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A DISCUSSION ON THE CHANGING DEPICTION AND SYMBOLISM OF THE LILY IN MEDIEVAL, VICTORIAN AND CONTEMPORARY WESTERN EMBROIDERY

By

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

ILLUSTRATION 12

Ornamental Hanging Flight of the Eagles to Alexander the Great Germany 10th Century.

ILLUSTRATION 13

Painting – A lady of the Hampden Family Unknown artist 1615.

ILLUSTRATION 14

Pierre Vallet's etchings of the Martogan Lily and the Orange Lily.

ILLUSTRATION 15

Cushion cover About 1600.

ILLUSTRATION 16

Pattern for Berlin wool-Work for the back of a chair. 1850.

ILLUSTRATION 17

Cope for St. Chad's Cathedral. Designed by W.N. Pugin. Birmingham 1841.

ILLUSTRATION 18

The Syon Cope London 1300-20

ILLUSTRATION 19

The Girlhood of Mary Virgin. Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1849

ILLUSTRATION 20

Ecce Ancilla Domini – Annunciation Rossetti

ILLUSTRATION 21

Woven fabric with Crown Imperial lily pattern 1876. Morris and Co.

ILLUSTRATION 22

Altar frontals – designed By Sir Ninian Comper 1897-1901

ILLUSTRATION 23

The Annunciation Jan Van Eyck Ghent Altarpiece 1420

ILLUSTRATION 24

"Consider the lilies of the field". 1879 Candace Wheeler

ILLUSTRATION 25
Wedding dress designed By Denise Assas Couture

ILLUSTRATION 26
Lily: 8 day 1985 Robert Janz

ILLUSTRATION 27
Lily: 8 day 1985 Robert Janz

ILLUSTRATION 28
Two Calla Lilies in Pink 1928 Imogen Cunningham

ILLUSTRATION 29
Single Lily with Red 1927 Imogen Cunningham

ILLUSTRATION 30
Our Lady of the Lily Georgia O'Keefe, 1929 By Miguel Covarrubias

ILLUSTRATION 31
Micky Donneim A Wonderful Irish Painting 1988

CONTENTS

"To see a world in a grain of sand
And heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour."

William Blake 1803[1]

INTRODUCTION

In the past the verb "to flower" meant the same as to embroider, and for many people embroidery is still synonymous with flowers. The brilliance and sheen of silks, the varied textures of wools, linens and cottons and the subtle intermingling of pearls or beads all seem made for recreating the flowers that give such pleasure in gardens, fields and hedgerows.

In the Musée de Cluny in Paris hangs a milles fleurs tapestry from 1500 entitled 'Embroidery'. This tapestry is shown in Illustration 1. It depicts a lady seated in a flowery meadow, a basket of threads by her side, her needle raised to complete the last stitches on the cushion in her lap. The needlework flowers echo the flowers in the grass around her. These romantic images bring alive the words of poets and writers past and present, when they compare the earth 'apparelled' with flowers to embroidery. This is how Chaucer conjures up the dazzling appearance of the young squire in the Prologue to The Canterbury Tales.

"Embroidered was he, as it were a mede,
Al ful of fresh floures whyte and red. (2)

The floures on his short gown were daisies, Chaucer's favourite spring flower. The flower symbolised his delight at the return of Spring and the embroidery recorded their freshness and gaiety.

I love the idea of symbolism behind flowers, in the way that the flowers were symbolic in Chaucer's Prologue. The historical background of flowers from the majestic rose to the humble violet fascinates me and I love how the

symbolism is portrayed in painting and embroidery. It amazes me how any flower so simple and beautiful can be so meaningful and important in certain cultures and at certain periods of time.

Yet for me, out of all the many varieties of flowers, I am attracted to the elegance and simplicity of the lily. The first time I became aware of the real beauty of the lily was when I saw the photographs from Imogen Cunningham, one of which is called "Calla with Leaf" (Illustration 2) from 1930 and another called "Two Callas" from 1925 (Illustration 3). I find that she captures the lily's 'personality' through photography in a way no one else has achieved. She loved the refinement of the lily and this can be seen clearly in her photographs.

