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"The Relationship between Medieval Ecclesiastical Embroidery and Contemporary Embroiderer Alice Kettle"

by

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Introduction

This thesis is about the different approches and techniques involved in the production of functional ecclesiastical embroidered pieces. The pieces described range from those that have kept strict rules in technical production, that is the work of twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Opus Anglicanum, or English Work and the contemporary work of English embroider Alice Kettle, who still uses the traditional medium of fabric and thread, yet breaks from the correct and strict technical rules of stitchery. The emphasis, through out, is on stitch and fabric manipulation both by hand and sewing machine techniques. These two types of embroidery have one feature in common, they are decorative effects produced by stitches on a foundation fabric, which has previously been woven on a loom. Because the embroiderer is not restricted by the structure of the fabric, this allows a freedom of choice of material, and in placing of the stitches, which is denied to the weaver. Warp and weft, must, out of necessity, intersect at right angles, but the embroiderer is free to lay stitches at any angle according to the nature of the design, and because a change of colour only involves picking up another needle, there is no limit to the number of colours which can be employed. Nor does the thickness of a thread present any difficulty, because heavy corded threads or even metal thread, can be laid on the surface of the cloth, being held in place by fine binding stitches, known as couching. The same part of the design can be worked over several times, first with thick padding thread, and then with fine decorative silk. This means that high relief work is possible and this three dimensional effect which gives some embroidery its sumptuous effect. Ecclesiastical vestments and altar frontals of Opus Anglicanum are beautiful examples of this kind of work. Coincidentally, the contemporary machine embroidery of Alice Kettle embodies the same qualities.

In my first chapter, I discussed the evolution of embroidery from the first stitch, to embroidery in the twelfth and thirteenth century - for which I

have choosen to concentrate on the hand embroidered art of Opus Anglicanum and its ecclesiastical vestments. From a wide ranging set of vestments I have chosen to focus on the Cope of Jesse, for its technical quality and rich symbolic resonaces.

In Chapter Two I discuss the social and cultural issues that have affected that art of embroidery in the twentieth century, and how the art has strived for recognition. It was not until this century that any signigicant mechanical advances were made in the textile industry, the most important being the development of Singer's sewing machines.

I have chosen contemporary embroiderer, Alice Kettle, and in particular her work for the Holy Sepulchre Chapel at Winchester Cathedral. Kettle's work forms a symbolic and technical link with the medieval embroidery of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of Opus Anglicanum, yet it has a contemporary feel.

Chapter One

Origins and Development of Embroidery up to the thirteenth Century

Great care must be taken when describing the origins and history of embroidery. Very few examples of early work exist and not until recently have textiles been considered worthy of thorough research. It is, therefore, difficult to establish the exact chronology of the processes.

Embroidery is probably best considered as a response to the practical requirements of humanity. Since the time of the cave dwellers, man has used textiles in the form of clothing and covering, man lived a normal life for half a million years, hunting animals and gathering wild foods. Around 8000 BC, man changed over to a settled way of life, practising agriculture, living in communities and developing useful arts. This sedentary and more economic way of life gave some measure of security and allowed for leisure and the arts of civilisation. As enough surplus food could now be accumulated, specialist craftsmen could henceforth be supported; these men devoted most of their time to the manufacture of tools, pottery, clothing and buildings. Such craftsmen solved the most basic problem of joining two pieces of skin (fabric) together. Having reached one solution of seaming, mans' interests evolved into something more than practical, and so, the decorative element of ornamentation began. Early oriental embroidery, for example, provides fine examples of how decorative seams were used. Other primative onamentation may be seen in the quill work of North American indians or the bark cloth worked by many African tribes. It is important to note that embroidery has no unique origin but has been developed independently, varying with local materials, cultures and climatic requirements. Through archaeological finds, Egyptian artifacts have provided evidence as to the existance of embroidery, by means of hieroglypics, tomb paintings and carvings. (Geiger, 1969, p.265)

The craft of embroidery can be substantiated with references found in the old testament of the Bible. The Book of Exodus, Chapter 26 refers to liturgical garments that were worked with gold plate and wire and rich colours worked on linen. (Clarke, 1968, p.116) Satin stiches thought to have been used in India and China around the period of the Shu Ching sixth Century BC. Embroidery was certainly possible in such peroids due to the availability of short threads, the continuous thread needed for other textile crafts such as knitting were not developed until much later. In fact there is evidence from Roman slippers that knitting was developed from a type of loop stitch embroidery, worked to create a fabric, rather than embellish it. All embroidery stitches have evolved from three basic stitches; first, an up and down motion, such as a running stitch. Secondly, an up or down and wrapping technique, epitomised by satin or cross stitch. Thirdly, a loop stitch such as chain or herring bone stitch.

When researching embroidery one must consider the society in which it existed. Demographics, trade routes, and social and cultural movements must be taken into consideration. Climatic changes and population distributions are also important factors, such factors can not only help to explain the type of textiles produced, but also how they survived. If the cloth is made from animal or vegetable fibres, the ground or surroundings in which it was preserved may have affected its survival. Tools used for embroidery have commonly survived and these can prove vital in establishing which techniques were in-vogue and when.

Embroidery in England up until the thirteenth Century

Christianity first arrived in Britain in the Roman period, but when the power of Rome declined and the legions were withdrawn, the country and its Celtic population were left open to invasion in the fifth and sixth

centuries AD by the pagan Anglo-Saxons. The newcomers were evangelized in the South by St. Augustine from Rome, who apparently carried with him a banner embroidered with the image of Christ, and in the North by the missionaries. Christianity became the chief stimulus of artistic expression in England. Anglo-Saxon rulers instigated and encouraged crafts and skills for the enrichment of the churches and monasteries. So strongly was Christianity establised in the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms that they were able to absorb and convert fresh waves of pagan invaders in Viking times. We are told that needlework was cherished by the noble and the privileged Anglo-Saxon women. The earliest surviving piece of needlework in Western Europe is a much deteriorated remnant of an English chasuble depicting Saint Harlindis and Relindis and is now in the cathedral church of Maeseryck in Belgium. It's of Anglo-Saxon workmanship and dates to the mid-ninth century AD and was worked in colour silks, gilt thread and seed pearls, depicting birds, animals and monograms in interlacing rondals. The design is consistent with manuscripts and illuminations of the same period.

Opus Anglicanum

Religious devotion and conviction has been the inspiration for many of the greatest works of art. One of England's greatest cultural achievements, known as Opus Anglicanum, which translates to "English Work", it describes the ecclesiastical embroidery of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This high period of English ecclesiastical needlework, is marked by the unique co-ordination of artistic and technical achievement, which was executed by monastic orders and professional workshops. These craftsmen worked mainly in Winchester and London. There was also an industrial aspect to Opus Anglicanum, it catered for both domestic and foreign orders which were paid for by

the wealthy ecclesiastical foundations. According to Clarke the high standard in English workshops was founded on seven year apprenticeships, and a continuity of experience. The apprenticeships were worked in accordance to very strict rules, which were enforced by embroidery guilds. (Clarke, 1968, p.134)

Ecclesiastical Vestments of Opus Anglicanum

The vast accumulation of vestments, gold and silver ornaments, jewels, relics, books and images, built up over the centuries were destroyed or dispersed between 1536 and 1539. As Henry VIII passed these acts for the disolution of all monastaries. Most of the fragments and textiles that survived the reformation, are now housed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, in London, and various cathederal museums.

Ecclesiastical costume has evolved from everyday wear, of the Roman citizens of the first and second centuries AD. Many garments worn by the clergy are only slightly changed from this period. While secular fashions changed, ecclesiastical styles were very conservative. Between the sixth and ninth centuries, the form of most of the garments was codified, either by papal declaration or by ecclesiastical councils. The fourth council of Braga, for example in 675 AD issued as decree, which regulated the way in which the *orarium* (stole) was to be worn by priests. It is possible to understand how the vestments are worn by looking at paintings, manuscripts, sculptures and stained glass.

Description of a Set of Ecclesiastical Vestments

St Ethelwold, Bishop of Winchester from 963 - 84, (fig.1,p.31) is

depicted in a monumental sculpture wearing a full set of ecclesiastical vestments. He stands holding the Bible and crozier, wearing a *Chasuble* - this was a large vestment which was originally circular in shape with an opening for the head. It was developed from the Roman overcoat, known as *paenula* or *casula* which means "little house". This vestment was usually made up of rich fabric, such as silk and embellished with decorative bands known as *orphreys*.

During the celebration of the mass, the priest at various times must raise his arms, for example, the elevation of the Host. As the full chasuble was a cumbersome and heavy garment, much of the embroidery on these garments was damaged due to the priests folding them back, out of their way. Eventually the shape of the chasuble was changed, and armlets were cut into it. (fig.2,p.32) Under the chasuble, the priest would wear an *Alb*. This evolved from the loose Roman under tunic, the *tunica linea*, and was made of white linen. Although coloured albs were made of silk, clothes of gold and velvet have also been recorded. Over the years, the shape of the alb became slimmer, and in particular the sleeves became tighter fitting. The alb was worn by all officers of the church, from the doorman to the archbishop. Albs were frequently decorated with ornamental patches of embroidery known *Apparels*, which were attached to the front and back of the skirt, just above the hem, with bands also around the wrists and neck.

Hanging from the bishop's left wrist is a slip of decorated fabric - The *Maniple*, also known as the *Fanon*. This developed from the *Sudarium*, a towel originally used by the priest to wipe his face during the service (sudar means sweat). Another long narrow strip of decorated fabric with fringed ends was the *Stole*, or *Orarium*, which was worn around the neck, and crossed over the chest. It was held in place by the girdle and hung to the hem of the alb, under the chasuble. When examined closely, it is evident that the decorated bands of the

orphrey, apparels, miniple and stole are all a matching set.

The Archbishops would also wear *Pallium* or *Pall*. This was a narrow strip of fabric worn around the shoulders with a strip hanging at the back and at the front. The Pallium was always made of white wool decorated with black crosses. A Roman Catholic Archbishop was expected to travel to Rome to receive this pallium directly from the Pope. This symbolically demonstrated his allegiance to Rome rather than the Archbishop of Canterbury, which was the high seat of the English church, or to the English Monarch. He was also expected to pay a large sum of money to the Papal for the Pallium.

As well as the vestments worn for the services of the sacraments - other garments were worn on ceremonial occasions - such as the *Cope*. The Cope became one of the richest of ecclesiastical garments. Originally a form of outer cloak worn by everyone, it developed into a magnificent processional garment. It was one of the few ecclesiastical garments that was not prohibited by the reformation. Copes were frequently decorated with orphreys down the front edges of the garment. The decoration of the orphrey was usually embroidered with repeating motifs of scenes from the life of Christ or of Saints. The Cope was held in position by a clasp known as the Morse, which was embroidered or made of gold and silver, and set in precious stones. Many were very large, and might depict a religious scene. The copes, when not in use were stored in large, quadrant shaped chests. They were laid flat, hood down, with the front edges being brought over to meet in the centre, thus minimising the folds. These chests date from the twelfth century. (fig.3, p.33) As the garments of Opus Anglicanum were so heavily decorated, they would have been impossible to hang up. The rest of the vestments, when not in use, would have been stored in chests and Almeries (cupboards).

