household came to Germany for her marriage to Otto II in 972.³

The survival from this period of the magnificent ceremonial mantle of the Empress Kunigunde, wife of Emperor Henry II, believed to have been made in the early eleventh century by a royal workshop in Regensburg, illustrates what remarkable work was beginning to be done in Germany itself—and outside the traditional convents. The mantle was made in the form of a chasuble, a visual reminder of the religious element in imperial rule. Its figures celebrate the biblical theme of Christ's return to earth with appropriate pictures taken from the liturgical year. Its survival we owe to the fact that it was given, not long after Henry's death, to the cathedral he founded at Bamberg, and there it still remains.⁴

In England before the Conquest documentary evidence identifies some individual lay women as embroiderers. One is named in Domesday Book as the holder of Knook in Wiltshire, a moderate-sized estate valued at 3 l. Its holder, the widow Leofgyth, was described as having made, and still making, gold-thread embroidery for the king and queen. The girl Aelfgyth of Buckinghamshire was also an embroiderer. Besides the two hides she could dispose of personally, she had also been assigned another half-hide by Godric the Sheriff so that she might teach his daughter gold-thread embroidery work.⁵ Some Anglo-Saxon wills mention bequests of bedclothes and wall-hangings, but there is almost no surviving evidence. The fragmentary early tenth-century gold-worked stole and maniple placed in the tomb of St Cuthbert in Durham is a rare and elegant survival. It may resemble the stole and maniple, worked with gold and precious stones by Ethelreda, abbess of Ely, which she offered to St Cuthbert. She died in 679 but her gift was duly recorded by Thomas, the chronicler of Ely.⁶

Despite these early embroideries and records of embroidery, the first truly famous example of eleventh-century embroidery is the so-called Bayeux Tapestry, which is not only a major piece of embroidery but also a recognised historical source describing the Norman conquest of England. Oddly enough, its known history only begins four centuries after it was created. It was first specifically mentioned in an inventory of the

belongings of the cathedral of Bayeux in 1476, but there is no reference to when it was first deposited there, probably for safekeeping. The inventory described it as:

a very long and narrow hanging on which are embroidered figures and inscriptions comprising a representation of the Conquest of England, which is hung around the nave of the church on the day of Relics and throughout the octave.⁷

Somehow this extraordinary illustration of history had already survived unmentioned for several centuries. In fact, it aroused no further interest until the early part of the eighteenth century when the first drawings of it were made. These were originally published in a series of engravings by Montfaucon in his massive *Monuments de la Monarchie Francaise* in 1729-30. The Tapestry led a somewhat disturbed life in the next two centuries. It survived the French Revolution, when attempts either to use it as a wagon cover or to cut it up to make a float for a carnival of the goddess of Reason were foiled by local admirers. Napoleon had it transferred to Paris to help encourage enthusiasm for his invasion of England, but then returned it when the plan was abandoned. For a while it was kept in the prefecture at Bayeux but it became much more generally known, especially in England, in the early nineteenth century. In 1819, it was copied by Charles Stothard, who provided very accurate drawings for the Society of Antiquaries in London. It was removed from Bayeux for protection during the Franco-Prussian War, and again in World War II. During the German occupation of Paris there were a few unsuccessful attempts to remove it to Germany from the Louvre. In 1945 the peripatetic tapestry was returned triumphantly to Bayeux and exhibited in the old bishop's palace. In 1982-83, it was cleaned, rebacked, and rehung in its own museum.⁸

Certainly, the troubled history of the Bayeux Tapestry underlines one of the problems constantly faced by medievalists—the strong odds against the survival of physical material from the Middle Ages. This is particularly true for the objects used in everyday living, although manuscripts too were often lost or destroyed. In the case of embroidery, normal wear and tear, changes in fashion, and inadequate care of fragile textiles: all encourage us to think of embroidery as being confined to religious pieces, since so many more of these have survived. One of the great virtues of the Bayeux Tapestry is its startlingly popular and secular appeal, which has encouraged many books on its various aspects.⁹

The Bayeux Tapestry has three particular claims upon our interest. It concerns a secular subject, that is, a contemporary epic event; its technique of embroidery indicates a particular school; and its form, a long narrow band, has Scandinavian parallels. As the original inventory stated, the Tapestry consists of a long strip of linen, some 69 metres long and with a varying width of some 46 to 54 centimetres (*circa* 230 feet long by 20 inches wide). The strip was originally longer, for the end has been damaged and some has disappeared. On it are 58 separate scenes, depicted on eight pieces of linen which were joined together after the embroidery had been completed. The borders at both top and bottom record a wide range of fables, ornamentation, and—most notably—where the main story is of the actual Battle of Hastings, the borders are full of archers, the dead and wounded, and the looters. Very occasionally, the main scene will also take over the upper border, but generally the story unrolls in the centre panel.