This description from 1948 of the lily called 'Calf-foot Arum' describes the lily with all its majesty:

> *"It is a flower – if you like. But the fact is I do not like, what makes you think the Arum is a flower? Not a petal, not a sepal in sight. The green of its stem widens out with neither suture nor joint flares into a cornet and then whitens. The white convolvulus draped over the hedges knows better, the long pendant of the datura is a poisoner's jewel. But you like the arum, its minimum of refinement its stiffness; 'What lovely simplicity, what strength, you say... Am I trying to pick a quarrel with you or with the arum?'"*[3]

I love this description as the writer questions whether the lily is a flower at all. Just looking at the photographs from Imogen Cunningham and reading this

description of the lily, one can understand the profound uniqueness and strength of this flower. Being an embroidery student I was particularly interested in researching the history of the lily in embroidery. In my thesis I want to discuss how the symbolism and depiction of the lily have changed and progressed, if at all, throughout medieval, Victorian and contemporary embroidery.

In my thesis discussing the symbolism of the lily and its depiction in embroidery, the reasons behind the changing depiction of flowers in general in embroidery must be explored. The history of flowers in embroidery in Western art is important. In my first chapter, I will discuss the use of symbols and also the history of the lily and its symbolism.

In my second chapter I will look at the history of flowers in medieval embroidery and give examples of the lily in embroidery at that time. The Victorian era is rich in the depiction of flowers in embroidery and is discussed in the third chapter. It is particularly interesting as designers of that time urged a revival of medieval embroidery with the emphasis on symbolism and on drawing flowers form nature. I will give examples of how the lily features during this period.

In contemporary times I want to explore whether or not lilies are as significant in embroidery or painting as they were in the past. If there are not many examples of the lily used symbolically in embroidery today I want to discuss artists who do use the lily's symbolism in their work.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SYMBOLISM OF FLOWERS AND THE SYMBOLISM OF THE LILY

THE USE OF SYMBOLS

Traditional symbols form a visual shorthand for ideas – and yet their functions and meanings extend to something much more than that. For thousands of years they have enabled sculptors, painters and craftsmen to embody and reinforce deep thoughts and beliefs about human life in single, immediate and powerful images.

The essential difference between a symbol and a sign is that signs have practical, unambiguous meanings: 'Private', 'No Smoking' etc. Symbols have greater imaginative resonance and more complex, sometimes ambiguous meanings. Some symbols encapsulate the most ancient and fundamental beliefs that humans have had about the cosmos and their place in it. Many have psychological meanings.

In communicating large ideas, images long predated writing. Either carved, painted or worked into clothing or ornaments, images that had become familiar symbols through repetition were used for magical purposes to ward off evil. They were also used to control societies, to weld them together, to inspire loyalty, obedience, aggression, love or fear. A coherent system of living symbols could make people feel in harmony with themselves, their community and their cosmos. It could inspire collective action. People still fight and die under emblems, standards or flags that have symbolic significance.

FLOWERS AS SYMBOLS

The attitude of our ancestors to plants and flowers was at once practical and mystical. Practical because every plant had its use either in the kitchen or in the sick room. Mystical because of the belief in the power of plants to ward off evil and the faith in their symbolism.

The symbolism of gardens and flowers goes back to the idea of the Garden of Eden, to the concept of paradise as a garden, the Bible is full of floral imagery, richest in the Song of Solomon:

> *"He shall grow as the Lily –*
> *He shall be as the dew upon the lily."*[4]

The lily of the Scriptures seems to have been a flower which excited much admiration as it was the subject of many beautiful comparisons.