Designers of Vestment Design of Opus Anglicanum

So respected and sought after were English embroiderers of Opus Anglicanum, that in 1263, Gregory of London was working in Rome as a gold embroiderer to the household of Pope Urban IV. The great Vatican inventory of 1295 recorded well over a hundred examples of English embroidery, far more than any other nationality.
(Igram, 1987, p.61)

At the end of the thirteenth century the London embroidery workshops reached the zenith of their achievement and their products were sought after by great potentates throughout Europe. This was a period of luxurious taste in England, corresponding to the decorated style in English gothic architecture and the rich illuminations of East Anglian manuscripts.

The designs during this great period of English church embroidery, fall into three groups: The earliest type was formed from the spiralling vine, the tree of Jesse, which enclosed representations of Saints identified by their symbols. The fabric used was generally rose coloured silk twill - for example, the Jesse Cope (fig.4, p.34)which is housed in the Victoria and Albert museum.

Towards the end of the thirteenth century, the basis of the design underwent a change. The ground was divided into squares (fig.5, p.34) such as the Syon Cope, also in the Victoria and Albert museum. The third type of design was developed in the first half of the fourteenth century, and consisted of a radiating arrangement of arcading - sometimes foliated, and with animals, figures, birds or symbols filling in the spandrils. The sacred figures within the arches were single or grouped, and the ground fabric was usually velvet - for example, the Butler Bowden Cope, embroidered on crimson velvet.

Another element contributed by the designers was a lively story-telling format. This narrative quality was common to most of the decoration at the time - this includes paintings, embroideries etc. It was a way of teaching Bible stories to the illiterate, because of this the drawing of the gestures was exaggerated in order that the meaning might be clearly conveyed. For example - high, broad foreheads and very large eyes (fig.6, p.34).

When the embroidery covered the entire surface of the fabric, linen was used as the supporting fabric. There were various reasons for this; it could be acquired cheaply, as it was grown extensively in Britain at the time, and when woven tightly it became very durable, and could withstand the weight of the embroidering.

Metal Thread

We can assume that the precious metal, gold, has existed since the beginning of recorded time. In the old testament, the book of Exodus, Chapter 26, God speaks of rich gold cloth ... in turn the Romans used it, and the Anglo-Saxons, and the embroiderers of Opus Anglicanum. In the thirteenth century there were two methods of producing metal threads:

The first method consists of pulling thin rods of gold and silver through holes in a disc. The drawn metal thread, or wire, was thus made solid. The goldsmiths produced these threads. The second method consisted of cutting out narrow tinsel strips from beaten gold or silver. This tinsel or "lamella" was spun around a textile core or used flat. This thread produced from the beaten gold or silver was very bright and shiny, and was used in Opus Anglicanum of the thirteenth century. Subsequently, the gold and silver lamella was spun around a silk core, (the silk thread,

was also being used in England and other parts of Europe at this time) this core helped to make it more manipulative. This type of thread was used up until the fifteenth century in embroidery. Yet, it did have certain inconveniences; it was very expensive to produce, but above all, it was heavy, and this put strain on the cloth, forming a destructive element of the garments. Due to this the metal thread was manufactured differently, and several kinds of imitations were produced. The imitations were cheaper and it was therefore possible to use more of this kind of gold and silver thread. The most important imitations are now generally referred to as "membrane gold and silver". They were made from animal membrane or gut (especially the intestines of cattle, according to Italian documents) which have been guilded or silvered. (Geiger, 1969, p.11) Some methods of guilding, however, have proven unsuccessful with regards to ageing, because the gold or silver has gradually worn off with the result that the gold threads are now a dull brownish colour.

Technique

After the metal threads were produced, there were three main techniques as to how the stitchery was applied. In order to make the stitch, a link must be made between the thread and fabric, embroiderers use a needle, the type of needle used is fundamental to the outcome of the piece.

> "a sensitive worker will feel quite unable to use a needle which is wrong for a particular job".
> (Whyte, 1969, p.24)

When using a needle correctly, the eye of the needle must be large enough to take the thread comfortably and make an adequate hole for its passage through the material. There are three types of needle: The *Crewel*, which is long, slim and pointed with a long eye for fine threads.

The *Chenille*, which is thick and pointed, with a very large eye for thick threads, and, the *Tapestry*, which is similar to the chenille, except the tip is blunt for canvas work.

Stitch Technique

There are three main types of stitch applied in Opus Anglicanum: Split stitch, surface couching, and underside couching.

Split Stitch

The rows of stitches are worked very closely together to cover the ground and worked using the up, down motion. The needle is brought up through the previous stitch, only leaving a tiny stitch on the reverse side. This allowed the embroiderer maximum use of thread and coverage. Only fine threads were suitable for this kind of stitch, such as silk. The split stitch was characteristic of the hair and face of Opus Anglicanum.

> "Worked directionally with spirals from the centre of the cheeks, the chin, and above the lips. This gives a three dimensional appearance which is accentuated by the physical distortion of the fabric."
> (Warner, 1991, p.24)

For the features it followed the outline, but on the cheeks it went into round spirals, as according to Warner (fig.8, p.36). The embroiderer could achieve great detail by using the split stitch. As the face and head were the most important parts of the figure and as the facial expression was of utmost importance in protraying the mood of the character, maximum detail was achieved through use of this stitch.

Couching

According to Thomas,

"Couching is derived from the French word, coucher, meaning to lie down."
(Thomas, 1889, p.55)

The Metal threads were laid down upon the surface of the material and fastened down with small stitches, using another independant thread. The couching in the embroidery of Opus Anglicanum was used mainly to fill in the body of the figure and the framework in the Cope, such as the scrolling vine spreading from the recumbent figure of Jesse, in the Cope of Jesse. It was also excellent for working an unbroken line and was suitable for working on fine fabric such as silk, as the heavier metal threads were sewn onto the surface and not forced through the fine ground fabric.

Surface Couching (fig.9, p.37)

Surface couching was an ideal manipulation of heavy metal thread. It could not be sewn through the fabric like an ordinary sewing thread, because it weakens the fabric as it is drawn bck and forth. The metal threads are couched down on the surface of the ground material with the silk thread. The threads are worked closely together and the maximum amount of metal thread is displayed without waste. The ends of the couched threads at the start and the finish are left free, and are not taken to the wrong side until the work is completed.

Underside Couching

Underside couching was one of the most amazing technical achievements of Opus Anglicanum, and has rarely been used since the early fourteenth century. The gold thread lies on the surface of the fabric, and the needle, threaded with a fine silk or linen thread, is brought up through the fabric, and is then taken over the gold, and returned down through the same hole, which draws a little loop of gold through the reverse side.

"The small loops formed hinges which prevented the embroidery from being unduly stiff."

(Kendrick, 1904, p.10)

For succeeding rows, the stitches alternate with those of the previous row. (fig.10,p.37) It is this gold work method which has contributed to the durability of the vestments.

The Cope of Jesse

The tree of Jesse is a biblical story from the old Testament (11: 1-9) which is one of the best-known descriptions of the ideal King of the future - Our Lord.

The Shoot from the Stump of Jesse: *11:1-9*

11 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
2 And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
3 And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth.
and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked.
5 Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist,
and faithfulness the girdle of his loins.

6 The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
7 The cow and the bear shall feed;
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
8 The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.
9 They shall not hurt or destroy
in all my holy mountain;

for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

The shoot from the stump of Jesse, symbolises the resurrection of Christ, for Christ gave His own body and soul for the people of the earth, so as to abolish sin. On the third day He rose from the dead and ascended into everlasting life.

This story was often depicted on the ecclesiastical vestments of Opus Anglicanum. It is an ambivalent image, as it reminds Christian believers that Christ suffered death in order to save their souls, yet it also reminds us of the resurrection, Heaven and everlasting life.

The Cope of Jesse is believed to date between 1295-1315 (fig.11, p.38) and was thought to have been embroidered in one of the workshops in London. The Cope when spread out is in the form of a semicircle with a radius of about four feet, nine inches. The middle of the straight edge comes to the back of the neck, both sides of this point pass over the shoulders of the wearer, and drape down the front and hang a short distance from the ground. From the middle of the straight side, to the middle of the curve (back), is the flattest area and the most important figures are placed here. The Cope of Jesse depicts the image of the recumbent figure of Jesse, (fig.12 p39) with David, Solomon and the Virgin Mary with the infant Saviour above him. To the right and left of this area are the images of the Kings and Prophets, they are disposed of in a radiating order, so that they are seen upright when the Cope is worn. The inner figures turn towards the middle, and the outer ones face the straight edge. All of the figures on the cope are encircled by the foliations of the vine, which spring from the heart of Jesse. This arrangement of branch work with foliage is one of the most sophisticated designs of the thirteenth century. On the Cope of Jesse, the elegant tendril pattern was embroidered in gold and silk threads on a red silk twill ground. The stitches were applied by underside couching

and split stitch, and was entirely hand embroidered. The Cope presently measures 53 x 72 inches (135 x 185 centimetres) but it is believed to have been originally larger; the size is difficult to categorically determine, as there are several pieces missing (fig.13,p.40). The size of other copes, such as the Syon Cope, 58 x 116 inches (341 x 295 centimetres) (fig.14, p.41) and the Butler Bowden measures 137.5 x 64 inches (341 x 165.5 centimetres) (fig.15, p.42) give us an idea of the approximate size of a cope.

The Cope of Jesse, was probably cut up around of time of the reformation in the sixteenth century, and used for other ecclesiastical purposes. From 1718 to 1857 - 58 it was kept in the Roman Catholic Chapel at Brockhampton, near Havant. It was afterwards in the possession of the Rev. F.H. Van Doorme at the Corpus Christi House in Brixton Rise and from there it moved to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1858.

Symbolism has formed the basis of all chuch art and is a means of visual communication, originally pagan. Many of the designs used in the church today, such as the vine or the circle, have originated from this early origin. The Cope of Jesse depicts the pictorial symbol of the vine/tree of life, which stems from the body of Jesse. The message conveyed by this symbol is of the resurrection, where according to Christian belief Christ rose from the dead on the third day, and those who believe in him, will also rise from the dead, and live an everlasting life.

The traditional liturgical colours are of medieval origin. Many cathedrals and churches possess sets of vestments and altar frontals in the appropriate colours for each of the church's seasons. Feast days and seasons are usually observed by changes in the colour of vestments and hangings, and this is still the tradition today. The colour sequence

used by the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England, is known as Western Usage.

White, cream or gold are used for the festivals of Christmas, Easter, The Ascention and sometimes for Saint's feast days. Red is used for the Pentecost and for the feasts of martyrs. Green is used for the Epiphany until Septuagesima, and after Trinity Sunday until the eve of Advent Sunday. Purple, Violet or blue is used for advent, vigils, ember days and passiontide. Black is used on Good Friday, All Souls Day and for Requiem masses.

The attribution of colour symbolism varies from time to time and from country to country. The Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England tend to agree on the same symbolic meanings of colour.

White is the greatest and symbolises God, innocence of the soul, purity of thought and holiness of life. Gold or Yellow symbolises sovereignty, the sun, love, constancy, dignity and wisdom. Red symbolises the colour of fire and the holy colour of blood. Green represents the earth and nature, fruitfulness, hope, and God's provision for man's needs. Blue signifies eternity, faith, truth and the feminine principle. The ground fabric os the Cope of Jesse is red silk twill, the colour red is symbolic to the body of Jesse - the colour of his blood. The vine on the Cope of Jesse has been embroidered with green silk, and is symbolic of hope and fruitfulness. The vine also coils into circles - the circle is a symbol of eternity and is ageless.