The embroidery was done in wools of five main colours: terracotta red, blue-green and sage-green, buff, and blue. A French scholar remarks that these colours were all from vegetable dyes which had long been used in Gaul. The embroidery is worked in laid and couched stitching with stem and outline stitches to create the contours of the figures, the thin lines, and many of the details. The laid stitches provide the massed effect while the couched stitches hold the laid stitches firmly in place. The results are bold and forceful, telling an exciting story in what might be called comic-strip style.¹⁰ Despite the effectiveness of this piece, the use of wool on linen as a method of embroidery was going out of fashion. It almost disappeared in the twelfth century as it began to be replaced by woven tapestries, which could cover more of the wall space. As well, the day of the long narrow wall hanging was passing in most parts of Europe, though such hangings continued for a longer time in the Scandinavian lands.

The lack of evidence results in a series of inescapable—and often unanswerable—questions. After considerable scholarly argument, it is now generally agreed that the hanging was commissioned by Odo, half-brother of William the Conqueror and later bishop of Bayeux, whose exploits it particularly celebrates. It was probably made in the south of England before 1082, although certainly not, as legend has suggested, by Queen Matilda and her ladies. In fact, no consensus has been reached as to whether it was made in commercial workshops or by whole nunneries, but it obviously required a large number of embroiderers. The size of the hanging, and the speed with which it

was designed and completed, makes it almost certain that there was a single master in charge of the work, either as the designer or as the supervisor and controller of several designers, but there is no proof. The Tapestry itself shows no signs of any drawing or cartoon laid down upon it. Although there are interesting parallels between the depictions in the Tapestry and the style of illustration in many contemporary manuscripts, there is a lack of evidence for the creation, use, or availability of patterns, which would seem to have been essential.

It is also generally agreed that, despite its first mention in a cathedral, the Bayeux Tapestry was designed to be hung, not primarily in a church, but rather as the decoration for the hall of a castle. This type of wall hanging also had a few recorded secular forerunners, notably the “curtain woven and depicted with the deeds of her husband as a memorial of his virtue,” given, according to the *Historia Eliensis*, to the Minster of Ely by the widow of Byrhtnoth, who died fighting the Danes in the Battle of Maldon.¹¹

The development of embroidery from the twelfth to the fifteenth century was marked by the growing elegance and richness of the work. More embroideries were worked on increasingly more elegant fabrics, such as damask and velvet, and were more often adorned with solid gold and silver as well as gold and silver thread. There was also greater use of precious and semiprecious stones, especially pearls, to enhance the work. It is an interesting footnote that this very use of precious metals encouraged the destruction of worn or outdated religious vestments. For example, Abbot Geoffrey of St Albans had given a chasuble to his monastery so covered with gold and precious stones that a succeeding abbot had it burnt to extract the gold. In 1371-73 the same fate befell the copes and chasubles of Archbishop Lanfranc at Canterbury, for which the burning recovered some ten pounds of gold.¹² Some idea of the immensity of the losses that occurred with the zeal (or greed) of some Reformers is suggested by the embroidered materials confiscated by Henry VIII's commissioners from Westminster Abbey in 1540. 330 copes, 100 chasubles, 99 dalmatics, 288 albs, 103 maniples, 8 mitres for the abbots, and 85 altarfrontals were dispersed or destroyed. The Abbey's enumeration did not even include such other embroidered items as curtains, coffin-cloths, banners, and canopies.¹³

Despite the ravages of such looting and obsolescence most surviving medieval embroidery still consists of superb clerical vestments safeguarded over the centuries in

church and cathedral sacristies. That fact encourages our natural tendency to downplay the amount and elegance of the embroidery also made for lay men and women. Because of the normal wear and tear in everyday use, and the frequent disposal of valuable items as bequests, most of the embroidered mantles, horse-trappings, heraldic banners, and purses have disappeared, leaving only the rare examples in museum collections. A more comprehensive portrayal of the passion for embroidery in both courts and castles comes from the elegant examples delineated in so many manuscript illuminations, or carefully described in full detail in the occasional contract or in an especially-specific bill in the accounts.

