

A 3-Part Embroidered Tapestry Project

Part 1: Planning and Designing an Embroidered Tapestry of the Middle Ages

The Kings of Trimaris Embroidered Tapestry Cartoon
By Franca Donato

About My Item:

“The Kings of Trimaris” is a cartoon (a sketch of a design) that an artist may have provided to an embroiderer for re-creation on cloth. I envisioned a commemoration of the crowns Trimaris as a final battle scene. The kings, and the princes of the principality of Trimaris, appear in chronological order from left to right by first reigns only. (The decision to eliminate multiple reigns was based on the size of the tapestry.) The heraldry was drawn from the armorial that is presented online. Some kings may have inadvertently omitted due to the unavailability of obtaining a drawing of their arms.

As artists in period, I consulted the work of other artists (illuminations, books, photos, armorial, and SCA publications) for ideas that I could adapt to my purpose and began an artist exemplar book. **[The idea book contains my exemplars.]**

I chose to follow the conclusion that the artist in period would have created the design on paper for later transferring onto cloth. In period, the design would have been drawn on linseed oil skin paper with charcoal. Due to my allergy concerns, the design is drawn on tracing paper, which is a substitute for the oil skin paper, with charcoal.

Research of Item in Period

Why embroidered tapestry?

Embroidery has been a method of adding decoration to apparel, and household and church furnishings for centuries. Despite its popularity, the origins of embroidery remain unclear. We do know that “the Church recognized the value of presenting Bible stories to the common people through the use of hanging tapestries; and by the 13th century, tapestries became status symbols for the wealthy and powerful and the art spread to the secular community” (Blake).

Large works also provided a means to commemorate or document historic events “telling true stories in installments as it were, each panel comprising a chapter, each series a complete tale, with its gallant precepts” (Viale, 25). One of the most referred to masterpieces, the Bayeux Tapestry, “depicts the events leading up to the defeat of Harold at Hastings in lively detail” (Wilson, 210). “From literary evidence we know such historical hangings were common in the houses of royalty and in aristocratic circles” (Siban di Sheaghdba).

“On a practical level, tapestries commissioned by lay people were used not only to decorate walls but also to provide privacy around beds, partition rooms, prevent drafts, and insulate from the cold” (Blake).

Who designed tapestries?

“In the Middle Ages, these craftsmen were generally anonymous beyond their local circle, though a few individuals might gain a wider reputation. Whilst some embroiderers may have drawn up their own designs, all would have endeavored to obtain the services of the most skilled artist available to them” (Staniland, 19).

“We do know a certain amount about the involvement of art designers in the production of bed- and wall-hangings in the royal embroidery workshops of London in the 1330’s. The artist was much in evidence in the workshops as an integral part of the production team drawing up the embroidery designs and supervising the

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progress and assembling the work” (Staniland, 21). “Mary, Queen of Scots, is known to have studied in France and have two master designers, Pierre Oudry and Charles Houvart. During Queen Anne’s reign, Robert Adam was designing embroidery patterns and it is widely believed Queen Matilda or the half-brother of William the Conqueror, Odo, charged a monk with designing the Bayeaux Tapestry” (Siban di Sheaghdba). “In the fifteenth century artists of standing are more frequently associated with embroidery and the Italian artist and writer Vasari records a number of them” (Staniland, 24).

The Creative Process

A. Selecting a subject.

It is no coincidence that “the heyday of embroidery coincides with the height of the illuminated manuscripts in England” (Siban di Sheaghdba). For example, the designer, Henneguain de Bruges, consulted illuminated manuscripts of the Apocalypse before undertaking the design of the “Apocalypse of Saint John (Viale, 26). “In addition to Biblical stories, popular subjects for tapestries were battles, legends or sports as well as allegories, myths and landscapes” (Blake). The Battle of Hastings is interpreted in the Bayeaux Tapestry.



B. Creating the design.

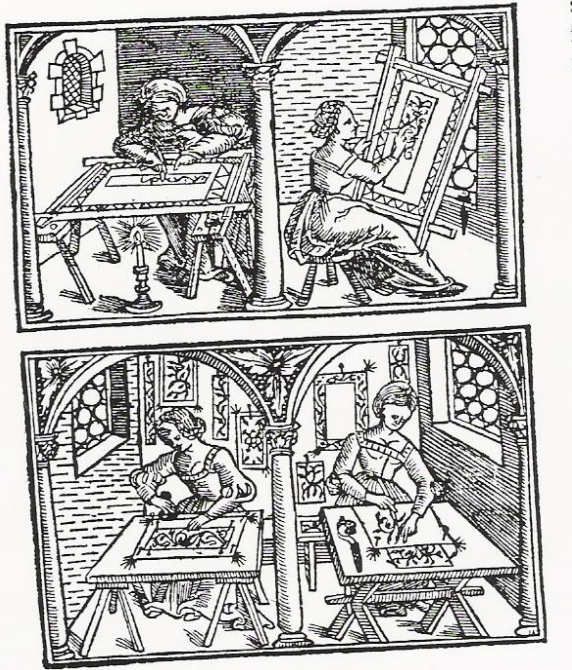
“The work of some of the designers of embroideries can be seen on specimens where the stitching has worn away or the dyes have rotted the embroidery silks themselves. These reveal how careful was the preparatory design drawn up by the artist, providing the embroiderers with detailed guidance” (Staniland, 23). “Medieval weavers used sketches or manuscripts that they freely adapted, based on their own personal perception and creativity, to create the designs in the tapestry” (Blake). “An English artist’s sketchbook of the late fourteenth century at Magdalene College, Cambridge, includes human figures, animals, birds, grotesques, architectural details, and ornament, some of which are reminiscent of fourteenth century embroideries” (Staniland, 24). “Being in common use they became important repositories of artistic traditions, and as they were moved from one workshop to another and were inherited by pupils from their masters, artistic forms and ideas were transmitted” (Web Gallery of Art).

“These might have been used by a designer working for embroidery workshops, though this can hardly have been the main purpose of the book. It demonstrates the way in which painting and embroidery design interlink” (Staniland, 24). “This is in contrast to the practice during the Renaissance, of using full-size drawings made by artists as templates for exact reproduction of a design” (Blake).

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“A woodcut in one of the earliest printed books for embroiderers, Alessandro Paganino’s Libro Primo...de rechami (1527) shows women tracing, pricking, and transferring embroidery designs, using natural light and candlelight to aid tracing” Staniland, 31).



In Cennino Cennini’s 15th century manual, Il Libro dell’ Arte, instructions to artists for creating designs on paper. For thin white paper, “then grease this paper with linseed oil...It becomes transparent, and it is good.” Failing this one could simply follow a much older method using parchment carefully scraped to make it transparent and them similarly treated with linseed oil” (Staniland, 31).

Conclusion:

I was inspired to begin this project after viewing the reproduction that was made of a portion of the Bayeaux Tapestry presented at Winter Art/Sci. There seem to me, to be a general lack of kingdom inspired regalia present in the hall and I wondered if embroidery was plausible in the style of the Bayeaux but honoring the kingdom in some way.

I have learned a great deal about embroidery production in the middle ages. There was a specialization of tasking in period that is much like what is experienced by artisans today. Inspiration for creation did not occur “in a bubble”. Artisans relied heavily on each other for exemplars and freely incorporated the ideas of others in their own work.

If I were to repeat this project, I would increase the amount of exemplar drawings that were consulted to possibly three or four times the quantity I used to allow for more creativity in the adaptation to my design.

I believe any good research and experimentation should inspire further study and I feel this product will inspire me to create other projects in the future.

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