The Reformation .... End of Opus Anglicanum

From the middle of the fourteenth century onwards, the excellence of Opus Anglicanum began to fade. There was no longer a demand for the luxurious quality, as in the preceding period. The wages of the

skilled workers rose, and at the same time the embroidery workshops had to meet increasing competition from imports of Italian patterned silks. The English workshops responded by simplifying their techniques, underside couching, for example, was replaced by surface couching. Designs were also simplified and repeated over and over again. Large pieces such as copes and altar frontals, were no longer embroidered. Finally the long tradition of religious embroidery was brought to a very abrupt halt by the reformation. The acts of 1536 and 1539 ordered that all the churches and monasteries be cleared of all monuments, images and scriptural texts. Many vestments were burnt and stripped of their thread. It has been recorded that many private palours were hung with altar cloths, their tables and beds were covered with copes instead of carpets or coverlids. Inventories of the mid-1950's show how churches and monasteries sold off their treasures in order to avoid government seizure. Unfortunately after the sales most of the teasures vanished without trace. However, some of the vestments were bought by Catholic families who used them in secret, as part of illegal Roman Catholic worship.

Chapter Two

Social Aspects of Embroidery .

Embroidery of the twentieth century is controversial in many aspects. The medium in which it is often produced, it's lack of obvious stitching, a disregard for technical sophistication, it's gender associations, and how society treats it as an art form are all contestable.

Much research has been carried out, into the history of embroidery. One of the most prominent, reoccuring questions arising from this research has been "has embroidery been creative or oppressive in the development of feminine behaviour?" The following quotation suggests that embroidery was a source of oppression.

> "The woman, rightly, will have her hands occupied, so her head may be unpreoccupied, for when the hand is idle, the brain works."
> (Perez de Ayala, 1925, p.66)

This refers to women and their embroidery of the nineteenth century. Men, during this era did not want women taking part in anything other than domestic matters.

Vast social and cultural changes took place in England during the bridging period of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These were due to a number of factors, including the industrial revolution, and the resulting increase of disposable income. This new era brought with it a "throwaway" society which rejected the ancient skills and techniques of embroidery which had previously been passed down from generation to generation. As a result, the embroidery of the twentieth century lacks technical sophistication and a social stigma had become attached to the art;

> "Sir, she's an artist with her needle .... could anything be more laughable, than a woman claiming artistic status for her sewing?"
> (Parker, 1984, p.144)

This was the opinion of embroidery held by a percentage of people at the beginning of the twentieth century. Also, the art became genderised;

"Few men would risk jeopardising their sexual identity by claiming the rights to the needle."
(Parker, 1984, p.81)

The invention of the sewing machine revolutionised twentieth century embroidery. It re-established embroidery as a socially accepted and respected art. It was a German company, named "Singer", that lauched the first industrial sewing machine in 1851. In 1856, Singer invented the first domestic sewing machine. Up until the 1930s sewing machines had been used to imitate cheaply and speedily the effects of hand embroidery. The creative potential of the machine had not yet been challenged or recognised. Rebecca Crompton and Dorothy Benson were key figures in revolutionising the situation. These two women formed a working alliance to investigate the creative possibilites of the domestic sewing machine. Althought today, machine embroidery is readily accepted as a creative medium, Crompton and Benson initially recieved a negitive response, Joan Edwards recorded how groups of teachers left before the demonstration sessions were over as evidence of their contempt, (Benn, 1988, p56). Eventually Crompton and Benson prevailed and brought machine embroidery to an accepted level.

During the 1950s embroiders gradually realised the effects which could be achieved throught machine embroidery, it could be manipulated to produce a range of free stitches which were very different from hand embroidery.

Alice Kettle

> "Alice Kettle's textile art is firmly anchored in an English tradition which goes back to the wildely acclaimed medieval embroideries of Opus Anglicanum, from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries,"
> (Harris, 1995, p.10)

Kettle's work belongs unequivocally to the end of the twentieth century, for she uses a modern domestic and industrial sewing machines to express her contemporary experiences and achieve her particular blend of effects. In recent years textile art has become a major emerging art form, with many fine artists such as Kettle turning to it as a medium of expression. Kettle studied painting at Reading Universty, from 1979-83, it was not until after graduating, that she discovered that the art of embroidery was the medium with which she was most comfortable.

> "When I made the change, I was aware that the two activities were closely related, but embroidery was the medium which helped me express my individuality "
> (Kettle, 1990, p.24).

Kettle is now one of the prime exponents of this new fine-textile art form and is particularity noted for her painterly machine techniques.

Kettle, while studying as a painter, worked on large canvases , in a bold abstract expressionistic style, with large brush strokes sweeping across the canvas. The tragic death of her mother in 1984 had a major impact on her style. Her paintings were replaced by smaller, more introspective works, all of which included figures. Intially, these were self-portraits, (fig.16, p.43) or portraits of people who were important to her at the time. Gradually they became more impersonal, though invariably reflecting her own emotional state. Her early figures were confined within boxes, either drawn literally or repesented by the edges of the canvas itself, (fig.17, p.44). When Kettle started to use the sewing machine, her figures appeared to be given a new life, they danced,

jumped and rolled off the fabric, (fig.18, p.45) .When she started the embroidery course at Goldsmiths College, in 1985, she made a conscious decision that there would be no hand embroidery in her work. It was not that she had a dislike for the stitchery, but she felt that the industrial and domestic sewing machine could best aid her work and what she wanted to achieve.

First, in order to make a stitch, a thread must be chosen, the types of thread Kettle uses have greatly contributed to her rather unique technique. By mixing various qualities of thread, such as silk, rayon, cotton and metal, combined with their colours, Kettle has explored many ways of absorbing and reflecting light. Also she used her skill as a painter to her advantage,

> "The lessons learnt from painting, to vary the types of marks and scale of the brush strokes, to balance bold area with dynamic lines"
> (Harris, 1995, p.13).

Kettle implemented this knowledge on to the fabric by the sewing machine. She challenged all aspects of the so-called technically correct machine embroidery. During her first few months at Goldsmiths She spent most of her time, learning the behaviour patterns of the sewing machines. She combined many colours and types of threads, and machined them layer upon layer onto cotton canvas. The images she stitched were of figures, standing, sitting, lying, and kneeling, it was an exploration of movement and gesture (fig.19, p.46). As a result she had now developed a stitch language of loops and lines. Also, as she had previously painted on large canvas, she felt this gave her confidence to cover large areas of fabric. Kettle found that by intensively stitching areas the fabric would ripple, now she had found a way of manipulating and moulding the fabric, this in turn released the figures from the fabric, and added to the sense of movement, she had thus created a new three dimensional format and challenged embroidery as an expressive medium of stitch and fabric. Kettle felt she,

> "was able to marry an inate feeling for textiles, with a painter's concern for colour and line, she felt at last, she had found her medium and her identity "
> (Harris, 1995, p.16)

Embroidery is made up of threads, the word "thread", has wide implications, as it may be termed as anything which will make a stitch, Whyte has mentioned, but a few,

> "All embroidery threads in cotton, linen, silk, wool and rayon, all manner of strings and twines in linen, hemp, jute, laces, hairs and weaving yarns from coarse hand-spun to gossamer synthetics. All knitting wools and crochet yarns, and mixtures, including metallic and lurex threads; Japanse gold and silvers, purls and cords, reels of machine threads, buttonhole twists, waxed linens, polypropylene, plastics and other synthetics,"
> (K.Whyte, 1969, p 14).

Despite the comprehensiveness of this list, it would be impossible to mention every kind of yarn, as yarns are prepared for specific purposes, according to design. Their variety is vast, due to the diversity of their raw materials, and due to the individual ways in which they are prepared and spun. Their characteristics differ enormously, from the supple smoothness of silks, the shine of rayons, the hairiness of wools, to the more brittle quality of synthetics. Also, their bulks and twists make them appear differently - a tightly twisted yarn has a wilful, springy quality, while floss silk and soft wool such as mohair and fleece have very little twist, yet spread and cover surfaces easily. Embroidery can use all of them. Each one makes a different statement on the fabric, depending on how it is applied, and on the style of the individual applying it. When we take a piece of thread, it can already be a type of line, and can-be used to draw. All threads ask to be used differently, for example, a chunky wool would not be suitable for minute detail, while a silk thread would. The threads can be split, for example silk threads were used in the split stitch of Opus Anglicanum, or used whole, or in combination groups to form multiple strands, giving a wide varity of scale and texture.

One of the most dominant and interesting aspects of Kettle's work is

her use of metal threads, for example her altar frontal for the Holy Sepulchre Chapel, in Winchester Cathedral. Metal thread has traditionally been hand sewn, as in Opus Anglicanum, this was due to the fact that it was very difficult to manipulate. In order to be able to use it in sewing machines the thread can only be used in a bobbin (the spool which is inserted into the lower part of the machine). Metal thread cannot be threaded on top or through the eye of the needle, as it snaps easily, making it extremely frustrating to work with. The top tension (spool) must be threaded, therefore, with either a cotton or fine silk thread. In order for the metal thread to stitch smoothly and freely it must run off the bobbin easily. If one wants to produce a technically correct sewing line, the top tension must be tighter. As Kettle aims to produce interesting textures, she loosens up the top tension. Even though this maybe viewed as mechanically incorrect, it produces a loopy line, on the opposite side, which warps the surface of the fabric, so each line of stitching moulds and shapes the fabric continuously. This is a very important aspect as the metal thread is the under thread in the machine. The work is, therefore, controlled from the reverse side of the fabric, so Kettle has to think of each stitch from the reverse side , and constantly take the work off the machine to examine it. Infact the loopy she creates is a twentieth century mechanical variation of the eleventh century stitch, underside couching (fig.20, p.47).

> "The remarkable part is that, the picture we see is really the reverse of the sewn fabric".
> (Coatts, 1992, p 27).

Altar Frontal Commissioned for the Holy Sepulchre Chapel

According to Whyte, commissioned work calls forth a different response in the designer. The designer should, when undertaking a church commission, visit the building in order to study its architecture and

absorb its atmosphere. The environment should influence and be reflected in the work. The space, height and character of the walls, all contribute to what is meant by the "feel of the place". If the designer is sensitive to those values, and can echo them, or take account of them by some method of contrast in her design, she will produce more interesting work, than relying on the style of the furnishings and decoration as her guide. In accordance with this scale of values, her design can reflect her own era and still hope to achieve an ideal, timeless quality in its setting.
(Whyte, 1969, p.217)

Symbolisim has been the foundation of all church art, designers today, such as Alice Kettle, use the same symbols that the designers of the thirteenth century used. The style of symbolic images may change, and perhaps become more abstract, yet if the symbolic image is not obvious, the colours can aid the meaning, as they two are symbolic. The combination of the two, reveal what is meant by the art work.