There is, however, one none-too-well-known treasury of thirteenth-century clothes in the nunnery of Las Huelgas which gives some examples of the heights reached by secular medieval embroidery. Las Huelgas, just outside of Burgos, the capital of old Castile, is the burial place of Alfonso VIII and his queen, Eleanor of England, and of several of their descendants. Many of the royal tombs were rifled during the Napoleonic invasion, but some escaped desecration. These were finally opened in 1942 when the bodies, and the clothes in which they were dressed, were discovered to be extraordinarily well-preserved. The bodies were reburied, but the clothes were rescued and put on display. All the exhibits are exciting but the most eye-catching is the ceremonial cap (shaped rather like a modern pillbox hat) of Ferdinand, the eldest son of Alfonso X. It is made up of heraldic squares displaying alternately the lion of Leon and the castles of Castile, worked in red and silver thread on silk, with backgrounds of small pearls or coral beads, all set off by borders of gold. The cap is in superb condition and, like the rest of the Las Huelgas treasures, opens a remarkable window into the medieval past and helps us to understand why such embroidery was so greedily sought after.¹⁴

From an early time the finest embroideries tended to be made in specialised workshops, since their creation might be required by growing royal demands. However, until the thirteenth century, the practice of embroidery was not primarily commercial. It was both a popular and approved pastime, not only in convents but also in royal and noble households, since it was considered a suitable way for ladies, whether lay or religious, to spend their leisure. Most of the male chroniclers and authors of manuals on behaviour had very strict ideas on what women should be allowed to do. However, most of them, even in the early Middle Ages, encouraged

fine needlework and embroidery as suitable feminine occupations. The enthusiastic biographer of Queen Margaret of Scotland claimed that she made her household into “a workshop of heavenly handicraft” which produced ecclesiastical vestments and hangings.¹⁵ Aelred, in his life of Edward the Confessor, praises Emma, the king’s wife, for her retiring nature and for the time she spent on reading, weaving silk and gold thread, and working elaborate embroidery for the king. A thirteenth-century Norman-French poetic life of the Confessor, *La Estoire de Seint Aedward Le Rei*, dedicated to Henry III’s queen, Eleanor of Provence, praised Queen Emma as a model for how a noblewoman should occupy her time. The English translation is excessively literal, but still more generally intelligible than the early Norman-French of the original. Emma was described as one whose fame had spread from England to Alexandria:

In engraving and portraiture,
 In gold and silver broidery,
 She made so many true, appropriate, and beautiful
 Men, birds, beasts, and flowers,
 Whether in needlework or patchwork;
 And so well did she divide her colours
 And in other rich and noble work,
 She had no equal as far as Constantinople.¹⁶

Prominent among the men who encouraged noble ladies to work at their embroidery were the enthusiastic clerics who hoped to benefit from their labours. Etienne de Fougères, chaplain of Henry II of England and later bishop of Rennes, and also author of a well-known book of manners, was specific in his praise of the countess of Hereford, whose good works included honouring churchmen by making many vestments for them with her own hands.¹⁷ At the end of the eleventh century there is an amusing example of such aspiring flattery carried to extremes by the poet/monk, Baudri de Bourgueil, later the bishop of Dol. He was extremely anxious to curry favour with Adela, Countess of Blois, the daughter of William the Conqueror, so he composed a long poem dedicated to her. This lengthy effusion of 1367 lines praised the countess extravagantly for her intelligence, her generosity, her beauty, and her chastity. Baudri then launched into a long, detailed, and certainly imaginary description of the tapestries, embroideries, and mosaics with scenes from the classics, which, he declared, decorated her chamber. While paying artistic testimony to her elegance and

distinguished parentage he even mentioned a wall hanging showing her father's conquest of England. One wonders whether he knew about the recently-completed Bayeux Tapestry? Baudri's editor suggests that the poet had pillaged his various sources—Ovid, Martianus Capella, Isidore of Seville and others—primarily to show off his own erudition and was so certain that the countess would be impressed by his flattery that she would surely make him the cope he was soliciting. The countess was used to flattery, and paid no attention to his begging poem. A few years later, the aggrieved poet wrote another, shorter, poem to Adela expressing his disappointment. He declared angrily that he had made her name immortal in his poem so that he certainly deserved his proper reward—the promised cope.¹⁸