The meaning of symbols has varied according to the age and the place. In the Middle Ages, in Europe, people were steeped in the symbolism of nature and every flower was full of meaning and hidden significance. The 15th century was one of the most magnificent for floral imagery. People at that time, looking at a tapestry, a painting or a carved capital in a church rich in floral decoration, knew what message the artist was trying to convey. Although one flower might have a number of meanings, some were accepted as being limited to certain interpretations.

At this period the lily signified purity, the Lily of the Valley, humility and the Violet modesty. When our 15th century ancestors looked at pictures of a vase containing roses, irises or lilies standing near a Virgin they knew they were looking at flowers symbolic of the virtues of Mary: her virginity or chastity, her majesty and purity. When they saw a painting of the Virgin in a rose garden, they were confronting a mass of symbols.

An example of a 15th century painting which contains many symbolic objects is 'The Portinari Altarpiece' by Hugo Van de Goes painted between 1475-76 and now in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence (Illustration 4). In this painting the scene is that of Christ's body being consecrated from the moment he enters the world. In the midst of this cold wintry scene the still life is the most perfect indication of the use of symbolism in painting of that period. The still life (as shown in Illustration 5) in the painting consists of a vase containing lilies and irises and another containing violets and carnations.

> *"Each Blossom, its number, colour and variety can be seen to make a comment on the religious significance of Christ's birth, Life and Death. The violets symbolise humility, the lilies and irises for passion and the three carnations (called nail flowers) for the three nails of the cross."*(5)

Possibly such associations and meanings could be multiplied and should, ultimately include the stylised grape design on the jar (wine=blood) and the sheaf of wheat (bread=body of Christ). It is apparent then that at this time in Italy that viewers of this painting would have realised and understood the significance of each flower in terms of its religious symbolism.

The early Church had problems with the symbolism of the rose. It was difficult to transfer a symbol that had stood for the love of life to one representing death by martyrdom for the Virgin Mary. However, gradually the rose came to be accepted as the symbol for divine love and passion. Colours of flowers were also significant. When a rose was white, it stood for purity, if red martyrdom. Massed roses in garlands or baskets represented heavenly joy and a single rose – divine love.

As a whole, the meaning of flowers in general, for many cultures around the world mean beauty (especially feminine). They also mean spiritual perfection, artless innocence, divine blessing, Spring, youth, gentleness – but also the brevity of life and the joys of paradise:

> *"Essentially the flower is a concise symbol of nature at its summit, condensing into a brief span of time the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth."*[6]

In Eastern religions, flowers also represent the unfolding of spiritual life, symbolised specifically by the lotus. Thus Brahma and Buddha are shown frequently emerging from flowers (Illustration 6). The dove-like columbine is the traditional medieval flower of the Holy Spirit; and the Virgin Mary is frequently depicted holding a lily or iris. The receptive cup-like form of the flower is symbolically passive and feminine. In the 1960's, the flower became an effective symbol of peace and joy for the flower children and flower power.

THE HISTORY AND SYMBOLISM OF THE LILY

When one thinks of the lily, most people generally think of the large Madonna Lily (Lilium Candidum) first. However, there are many varieties of lily which are also popular, e.g. the Martagon Lily, the Tiger Lily, the Water Lily, the Turks-Cap Lily and Orange Lily. There is also the Lily of the Valley and the Fleur-de-Lis, which is a stylised form of the lily. From all the lilies mentioned above only the Madonna Lily is part of the garden lily species, botanists call Liliaceae.

The plants of this order can only be found in cold or moderately tempered latitudes. However, when English writers speak of liliaceous plants they mean those that have a blossom shaped like the Madonna Lily and have long slender leaves.

The lily is one of the most ambiguous of all flower symbols, identified with Christian piety, purity and innocence, but having associations with fecundity and erotic love in older traditions through its phallic pistil. The lily found in Christian art is the White Lily named the "Madonna" in the 19th century after its association with the Virgin Mary. It is often shown in a vase or is held by the angel in Annunciation paintings. The beautiful Lily of the Valley has the same symbolism.