Kettle was commissioned by the Bishop of Winchester, to embroider an altar frontal for the Holy Sepulchre Chapel in 1994. The commission was and is part of an on going commissioning programme of new work from contemporary artists. Kettle was specifically chosen for the Holy Sepulchre Chapel - Lady Chapel, because of her excellence as an embroider, and also because she is a local artist and resident of Winchester (fig.21, p.48). The cathedral has a distinguished history of commissioning fine embroidery from the early eighteenth century onwards. Most of their vestments from the twentieth century were designed by architect Ninian Comper and embroidered by the Sisters of Bethony. The Winchester cathedral broderers was founded in 1931; by Louisa Peasel and Sybil Blunt. Mrs Blunt drew the designs, and Mrs Pesel worked and over-saw the sewing. They produced over 360 kneelers for chairs, 96 alms bags, 34 long bench cushions, 62 stall

cushions, and 1 lectern carpet, it was the largest body of work ever given to a cathedral from one commission.

On reading the artist's accompanying statement for her altar frontal (app.1. p.55), it is quite clear that Kettle set out to embroider a piece that would complement the imagery and technique of the twelfth century wall-paintings for which the chapel is famous and not take from them in any way. On visiting the cathedral I learned the very interesting and historic story of the wall-paintings. The painting above Kettle's altar frontal dates from approximately 1180 (fig.22,p.49), and was uncovered during conservation work in 1963. In the thirteenth century the architecture was changed within the chapel, from the rounded archs of the Romanesque style, to a pointed Gothic style. In doing so the painting no longer fitted the dimensions of the arch, so it was painted over by a less spectactular painting in approximetly 1212, which is now mounted on the back wall of the chapel, (fig.29, p.51). Unfortunalety there is no knowledge of either painter. Kettle's altar frontal has been embroidered in accordance with the symbolic imagery of the wall-painting from 1180. The union between them, has created a symbol which is also the symbol depicted on the Cope of Jesse, the ecclessiastic symbol of the Tree of Life which represents the resurrection - everlasting life. The cross in the crucifixion scene (fig.23, p.50) symbolises the tree of life, as does the vine on the Cope of Jesse. The colour of the cross is also symbolic, it has been painted green, the liturgical colour green symbolises life, growth, fruitfulness and hope.

Kettle has completed the symbolic image of the Tree of Life, by laying Christ/Jesse in the tomb (altar frontal) which is underneath the wall painting. The format of the wall painting combined with the altar frontal, is of a similar structure to the Cope of Jesse. A pyramid is formed with the recumberant figure at the base, and from him the vine shoots. The cross and the vine are united by the colour symbolism of

green. The pictorials may be slightly different, yet it is the symbolic meaning which unites them.

According to Whyte, symbolism is the foundation of all church art. That it is a visual lanuage with the power to convey beliefs and concepts of worship. The designer should not disregard symbolism as something merely ancient and overlaid with mystery for it is its very essence that by passes lanugage and out strips time.
(Whyte, 1969, p.216)

The image on Kettle's altar frontal depicts the deposition scene, showing the figure of Christ laid out. (fig.25, p52) Tradionally the figure of Christ is embroidered in gold thread, as gold was the most beautiful, precious and expensive metal obtainable and the liturgical colour gold symbolises sovereignty and love. Kettle conformed to this tradition, as she was working according to the colour palette dictated by the wall-painting. The normal restrictions of liturgical colour dictated by the church calender for vestments and frontals did not apply, since this frontal is to be in position throughout the year. The Dean and Chapter of Winchester cathedral were apprehensive that Kettle, would depict to literal a representation of the dead body of Christ. She responded to this by making the figure more abstract, and by omitting her usual outlines, the figure therefore became a more intergral part of the background stitching, and in turn, the altar frontal merges with the wall-painting. Kettle regards the figure as
"The essence of my work, the human content, the emotional link ".
(Harris, 1995, p.11)

The figure on the altar frontal is a fine example of this, it is very peaceful, and creates a tranquil and silent atmosphere, within the chapel. Kettle achieved this quality through her image, colour palette and stitch technique. According to Dean, when planning colour

schemes apart from the symbolic meanings, an understanding of tone value is necessary. Two equal areas of similar tones will produce a merging effect when viewed from a distance. The altar frontal's colour palette has been dictated by the soft tones in the wall painting. The embroidered background is predominatly white, which symbolises God, purity of thought, and holiness of life.
(Dean, 1961, p.22)

The altar frontal's colour palettle is comprised predominatly of a white background with brown, silver and gold threads worked over it (fig.26, p53) The colours on the figure are unrealistic, yet, they reflect the strong colours which still survive in the original wall-painting, such as gold, various shades of pink, red, gray, blue and brown (fig.25, p52). All of these coloured threads are stitched intensively over the white and silver ground. There is a flash of red and blue at the top, which highlight the colours, there is a lower band of gold thread, (fig.27, p54) and in compositional terms, forms the base of a pyramid one can follow throught, the deposition scene to the pantocrator, and finally to the figure of Christ in majesty, at the apex.

> "Strong simple design ensures full impact in a church, and without this foundation no amount of dedicated work and skill in execution, will have it's full value. "
> (Whyte, 1962, p.222).

Kettle has included all the correct elements of an ecclesiastical commission. The altar frontal is one of simiplicity. Its rythmic surface catches the light and the overall effect complements the wallpaintings..

Conclusion

During my initial research of my two chosen periods of embroidery, it appeared that they had many differences. However, I have since discovered that they are bound together by ecclesiastical symbolism. The strict technical stitchery of Opus Anglicanum in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; and the experimental technical stitchery of Alice Kettle - both of which have produced a technique which has been widely acclaimed.

The technical sophistication of the hand embroidery of Opus Anglicanum may never be equalled. Yet, contemporary machine embroidery challenges its excellences. All this, has led me to believe that embroidery is a rare phenomenon. It needs no special working conditions such as kilns, forges or looms, it can be worked by anyone with a minimum degree of manual dexterity and equipment. It is an art with both artistic and practical uses. The medieval embroiderers of Opus Anglicanum implemented the art by simply using needles and threads on a foundation fabric. The art has now evolved over the centuries using the same equipment. It was only in the nineteenth century that the mechanical needle (sewing machine) was introduced.

Contemporary embroidery now implements both of these methods. By doing so, twentieth century embroiderers strive for technical excellence or abandon technique completely. Many embroiderers de-emphasize stitches and their myrid variations - and treat the threaded needle like a paint-laden brush. Embroiderers explore the possibilities of medium, rather than just using the traditional cloth and thread. Contemporary embroiderers are aware of their ancestoral roots in the stitched textile tradition, but they have evolved ways of working which challenge boundaries and transcend technicalities.

"With British work showing exciting new directions,
is it not time that the reputation of Opus Anglicanum
was restored to its previous level?"
(Parry, 1994, p.24).

Fig. 1
St Ethewold, Bishop of Winchester, 963 - 84
(a) Chasuble
(b) Alb
(c) Maniple
(d) Stole

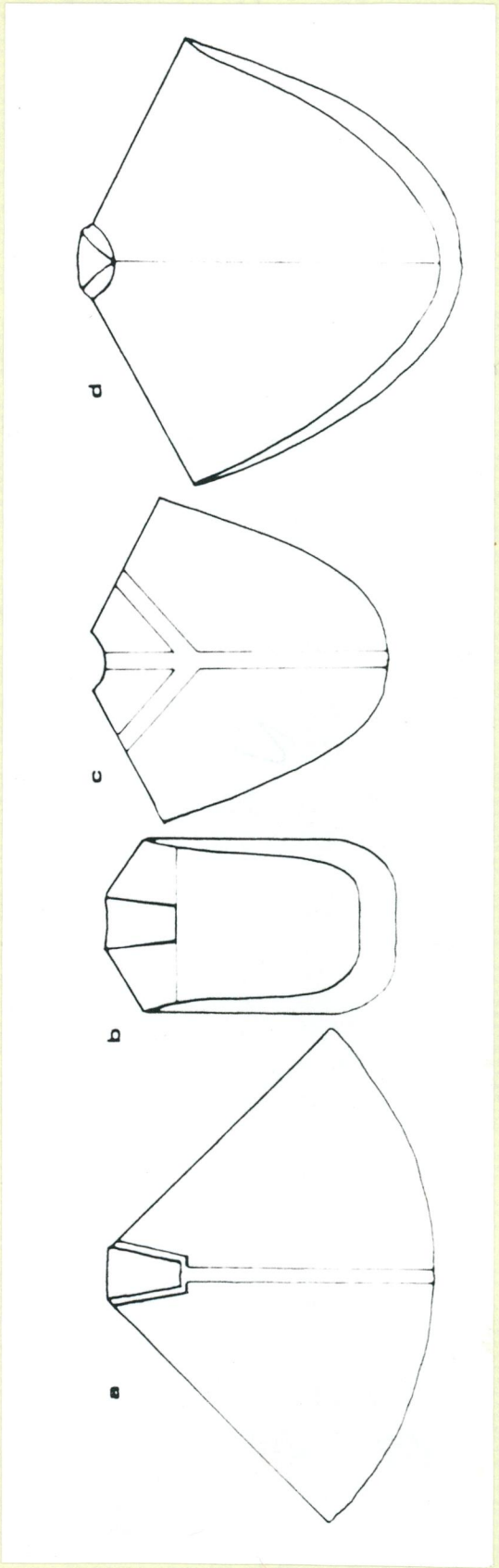
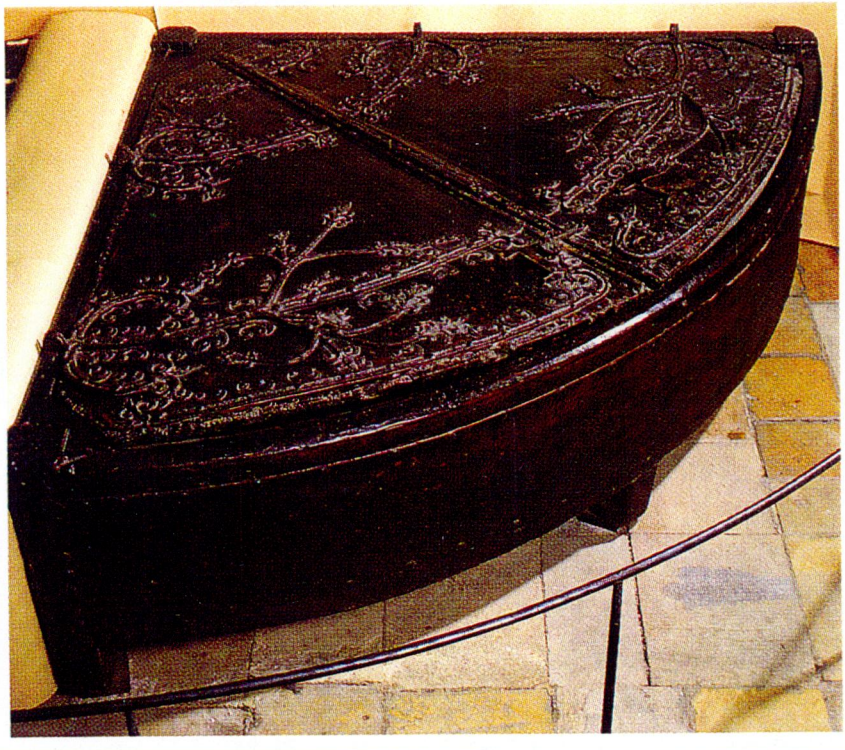