However, it was not only noblewomen who embroidered. In the middle of the twelfth century Christina of Markyate, recluse and then nun of a priory dependent on the Benedictine abbey of St Albans, was encouraged by her good friend Abbot Geoffrey to embroider a mitre and sandals which he then presented to Adrian IV, the newly-elected English pope. Matthew Paris, who recorded this story, was delighted to underline the fact that Christine's embroidery was the only gift the pontiff did accept.¹⁹ Earlier recluses had been warned that they should not do elaborate needlework, or make purses which would win them friends,²⁰ but obviously that changed over the centuries. In the early fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan's poem, the *Dit de Poissy*, celebrates her visit to that aristocratic and well-endowed Dominican priory near Paris, flourishing under royal patronage, where her daughter had gained admittance. She describes admiringly the splendid purses embroidered with birds in gold and silver, and the girdles and laces which the nuns made in their spare time. They were allowed to give these elegant trifles to their visitors as presents.²¹

The exhibition *Art and the Courts* brought to Ottawa in 1972 some of the finest examples of the *opus anglicanum*, the English embroidery which was admired and sought after all over Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Matthew Paris suggests how widespread was its fame with an anecdote describing what he called "manifest proof of the avarice of the Roman Curia." Apparently, in 1246 Innocent IV was so impressed by the beautiful orphreys, or bands of rich embroidery (especially of gold), on the vestments worn by English ecclesiastics appearing at his court that he asked where they were made. When he was told, "in England," Paris has the pope exclaim: "Truly England is our garden of delights. Verily, the well is inexhaustible;

and where much abounds, much can be extorted from many.” Innocent then sent off solemn papal letters to order the Cistercian abbots to send him the orphreys he had first admired, to adorn his own choral copes and chasubles. As if, Matthew Paris adds indignantly, the pope could acquire all these things without cost, though, he adds, this order pleased the greedy London merchants because of the opportunity for more sales.²²

The special feature of the embroidery known as *opus anglicanum* was its plentiful use of gold and gold thread and that it was under-couched, that is, the thread was pulled through and fastened on the underside of the material. This provided a new flexibility to these heavily-ornamented vestments and allowed them to shimmer effectively in the candlelighted churches. These products of both individual English embroiderers and embroidery workshops became notable exports. One stunning example of this type of work, known as the Cope of the Passion, was in the Ottawa exhibition. It belonged to Clement V, the fourteenth-century pope who had been archbishop of Bordeaux, then under English rule. It has been preserved in the cathedral of Clement’s birthplace, Saint-Bertrand de Comminges in Gascony. Besides being a superb example of *opus anglicanum*, it is also fascinating for its suggestion of the possible relationships of embroidery to other current forms of art, for there are details which echo both current work in ivory and in manuscript illuminations. The French description is terse: “Sur fond blanc se detachent, parmi un décor vegetal et zoomorphe, des medallions contenant 18 figures de prophètes et 17 scènes de la Passion.”²³ The whole iconographic scheme is complex and carefully worked out. Perhaps most interesting is its extensive use of the bestiary, and an especially large number of keenly-observed birds. Some twenty species appear on the cope ranging from the swan and peacock to the common woodpecker, pigeon, and warbler. The embroiderers (or was there a designer?) appear to have copied their birds from a pattern-book, possibly the medieval sketch book now in the library of Magdalene College, Cambridge. This sketchbook, with its large number of accurately-drawn birds, shows the same care for exactitude as contemporary treatises on falconry, and its influence can also be traced in the birds portrayed in contemporary manuscripts.²⁴