As a favourite garden flower of antiquity, the lily was fabled to have sprung from the milk of the Greek goddess Hera and was linked with fecundity not only in Greece but also in Egypt and the Middle East generally.[7]

Lilies symbolised prosperity and royalty in Byzantium and this, rather than the link with purity, may have been the original reason for the choice of the Fleur-de-lis as the emblem of France.

Its emblematic significance for Christian saints is taken largely from the sermon of the mount in which Jesus used the glorious "Lilies of the field" as an allegory of how god provides for those who renounced the pursuit of wealth.

> *"And why take ye thought for raiment?*
> *Consider the lilies of the field,*
> *How they grow; they toil not,*
> *Neither do they spin."*
>
> Matthew 6:28-30

The White Lily can symbolise death as well as purity, and is often seen as a portent of death.

THE LILY AND ITS LINK WITH THE VIRGIN MARY

The lily, sometimes in the form of an iris, is sacred to all Virgin Goddesses as both Mother and Maid, the Chaste Virgin, Queen of Heaven and the Mother Earth.

From earliest Christian times, flowers have been associated with Our Lady. The liturgy constantly stresses this association and Christian people have been long used to calling Mary such names as "Lily of the Valley" and "Mystical Rose". Flowers symbolising virtues like modesty humility, purity and love have been as it were dedicated to her.

The Madonna Lily (Lilium Candidum) is called also the Annunciation Lily, as the Angel Gabriel is so often depicted holding one in his hand at Mary's Annunciation. In Italian art Our Lady often has a vase of lilies by her side with three flowers crowning the stems. The Lily of the Valley in the Christian religion symbolises "Our Lady's Tears."[8]

THE LILY AND THE LOTUS WATER LILY (NYMPHAEA)

The lily is in the West the counterpart of the lotus in the East, though the lotus carries a more profound symbolism. Like the rose, the lotus has both masculine and feminine attributes and is both "Yin" and "Yang". Like the lily it represents purity, beauty and feminine perfection. The lotus also expresses spiritual unfolding; starting with its roots in the slime, it grows upwards

through the dark waters and it flowers, floating on the waters, reaching the light of the sun and the air of the heavens.

THE FLEUR-DE-LIS

The heraldic fleur-de-lis is a stylised lily with three flowers. The origin of the emblem is taken from the legend that a lily was given to Clovis, King of the Franks in the 10th century on his baptism to symbolise purity. The device was chosen as the emblem of the French king in the 12th century and the plethora of Lilies of the Field was reduced to just three by Charles V in honour of the Trinity. The central flower is often given an arrow or spear shape, suggesting military, as well as masculine power.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE DEPICTION OF FLOWERS AND THEIR SYMBOLISM IN MEDIEVAL EMBROIDERY

For well over a 1,000 years, embroidery has been a means of adding decoration to clothing, personal accessories and household and Church furnishings. Evidence in Europe certainly suggests that the concept of adding needleworked decoration to clothing was well established during the Early Bronze Age (1500-500 BC)[9] (shown in Illustration 7) in Denmark at least. Archaeological finds revealing forms of embroidery elsewhere in Europe belong to the Iron Age 500 – 100 BC)[10]. Although textiles normally do not last well, being especially fragile and vulnerable objects, surprisingly large quantities of embroideries survive from the Middle Ages in Europe.

Embroidery is the art of applying decoration by needle and thread to the surface of a piece of woven cloth, usually called "the ground". Embroidery is an optional additional decoration worked after the whole weaving process including the dyeing and finishing processes. Mis-use of terminology has brought about several confusions, for example tapestry is a form of weaving but the popularly known Bayeux Tapestry is, in fact, a large embroidered hanging.