Fig 2
Development of the Chasuble



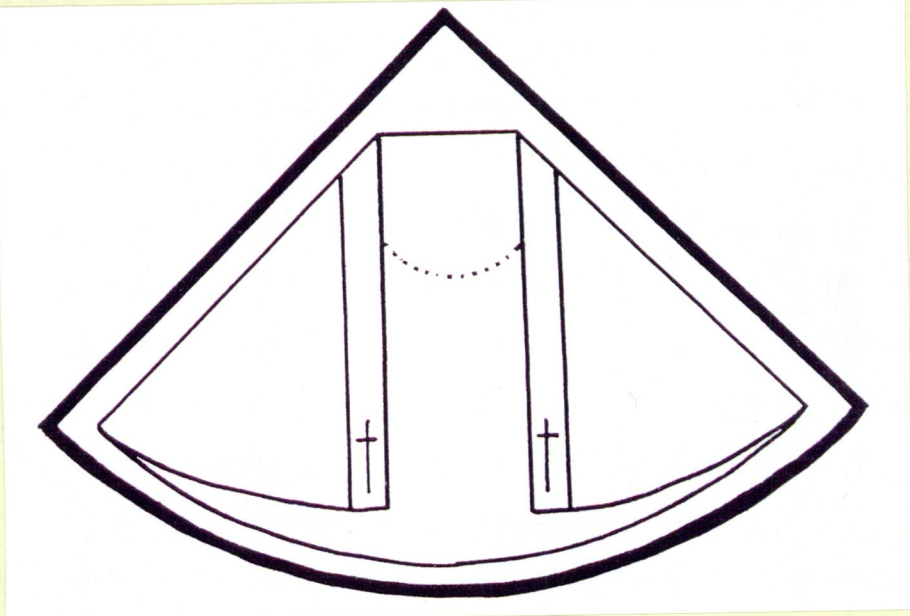
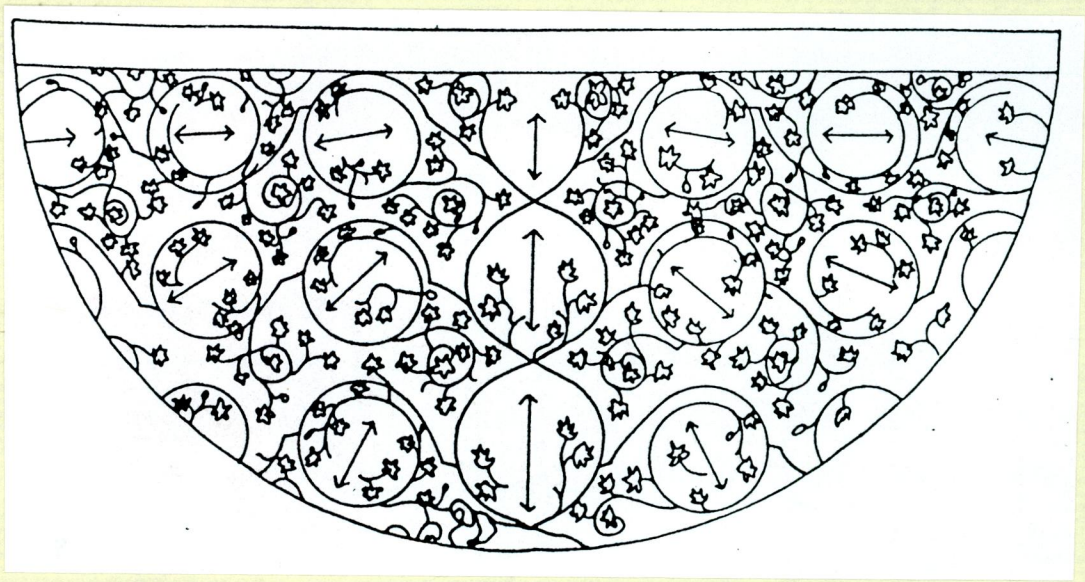
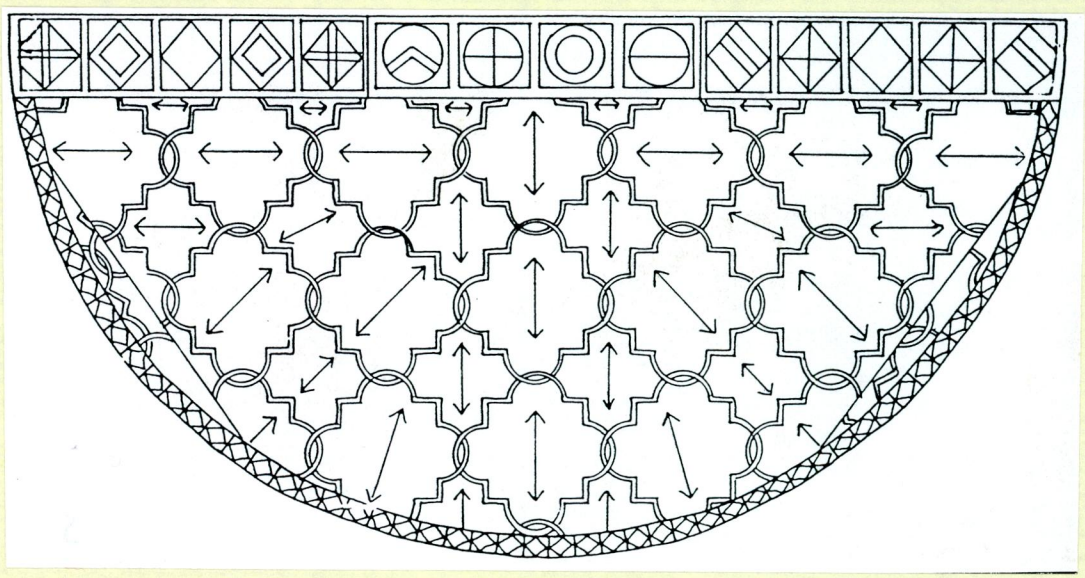


Fig 3
Thirteenth Century Cope Chest





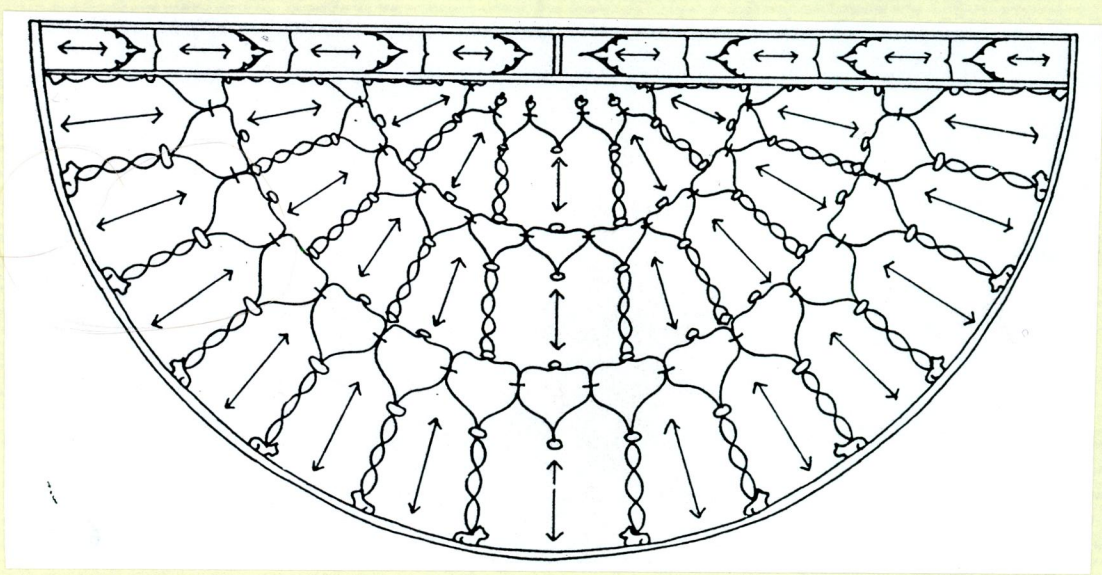
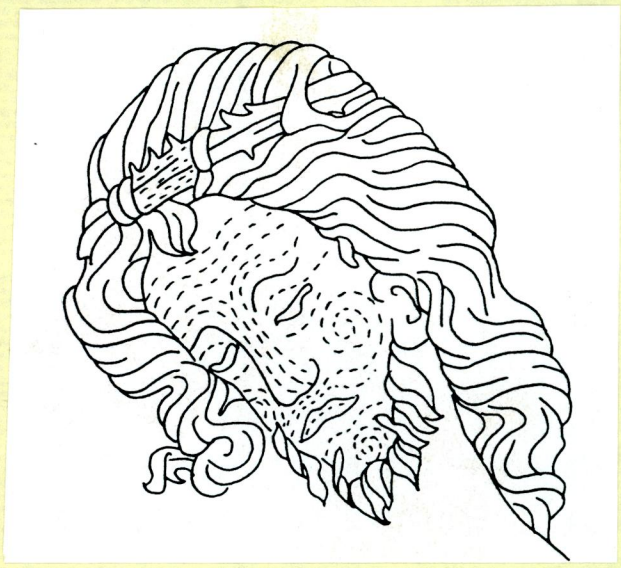


Fig 4, 5 & 6

(a) Structural Design - Jesse Cope
(b) Structural Design - Syon Cope
(c) Structural Desing - Butler Bowden Cope