We do not know where Pope Clement’s cope originated, although the likelihood is that it was made in one of the London workshops created by the members of a recognised core of embroiderers—both men and women, though the women

predominated. The output of these workshops was generally handled by some of the richest London merchants. Thus, for example, in the mid-thirteenth century one skilled woman embroiderer had several personal commissions from King Henry III. Mabel of Bury St Edmunds appears frequently in the royal records, primarily between 1239 and 1244. She was commissioned in November 1239 to make a chasuble and offertory veil for the king's use, and allowed 10 l. for her expenses. King Henry's desire for more pearls and gold to ornament the embroidery required his provision of further monies to pay for the decoration. In late summer 1241, the vestments were completed, and lined with cloth of gold, after being appraised and approved by other embroiderers. The king decided to enhance the finished work still further by having a great orphrey made for it as well as a surrounding border and fringe. Two years later, Mabel again had another royal commission to make a banner of samite, embroidered with gold and the images of the Virgin and St John, for hanging in Westminster Abbey. Henry specified the subjects himself but entrusted the final design to Mabel. On the completion of this second major piece, she was paid 10 l. as well as her expenses. Although Mabel makes no further documented appearance as an embroiderer, she was remembered by the king some years later when he was in Bury St Edmunds. In March 1256 he gave her a gift of cloth and a robe of rabbit fur "because Mabel of St Edmund served the king and queen for a long time in the making of ecclesiastical ornaments."²⁵

The importance of embroidery as a valuable part of London's commercial activity in the thirteenth century is well illustrated in the extremely lucrative career of Adam de Basing, one of the most important of the royal merchants in London in the years from 1238 to 1260. His wealth was based to a considerable degree on his sales of rich embroidered cloths and vestments to the royal household. From the many entries in the Liberate Rolls it would appear that King Henry had an almost insatiable appetite for these items. He purchased mitres, copes, chasubles, banners, and funeral cloths in bewildering quantities. Some he kept for himself or his family or offered to churches which he wished to honour, particularly Westminster Abbey, whose beautification was one of Henry's great enthusiasms.

However, the importance of embroidery as a particularly elegant form of patronage is attested by the fact that many of these ecclesiastical embroideries were bought to be presented to a very wide range of people: bishops (both at home and abroad), abbots, the Grand Master of the Templars—and a few less highly-placed

clerics. The king also provided full sets of vestments for his married daughters for their private chapels. The value of each gift varied sharply, according to status and the need to impress the recipient. It is not surprising that the most expensive—an embroidered chasuble and a complete set of white vestments costing 32 l. 16 s.—was sent to the White Cardinal in 1252 as a tactful gift from the king. It was surely intended to encourage greater favour for English interests at the Roman Curia.²⁶

Adam de Basing's predominance as purveyor to the royal household of so many of these rich cloths and embroideries helped to build his considerable wealth. It has been stated that "his dealings with the Crown were probably the heaviest individual transactions on record for the period," in that between 1238 and 1260 he received 1,733 l. for them.²⁷ The heavy traffic in these goods must have required the existence of groups of numerous skilled embroiderers who could regularly design and complete the orders for such delicate and time-consuming work, but it is not known how this was managed in London in the thirteenth century. Nevertheless, it is obvious that although embroidery could still be a noble lady's pastime, it had also become a recognised form of well-paid work, by which a growing number of women were making a living, whether in group workshops or as individuals doing piecework.

The actual organisation of embroiderers is somewhat more visible in Paris than in London. Although they do not appear as a separate guild in Etienne Boileau's *Livre des Metiers*, compiled in the 1250's, the tax roll of 1292 lists fourteen master embroiderers, both male and female. Three years later, all those involved in the craft—masters, mistresses, and workers of both sexes—appeared before the provost of Paris, asking him to confirm the statutes they had drawn up to regulate the craft. Their document underlined the preponderance of women. Ninety-three names were listed at the head of the statutes, of whom barely a dozen were men. It is probable that in Paris, as in London, men were more involved in supervising and selling the embroideries made predominantly by women. It is interesting to note that many married women were listed as embroiderers whose husbands had other trades, and that women listed as either embroiderers or purse-makers in the tax rolls also had another occupation. Some were illuminators or writers, and one was even a mustard-maker.²⁸ It would appear that the two-income, two-job family has a longer history than many might believe.