Rick silks, clothes, tapestries and embroideries were vital symbols of wealth and status second only to precious metals and jewels. They were easily portable and the great demand for rich silks and finely dyed cloths brought radical changes in production and marketing as the Middle Ages progressed.[11]

Ornamentation by embroidery however, must have been an almost exclusive prerogative of the wealth ruling classes, certainly in the Middle Ages.[11] it was and still is a consistently important element in ecclesiastical splendour and many examples of embroidered vestments have survived in Church and Cathedral treasuries. Magnificent embroideries were an integral part of medieval international diplomacy, both as gifts and as impressive attire for Kings, Popes and Princes alike.

Professional embroidery workshops probably existed quite early in the Middle Ages to produce these much-prized possessions although little information is now available about these independent workshops, particularly those responsible for the creation of "Opus Anglicanum". From 1250 – 1350 ecclesiastical embroidery was of an exceptionally high standard of design and little short of miraculous in techniques. It is small wonder that it found favour abroad and that copes and chasuble sent as gifts provoked orders for more of the work which is still known today by the name it acquired – "Opus Anglicanum" and known too, to refer to embroidery and no other craft.[12]

There are several characteristics which distinguished "Opus Anglicanum" from other contemporary work in addition to its marked superiority in the technique of handling gold thread and silk. Each country had its own saints and these were included with others of general significance. In terms of the design of Opus Anglicum, a relationship existed in England between the manuscript illuminators and the makers of Opus Anglicanum, but this will almost certainly always remain a matter of speculation since so little can be known about the

producers of either. Whether the relationship between the illuminators and the embroiderers was direct or indirect is unclear.[13] What is certain is that the designs for the embroideries reflect a great deal of the drawing style, arrangement and iconography found in contemporary manuscript illuminations.

Another distinguishing feature, and one which can be traced henceforward in English embroidery, is the predilection for wild life, particularly birds and animals. There are very few recognisable plants, other than the daisy, columbine, rose, lily and oak and the vine, a long established Christian symbol.

Of all sacred flowers, the Madonna Lily, the plant and flower of light, symbol of purity and the emblem of the Virgin, is best known. In embroidery it appears in the fourteenth century binding of the Felbrigge Psalter, the earliest needlework book cover to survive, now in the British Library.[14] This belonged to the nun Anne de Felbrigge, and it is probable that she herself worked the Annunciation scene on the front cover; Illustration 9 shows the drawing of the Annunciation scene. Here, between the Angel and Virgin, is a lily in a gold vase banded in blue bearing flowers so formalised they resemble Fleur-de-lis rather than lilies.

The Annunciation was one of the favourite scenes depicted in medieval embroidery. Illustration 10 shows an embroidery from the 6th-7th century called the Annunciation and Visitation. The 6th and 7th centuries mark the beginning of the period in which the Church directed embroidery to sacred tasks.

The Annunciation was also one of the most popular scenes depicted on the magnificent vestments made by the medieval embroiderers and worn in great Cathedrals. A fine example can be seen in the 14th century of the Butler Bowden Cope (Illustration 11) in the Victoria and Albert Museum. On this sumptuous vestment the Virgin is depicted in a golden gown embroidered with a single red rose, a symbol of her divine love.

The name "Opus Anglicanum" was not used after 1349.(15) This was the year when the Black Death ravaged Europe. Craftsmen who survived this pestilence handed on their knowledge to the succeeding generations.

After the use of embroidery for ecclesiastical purposes, it became very important for heraldic purposes. Embroiderers were called upon to work blazons upon pennons, banners and jupons. One of the earliest surviving German embroideries, "The Flight of Alexander the Great" from the 10th century (shown in Illustration 12) shows the Fleur-de-lis used for heraldic purposes. The king, wearing a chasuble-like garment, floats in the air between two eagles. The origin of the embroideries cannot be definitely established.(16) Above Alexander the Great's head appear three Fleur-de-lis motifs. Obviously, even from that time, it had significance and was symbolic of royalty. Not only did heraldic devices dominate in embroidery destined for the battle-field and occur in ecclesiastical work, although during the late 14th century fashion also dictated that a wife should wear her own coat of arms impaled with that of her husband.