Fig 7
Detail of Figure - Opus Anglicanum



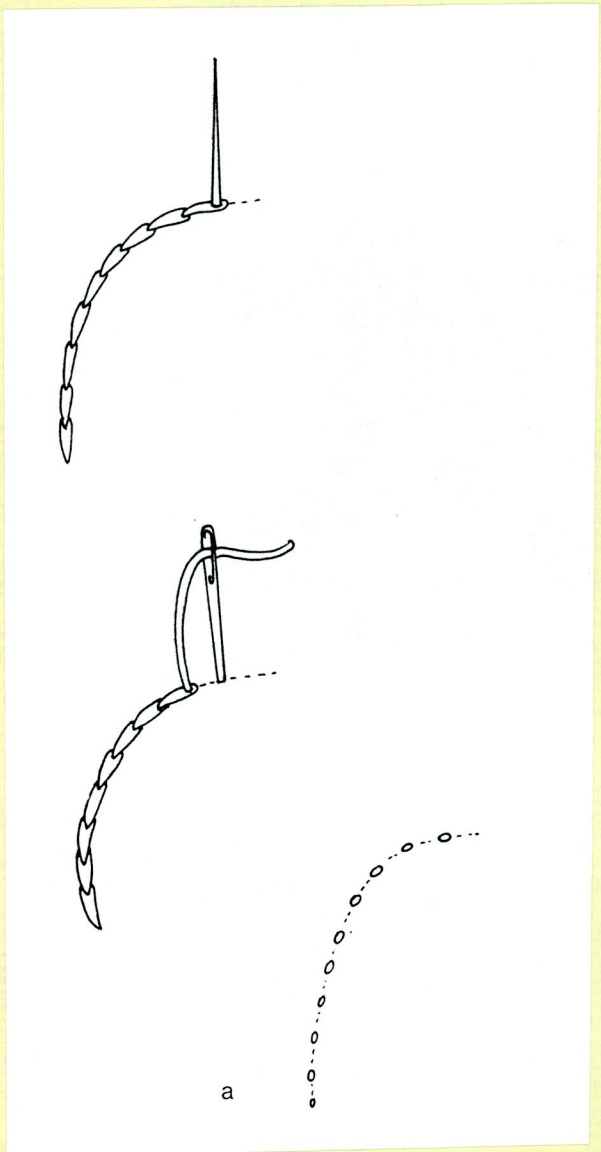
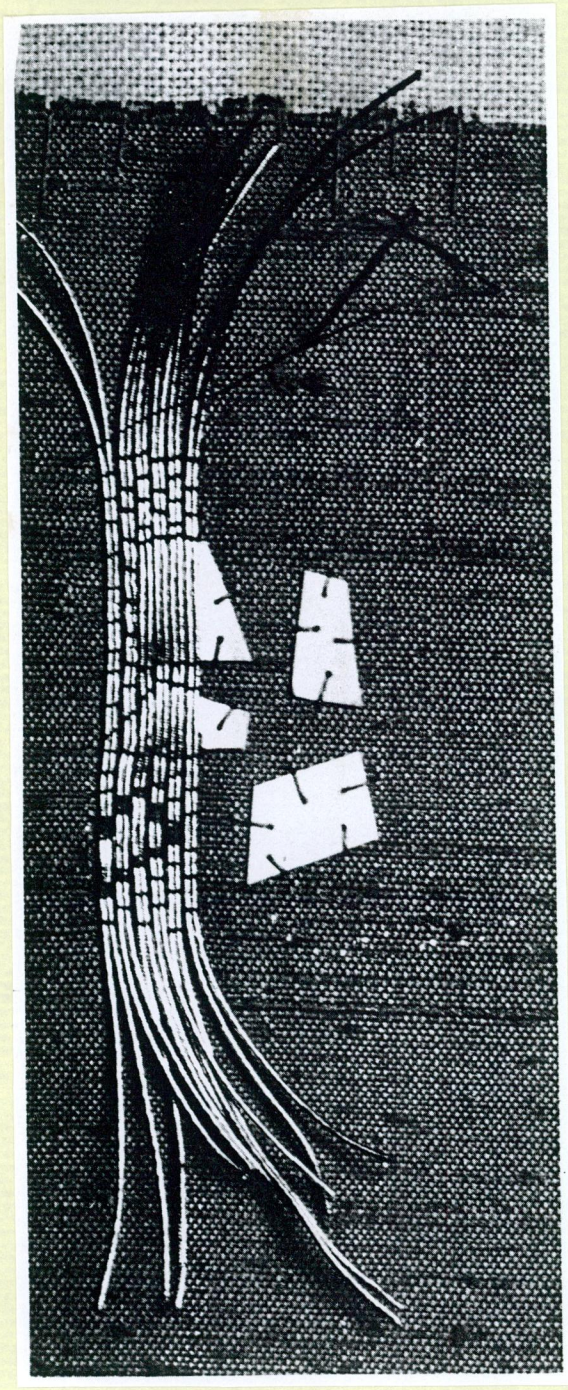
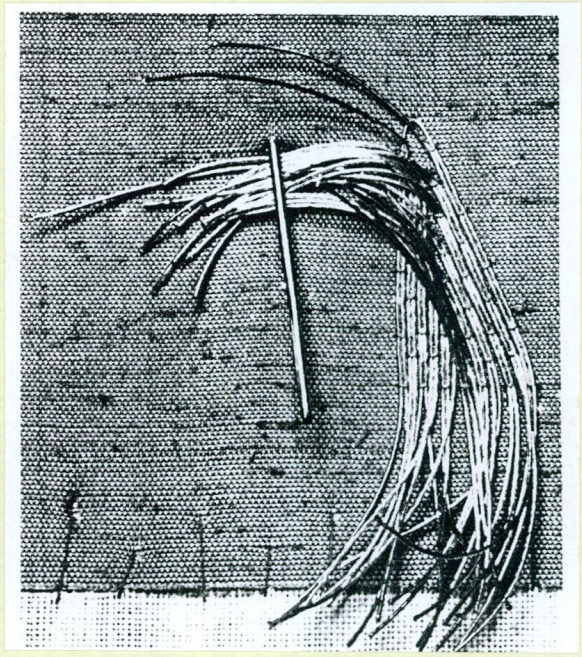


Fig 8
Split Stitch, Opus Anglicanum





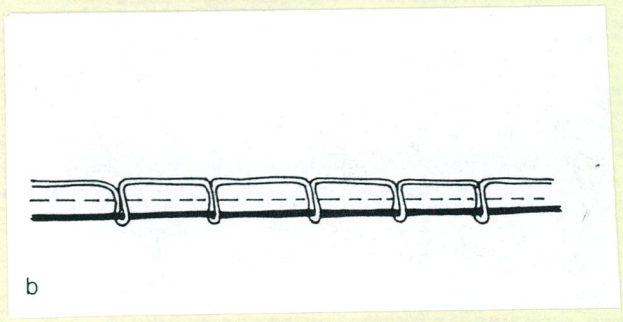


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Fig 9
Surface Couching, Opus Anglicanum