In the French statutes, the corporation was open without an entry fee to any man or woman, so long as they were skilled and were willing to obey the established rules and customs. Each master or mistress could have only one apprentice at a time, whose apprenticeship lasted at least eight years. They could add a new apprentice only when the current one was in his or her last year. All work had to be done by daylight since they felt it was clear that “work done at night could not be as good and as satisfactory as work done by day.”²⁹ They were also forbidden to use cheap gold thread because it would spoil the embroidery. By 1316 the corporation included 179 people who embroidered clothing, such as tunics, robes, and gambesons, gloves, sandals, hats, and furs as well as horse-trappings and banners.

There were several more specialised embroiderers listed as separate corporations in the *Livre des Metiers*. One totally female guild made women’s embroidered purses, known in France as saracen work. These had great popular appeal since such smaller objects were less expensive and thus had a larger market. Their statute of 1299, when they numbered 124, allowed them to have two apprentices, and stated that the period of apprenticeship could vary from six to ten years. Another group made and sold what were called *chapiaux d’orfrois*, i.e. they made hats or coifs, embroidered with gold and pearls, for rich ladies. To ensure that their work was completely luxurious, they were forbidden to base their head-coverings on parchment or linen, nor could they use cotton thread. As well, embroiderers of clerical vestments had for some time their own special corporation of *chasubliers*. Both these small groups seem to have been swallowed up by the much larger corporation of embroiderers around 1400.³⁰

The fourteenth-century records suggest constantly growing demand by the courts and nobility for ever-more-spectacular and expensive embroidery, and the same escalation was also visible in more luxurious church vestments. Ottawa was fortunate in having several examples of fourteenth-century secular embroidery displayed in the 1972 exhibition *Art and the Courts*. Among the secular treasures exhibited were a fragment of heraldic embroidery, probably from the court of Edward III; an alms purse of saracen work, embroidered with gold, silver, and silk on green velvet in most delicate patterns; and a fascinating girdle for a woman’s dress, which was not only embroidered on green silk with lions embossed in silver leaf, but was also enhanced with translucent enamel plates.³¹

Joinville, that hardy survivor of the more restrained thirteenth century, deplored these changing fashions in comments to King Louis X. The elderly crusader remarked nostalgically that when he was with St Louis in Outremer he never saw embroidered tunics on anyone, not even the king. When Louis X boasted that he had tunics embroidered with his arms that had cost him 800 *livres parisis*, Joinville's sharp retort was typical of that blunt noble. He declared that the king would have put the money to better use if he had given it away for the love of God and had his robes made, like those of his ancestor, of good satin with the less expensive *appliqué* coat of arms.³²

The redoubtable Mahaut of Artois, countess of Artois in her own right and mother-in-law and godmother to two French kings, affords further proof of the fourteenth-century passion for luxurious embroideries. The inventories, which were part of her claim for damages against the marauding nephew who had pillaged her castle at Hesdin, included many elegant embroidered items. Among them was a matching set of vestments and altar cloths of white silk embroidered with gold parrots, for which she claimed 500 *livres*. Clothes included an embroidered velvet gambeson, a *houssse* or outer wrap, embroidered with the arms of Burgundy, and horse-trappings similarly embroidered, for another 90 *livres*. In the judgment given in her favour in 1221, it is amusing to note that—rather like modern insurance companies—her estimates were often cut in half.³³ The most extravagant known example of fourteenth-century French embroidery was probably the surcoat which the duke of Bourbon unwisely wore over his armour at the battle of Poitiers in 1356. The Black Prince's resounding victory included the capture of both the French king and the duke of Bourbon. His surcoat, embroidered with his arms, had been enhanced with six hundred pearls, as well as rubies and sapphires. When Bourbon had to seek funds to pay his ransom, an Italian moneylender in London was willing to advance him 4200 gold crowns on the surcoat alone.³⁴

The court of Edward III in England was as profligate with its spending on embroideries as its French counterpart. In 1330, three bedspreads were ordered for Queen Philippa's churching ceremony after the birth of her first son. The account for this commission is particularly complete, for it gives the number of workers, seventy men and forty-two women, and the differential rates of pay: 4½ d daily for men and 3¼ d for women. Its total cost for labour of just over 60 l. also includes the costs for two designers. The man in charge received a *per diem* of 8¼ d for seventy-two days;

his colleague's *per diem* was 6¼ d for seventy-eight days. Although in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries artists began to claim both credit and cash for their share in the design of both tapestries and embroideries, this account seems to provide the first specific evidence of payment to designers.

