

Bible Embroideries

English embroiderers were famous in the Middle Ages for church vestments and hangings, but in the 1540s this market stopped abruptly because of the Reformation. In the second half of the 16th century there was an increase in embroideries for the home. Girls and women had to learn to sew, so they could provide clothing, bedding and furnishings for their own or their employer's household. Girls from the middle and upper classes had time to embellish items with patterns which were not strictly speaking necessary, but which added colour, warmth and interest to the home. For women the word 'work' meant needlework: a meaning which just about survives in the 'workbox' or sewing box, and they would spend hours a day beautifying the home with curtains, bed curtains and valances, cushions, table carpets and runners as well as clothing.

They needed patterns and ideas, and many of them came from books: particularly herbals, and the Bible. Books were still quite rare below a certain level of society, and a household might own only a Bible. Some children learned to read using the Bible, and they would hear their parents reading from it at morning and evening prayers, and of course, readings in church. The Old Testament in particular was a source of exciting, not to say racy, stories, and these were used for many embroideries. New Testament stories were rarely used in art in this country because they were associated with Roman Catholicism and idolatry. Also, it may not have been thought appropriate to sit on a cushion showing the crucifixion, for example.

The patterns for embroideries were drawn by professionals, and they often used engravings, which were widely available. The main features were copied more or less faithfully, as appropriate, and the embroiderer would choose the colours and stitches. Elizabethan and seventeenth century embroideries were very colourful, and with a particularly English love of pattern. Nearly all scenes take place out of doors, with a rural background scattered with animals, birds and flowers at different scales, but all designed to fill in the surface in a pleasing way. The stories chosen from the Old Testament show what interested to embroiderers. They are all exciting stories, dramatic and sometimes romantic. They often feature women, but not always.

There were heroic women such as Deborah and Barak, Jael and Sisera, Judith and Holofernes. A more acceptable role model was Esther, who saved her people the Jews from her husband King Ahasuerus. There were more passive women who were nevertheless important in history, such as Rebecca at the well and Moses' mother and sister. The finding of Moses in the bull rushes was a popular scene. The story of David and Bathsheba also appealed to girls and women. Abraham dismissing his handmaid Hagar and his child by her, Ishmael, was another popular episode, along with Abraham entertaining the angels, and the Sacrifice of Isaac. A pair of long cushions listed at Hardwick Hall in 1601 showed the Sacrifice of Isaac and the Judgement of Solomon. Why were these two paired? Was it something to do with parental love? Another scene was the visit of the Queen of Sheba to

Solomon. Perhaps surprisingly, the death of Jezebel, and Joseph escaping Potiphar's wife were also embroidered.

Joseph being raised from the pit, and the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea are episodes featuring men, as is a rare New Testament scene of the Prodigal Son, but this of course was an interesting story. The birth of Jacob, and Jacob wrestling with the angel were also worked in the silk threads of the period. The embroideries might be on canvas with metal thread picking out details such as crowns, or on silk or linen where the background might be left plain. The creation of Adam (but not Eve) is a scene which gave plenty of scope for the use of flowers, birds, animals and even a mermaid.

Biblical scenes were also used in wall paintings, pottery and delft tiles at this period. We do not know how people thought about the scenes. Did they use them to teach children and servants the Bible stories, or did everyone know them anyway? Were they a reminder that God was everywhere or were they just 'part of the furniture', blending in with everything else in the house? The Bible was not the only source for interior decoration. Classical myths were also popular and concepts such as virtues, the four elements or the humours. The boys and men of the household would have been educated at grammar schools where they learnt Latin and Greek partly through poems and stories, which found their way into general culture. The Bible scenes are perhaps more interesting because we know how deeply and seriously people took religion at this time.

Mary Alexander, December 2010.