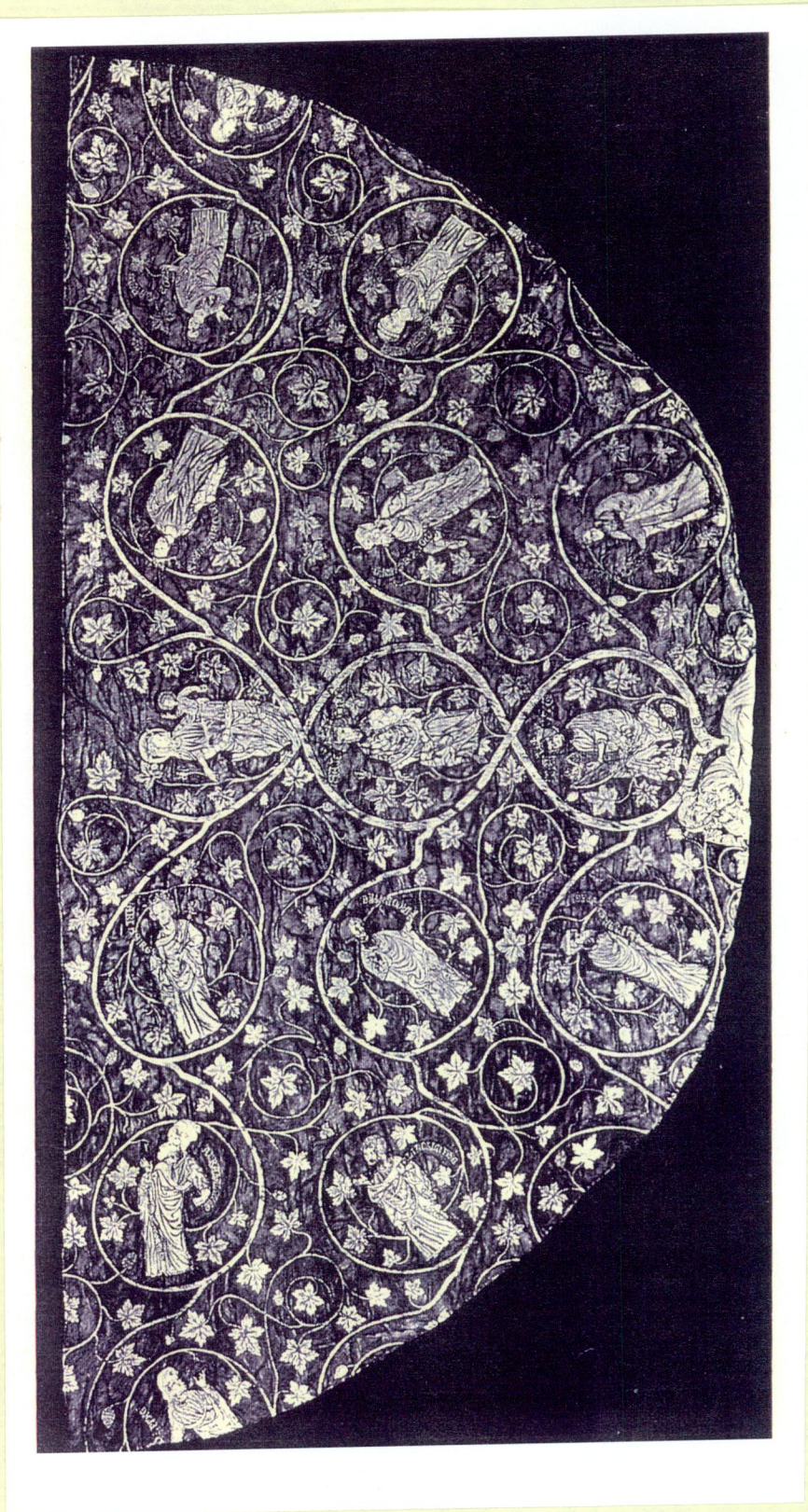


Fig 11
Cope Of Jesse

Fig 12
Detail of Jesse

Fig 13
Cope of Jesse
1295 - 1315

Fig 14
Syon Cope
1300 - 1320

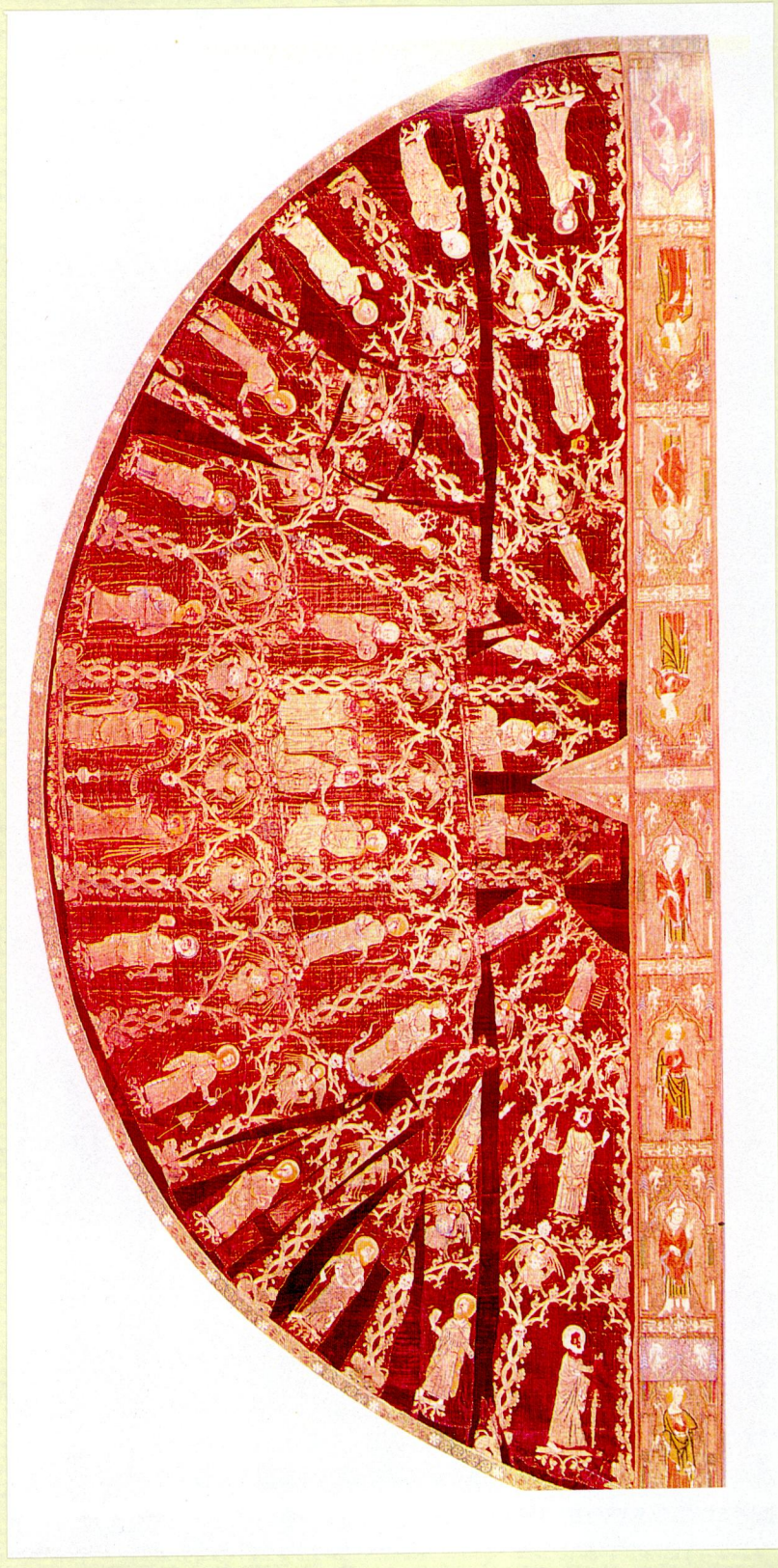


Fig 15
Butler Bowden Cope
1330 - 1350

Fig 16
Alice Kettle
Self portrait 1985
28 x 20

Fig 17
Figure, box painting
1984
29 x 22

Fig 18
Jumping Figure 1987
23 x 30

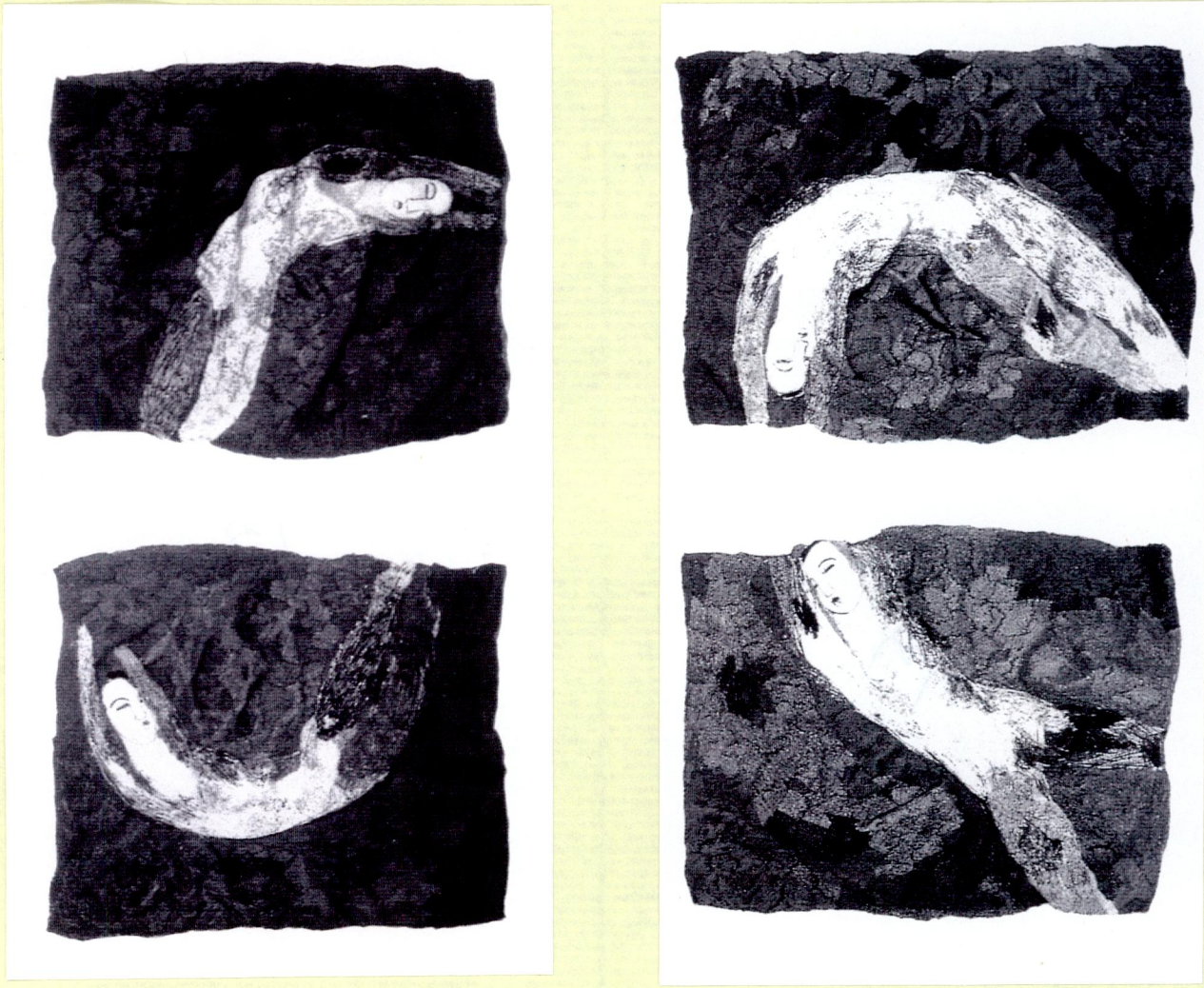


Fig 19
Movement and Gesture Pieces
1987 - 1988
37 x 30

Fig 20
Detail - stitch, Alice Kettle

Fig 21
Holy Sepulchre Chapel

Fig 22
Wall Painting, 1180,
Holy Sepulchre Chapel

Fig 23
Detail of Cross, Wall painting, 1180

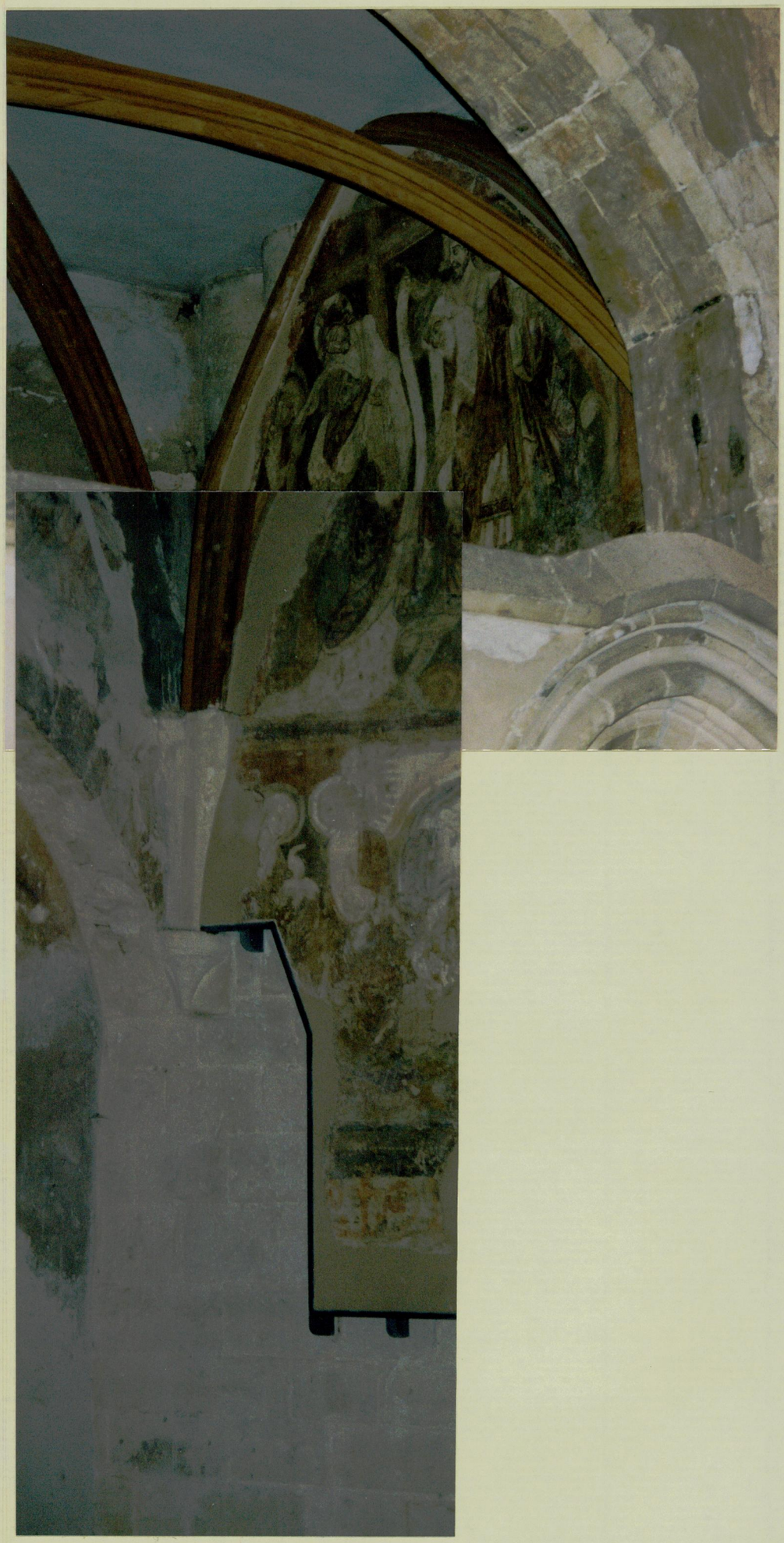
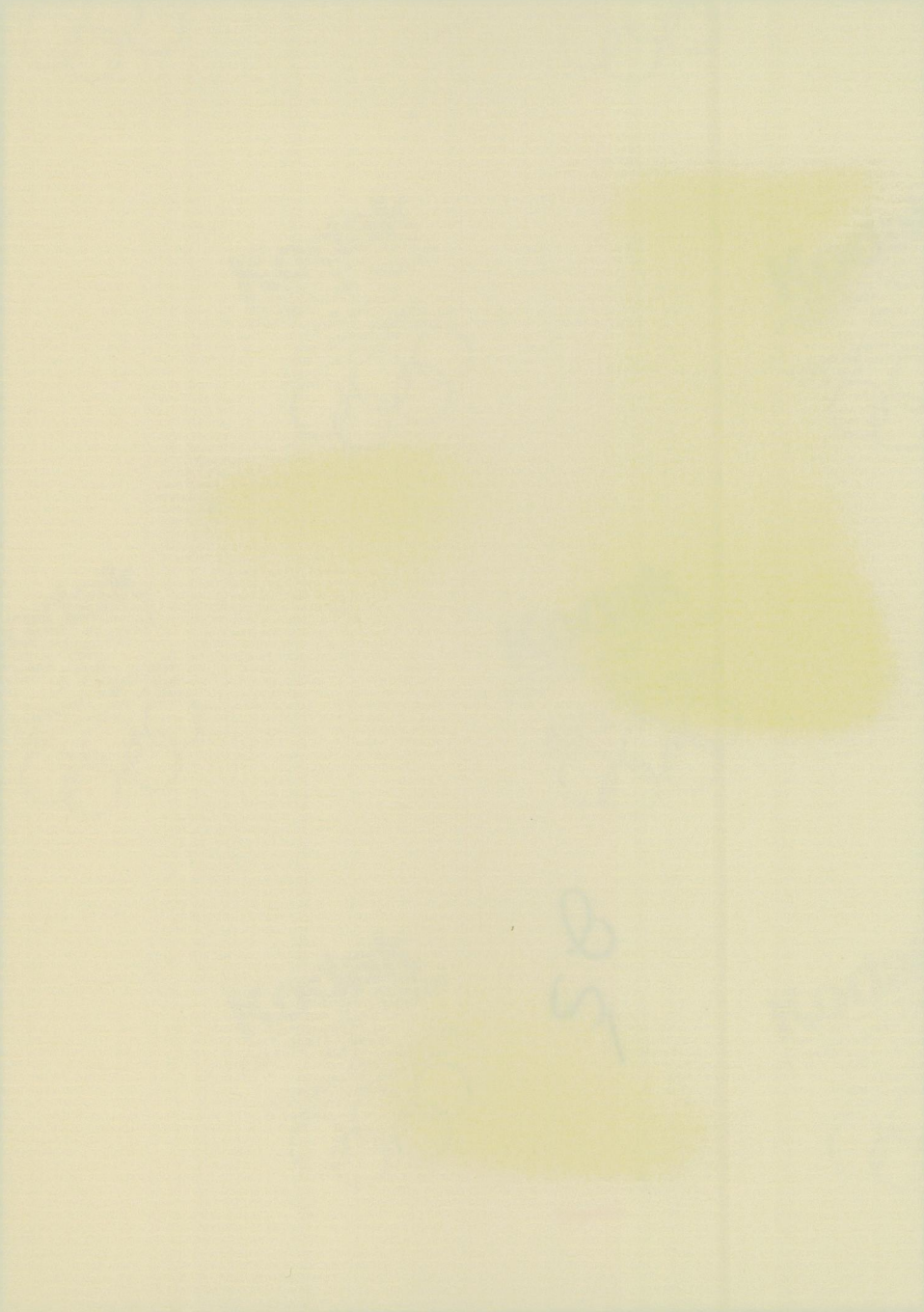