At the same time an expensive “robe,” i.e. a full set of five garments of purple velvet embroidered with gold squirrels, was ordered for the queen. Its total cost, including the price of the velvet, the fur linings, fourteen pounds of gold thread and sixteen pounds of silk thread, as well as labour costs of just over 60 l., came to the remarkable sum of over 200 l.³⁵ Edward's armourer, John of Cologne, who was in charge of embroidery, made the king a fine embroidered bed cover, the canopy and curtains with decorative panels studded with pearls and precious stones—but it only exists now in the accounts. Still extant are parts of the heraldic horse-trappings (at the Ottawa exhibition). The fragment shows two lively leopards, embroidered in gold thread on red velvet with long tails flourished in a double bend. They boast eyes of rock crystal, and the red velvet ground is scattered with precious stones surrounded with tiny freshwater pearls.³⁶

A final example of the progressively more profligate expenditures of royal courts on embroideries appears in a detailed contract of 1410 between Queen Isabeau of France and Jean de Clarcy, the king's embroiderer. The queen knew exactly what she wanted—a great deal of gold embroidery on expensive azure velvet. She specified the generous amounts of velvet to be used, the details and decorative types of embroidery, as well as her choice of subjects. All the vestments had to have elegant orphreys, and many were fringed as well. Collars and sleeves were to be bordered with seed pearls, and larger pearls were to be placed around the diadems. All this was to be done for 4,500 francs, and completed by Easter 1411.³⁷ The contract, seen against the fractured state of France and the devastation caused by the Hundred Years War, is startling in its heedless extravagance and magnificence.

It is obvious that in the centuries since the Bayeux Tapestry was created embroidery had become a profitable commercial factor and a stunning example of what we tend to call conspicuous consumption. Although the early fourteenth century probably marked the apogee of the most artistically-designed and carefully-executed embroideries, their growing commercial demand encouraged more repetitive designs,

especially as a mass use of easily-copied popular motifs could speed the work—and increase the profits. Although some types of embroideries would continue in the following centuries they would differ considerably from the medieval examples I have mentioned. The chief extravagance of courts and nobles became tapestries rather than embroideries, while the market for finely-embroidered clerical vestments was severely affected, especially in England, by the Puritan stance of so many of the reformers.

However, it should be remembered that embroidery of a much simpler nature still played a pleasant part in the lives of more ordinary people in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Chaucer's Squire was embroidered like a meadow full of red and white flowers, while the Sergeant at Law had a silken belt and the Franklin a silk purse. Young Alisoun, in the "Miller's Tale," had black silk embroidery on the front and back of her collar which, according to Chaucer, helped to reflect her flirtatious nature. A Spanish Book of Hours of the second half of the fifteenth century illustrated the life of the Holy Family with Joseph working with his tools, the child Jesus playing with his toys, and the Blessed Virgin creating her own simple embroidery.³⁸

Such an approving recognition of embroidery as suitable even for the spare time of the Blessed Virgin reminds us of the earlier centuries with their more restrained use of rich ornament. It seems a proper place to conclude this quick overview of developments during the Middle Ages in the types of embroidery and the activities of embroiderers. There are some unsolved puzzles, those unknown designers and invisible pattern books, but we can enjoy the work of the men and women who not only enhanced the belongings of our forebears, but also provide a colourful byway to explore in the study of medieval history.

Ottawa

Notes

1 Kay Staniland, *Embroiderers* (London: British Museum Press, 1991), p. 4.

2 Staniland, *Embroiderers*, p. 8.

3 François Boucher, *20000 Years of Fashion* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, n.d.), p. 147.

4 Magnus Backes and Regine Dolling, *Art of the Dark Ages* (New York: Abrams, 1969), pp. 150-51.

5 Christine Fell, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* (London: British Museum, 1984), p. 42.

6 Staniland, *Embroiderers*, p. 8.

7 David M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 12.

8 Wilson, *Bayeux Tapestry*, pp. 12-14.

9 Wilson, *Bayeux Tapestry; The Bayeux Tapestry*, ed. Sir Frank Stenton (New York: Phaidon, 1957, 2nd ed., 1965); J. Bernstein, *Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry* (London: Weidenfeld, 1986); J. Bard McNulty, *The Narrative Art of the Bayeux Tapestry Master* (New York: AMS Press, 1989); Simone Bertrand, *La Tapisserie de Bayeux et la manière de vivre au onzième siècle* (Bayeux: Zodiaque, 1966).

10 Wingfield Digby, "Technique and Production," in Stenton, *Bayeux Tapestry*, pp. 39-42.

11 Digby, "Technique," p. 48.

12 *Gesta abbatum monasterii sancti Albani* I, Rolls Series 28d (1867), p. 93; T.S. Boase, *English Art 1100-1216* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), p. 239.

13 *A House of Kings: the History of Westminster Abbey*, ed. Edward Carpenter (London: John Barber, 1996), p. 446.

14 F. Valentín de la Cruz, *Burgos* (Madrid: Everest S.A., 1981), pp. 106-109.

15 *Vita S. Margarita* Surtees Society 51 (1868), p. 239.

16 "L'Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei," *Lives of Edward the Confessor* Rolls Series 3 (1858), pp. 212, 58:

D'entaille e de purtraiture
 D'or e argent brudure
 Tant fist verais popres e beaus,
 U d'agoille u de taveus,
 Hummes, oiseus, bestes, e flurs
 E tant parti ben ses culurs
 E de autre overe riche et noble,
 N'out per gesk'en Costantinoble.

- 17 Charles Langlois, *La Vie en France au Moyen Age II* (Paris, 1926; Geneva: Slatkine), p. 27.
- 18 *Oeuvres poetiques de Baudri de Bourgueil (1046-1130)* ed. P. Abrahams (Paris: H. Champion, 1926), pp. 253-55.
- 19 *Gesta Abbatum I*, p. 127.
- 20 *The Ancrene Riwle*, trans. M.B. Salu (Notre Dame, Indiana: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1945), p. 184.
- 21 Christine de Pizan, *Oeuvres Poétiques 2*, ed. M. Roy (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1891, rep. 1965), pp. 159-222.
- 22 Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora IV*, Rolls Series 57, pp. 546-7.
- 23 *Les Trésors des Églises de France* (Paris: Caisse Nationale des Monuments Historiques, 1965), no. 491.
- 24 *Art and the Courts* Catalogue of Exhibition (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1972), no. 88; Brunson Yapp, *Birds in Medieval Manuscripts* (London: British Library, 1981), p. 82.
- 25 Margaret Wade Labarge, *A Small Sound of the Trumpet* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 228-9; *Cal. Liberate Rolls Henry III 1240-45* (London: Public Record Office, 1930), p. 286.
- 26 *Cal.Lib.R. Henry III 1251-60*, p. 40.
- 27 Gwyn A. Williams, *Medieval London: From Commune to Capital* (London: Athlone Press, 1963), p. 323.
- 28 G. Fagniez, *Études sur l'industrie et la classe industrielle à Paris, 13e et 14e siècles* (1884; New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), pp. 8-11; A. Franklin, *Les Corporations ouvrières de Paris, 12e-18e siècles, d'après les documents* (1877; New York: Burt Franklin, 1971), pp. 1-3; A. Lehmann, *Le Role de la femme dans l'histoire de France au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1952), p. 450.
- 29 Franklin, *Corporations*, p. 2.
- 30 Lehmann, *Role*, pp. 447-8, 451-2; Franklin, *Corporations*, p. 3.
- 31 *Art and the Courts*, nos 95, 96, 60.
- 32 Joinville, *Life of St Louis*, ed. R. Hague (London: Sheed & Ward, 1955), p. 25.

33 Le Roux de Lincy, "Inventaires des biens meubles et immeubles de la comtesse Mahaut d'Artois," *Bibliothèque de l'école des chartes* 13 (1851-52), pp. 61-2, 72-3.

34 Franklin, *Corporations*, p. 2.

35 Staniland, *Embroiderers*, pp. 28-9, 23.

36 *Art and the Courts*, no. 95.

37 Fagniez, *Etudes*, pp. 376-77.

38 B.L. MS Additional 18193 f. 48v. Book of Hours, Spain, second half of fifteenth century, reproduced in Janet Backhouse, *Books of Hours* (London: British Library, 1985), pp. 71-2.