Fig 24
Wall Painting 1212
Holy Sepulchre Chapel

Fig 25
Figure of Christ,
Altar frontal



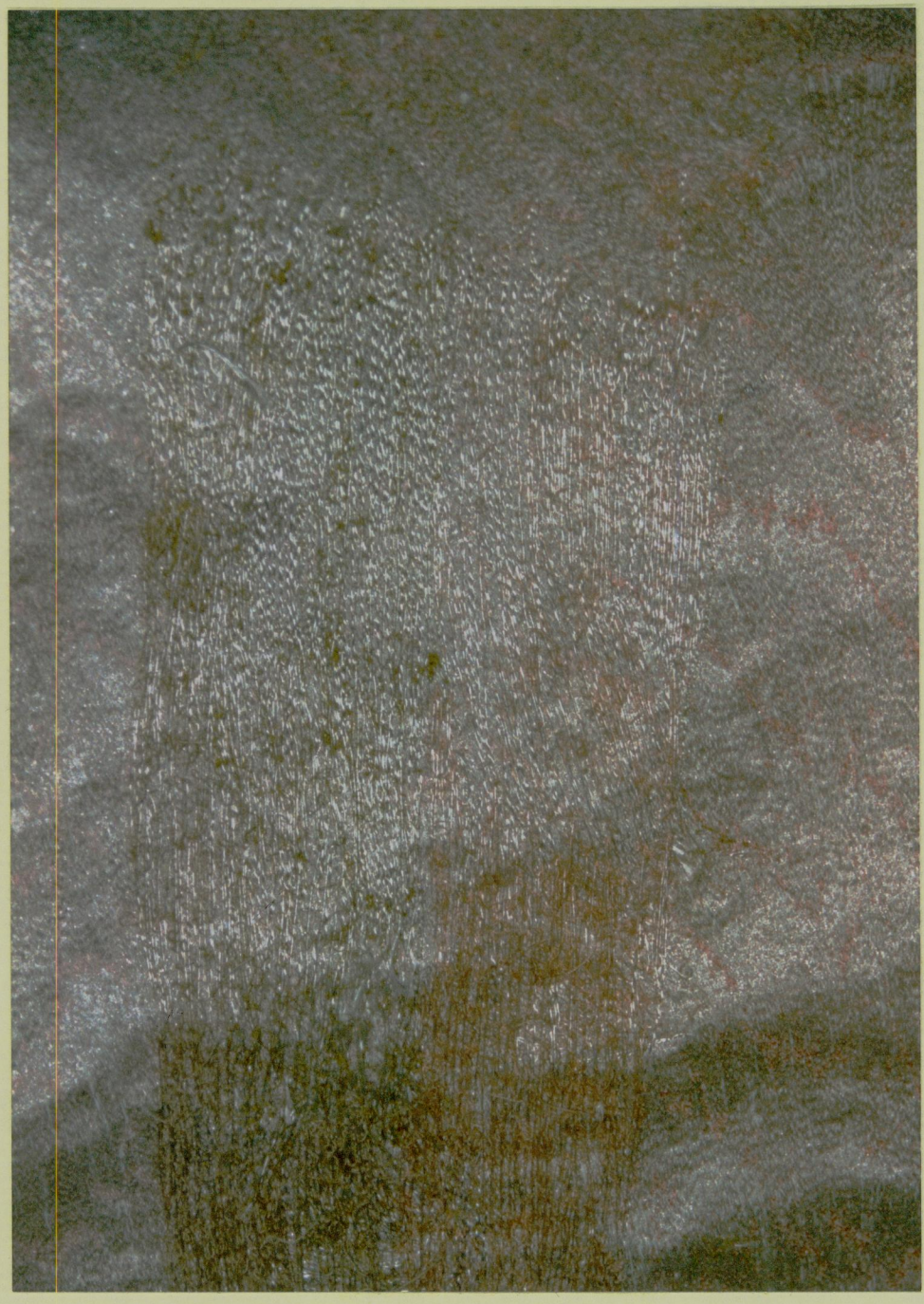


Fig 26
Detail of Altar Frontal

Fig 27
Altar Frontal

ALICE KETTLE

TEXTILE ARTIST
12 Arthur Road, Winchester, Hampshire SO23 7EA, England
Telephone and Fax (0962) ~~864546~~ 00441 864727

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

My aim has been to complement the artistry, imagery and technique of the medieval wall-painting in the Holy Sepulchre Chapel.

In wall-painting, paint is applied to plaster, giving strong, bright colours in places, softer tones where the paint has been absorbed into plaster, and white areas where the paint has come away with the passage of time.

In keeping, my frontal is stitched much as a painter applies paint: layer upon layer of different thread, with lines and shades frequently redefined. The background is white and silver, a translation if you like of plaster into thread. Soft pastels produce a tone both impressionist and contemplative. An occasional, bold brush stroke reflects the strength of colour of the original wall paintings, and lends a gently contemporary note.

But perhaps most importantly I have concentrated on gold thread. Traces of gold paint have been found on the angel wings on the East wall of the Chapel, whose paintings date from the 1160s. And gold thread imbues the frontal with a quiet, majestic glow.

In terms of visual design, this strength is also suggested by the symbolism of the pyramid. The attentive eye will notice a progression upward, from the solitary figure of the frontal, through the Deposition scene, to the Pantocrator above, Christ in majesty. Jesse

Another device I have used is to draw the gaze of the viewer from outside the Chapel through the open arch and into the intimacy of the Chapel by continuing the legs of Christ around the near side of the altar.

If the decay of time and death is one impression of the Chapel, then hidden strength and majesty is surely the underlying statement. I have sought to hint at this mystery, and to complement these beautiful paintings in my own medium of thread.

Commissioned Altar Frontal, 39" h x 100" w x 42" d
Winchester Cathedral Holy Sepulchre Chapel

Alice Kettle, Winchester, Easter 1994.

Alice Kettle - Artist's Statement

15 January 1996

Miss E McArdle
MCAD
100 Thomas Street
DUBLIN 8
Eire

Dear Miss McArdle

Thank you for your letter of 9 January. With regard to the Jesse Cope (Museum number 175-1889), you can find details about this in the Opus Anglicanum catalogue, V&A/Arts Council, 1963. You should be able to obtain a copy through the inter-library loan scheme, as it has long been out of print.

I cannot provide you with a colour illustration of the cope, but you could order a colour print to be made from an existing colour transparency, although this is rather expensive. Please see the enclosed leaflet about our Picture Library who deal with the order and dispatch of photographs.

To answer your questions:

We do not know the precise origins of the cope except that it was in the Roman Catholic chapel at Brockhampton near Havant, Hampshire from 1718-1857/8. It seems from surviving evidence that most examples of Opus Anglicanum of this quality were produced in professional workshops, most if not all of which were situated in London.

I cannot estimate how long it would have taken to make; a number of embroiderers, both men and women, would have been involved and that it would have been months if not a year or more. If you look at a book by Kay Staniland, Embroiderers in the Medieval Craftsmen Series, British Museum Press, 1991, she has worked out how long some secular embroideries probably took to produce so you may be able to deduce something from that, although ecclesiastical embroideries were often more complicated and labour-intensive to make.

When it was acquired by the V&A, it was pieced together as a cope on a red silk twill ground material, having at some time been cut up to make into other church vestments and furnishings and then reconstituted. In the 1980s our Conservation Department took the pieces of cope off this material and re-pieced it together more accurately on a new red silk twill ground especially commissioned for this purpose.

I am sorry that you were unable to see the Jesse Cope when you came to the Museum, but unfortunately we are unable to show all our Opus Anglicanum at one time. It may be displayed in the future, but we have no definite plans at the moment.

Yours sincerely

Linda Woolley (Miss)
Deputy Curator
Textiles and Dress

Enc

WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL

The Dean and Chapter of Winchester

The Cathedral Office, 5 The Close, Winchester, Hampshire SO23 9LS

Telephone: (01962) 853137 Facsimile: (01962) 841519

From the Revd Charles Stewart,
Precentor and Sacrist

16th January 1996

Dear Eilish McArdle,

Thank you for your letter, and for your kind words about the help you received during your visit to the Cathedral and in particular to the Holy Sepulchre Chapel. I am glad you were able to spend time in what I consider to be one of the most hallowed spots in the Cathedral.

To answer your questions:

1. Yes, the Cathedral is involved in a sustained programme of commissioning new work from contemporary artists. At the moment, my main endeavour is the renewal of our vestments - a major undertaking. As regards altar frontals, I have inherited a number of designs from an earlier, uncompleted project which was inaugurated by my colleague, Canon Keith Walker, who is greatly interested in visual art. We share oversight for this area, my field of responsibility being for visual art which has a liturgical dimension, and Canon Walker for the rest. It would probably be a good idea if you were to contact Canon Walker at no 11 the Close, Winchester, SO23 9LS.

2. Alice Kettle was specifically chosen for the Lady Chapel commission because of Canon Walker's knowledge of his excellent work and because she is a local artist. The Holy Sepulchre Chapel frontal was in fact part of the larger project mentioned above.

3. As with virtually all mediaeval wall paintings, the identity of the artist or artists is unknown.

4. It is certain that the artist who painted the East wall was different from the artist or artists who painted the vault and the painting on the West wall. These latter date from approximately one hundred years later than the East wall. As you rightly suggest, the East Wall painting is of a higher quality.

With many thanks again for your letter, and with all good wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Charles Stewart

Winchester Cathedral
16 Jan 1996

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