The medieval craftsmen left behind them a legacy of astonishing beauty. A general decline in skill, however, marked the late 14th century and early 15th century in the craft of embroidery. This must be attributed to the Black Death and the importation of Italian brocades.(17)

ELIZABETHAN AND EARLY STUART EMBROIDERY

Embroidery in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I burst into flower. Garden and country flowers enclosed in freely scrolling lines appeared on coifs and bodices, on tunics and shirts, on collars and dresses, on men's indoor hats and upon gloves. They flowed over bedspreads and long pillow covers and over cushions. Ideas came from many sources not only from nature. The needlewoman's enthusiasms for plant life led her to search through old manuscripts and herbals.

It was during this period that the design of flowers for embroidery became more stylised and with it the design of the lily also became more stylised. Illustration 13 shows a painting of A Lady of the Hampden Family by an unknown artists from 1615. She is wearing a skirt embroidered with 'outlandish' lilies, Crown Imperial Lilies and irises. At this time in England there was a distinction between English flowers such as columbines and 'outlandish' strangers such as tulips and hyacinths from Turkey and sunflowers from the New World. These were to be treated like jewels, and not planted among the English flowers. Each of the flowers on the skirt is set in its own

gilded frame and this enhances its individual qualities. There are two lilies on the skirt, the upper one closely resembling the beautiful etching of Lilium Martagon in Pierre Vallet's Florilegum, Le Jardin du Roy Très Chrestien Henry IV (1608), as shown in Illustration 14. Vallet was famous not only as a botanical artists and gardener but also as embroiderer to Henry IV. Another beautiful example of outlandish flowers used in embroidery in the Elizabethan era is the cushion cover shown in Illustration 15. The lily is embroidered on the third row of hearts up on the left-hand side. Each flower on this cushion had its own symbolic meaning.

Queen Elizabeth herself is a fine example of a major figure at the time who wore symbolic embroidery. Flowers were considered symbolic of the Queen's virtues – she was constantly celebrated as the "Tudor Rose" and the pansy, associated with chastity, was her favourite flower.

Colours as well as flowers had symbolic meanings, some reaching back to pre-Christian times. Everyone knew that when the Queen wore white lilies they signified purity and many would have associated black with sorrow, green with youth and red with power. There were books that described the precise meanings of every shade and combination of colour.

During the 17th century a more vigorous style developed, aiming at greater naturalism and a richer decorative effect. Flowers with large and striking blooms appeared frequently on stumpwork cabinets, mirror frames and cushions.

Oriental influences, first noticeable in the later 17th century, inspired in the first half of the 18th century many strange exotic blooms.(18) Needlework was especially significant in the social life of Tudor and Elizabethan England. It was not only regarded as a craft comparable to wood carving and metalwork but was also in a very practical way the major part of a girl's education as well as a leisure activity among the wealthy of both sexes.

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CHAPTER THREE

THE DEPICTION OF FLOWERS AND THEIR SYMBOLISM IN VICTORIAN EMBROIDERY

The most significant factor in Victorian England was the rise to power of the middle classes. This rise to power brought not only increasing wealth and material comfort but also a desire on the part of the middle classes to share in the cultural pursuits of the leisured classes, among those the art of embroidery.

As in the Elizabethan Era, throughout the 17th and 18th centuries embroidery had remained almost exclusive to the upper and leisured classes but by the beginning of the 19th century embroidery no longer held the exclusiveness it had so long enjoyed.

The most popular form of embroidery throughout the early Victorian era was "Berlin Woolwork". It was a type of canvas embroidery worked in worsted wools, mainly in tent or cross-stitch on a square, meshed canvas.

Floral subjects formed a very high proportion of the Berlin patterns, particularly for upholstery. In the 1830's and 1840's, floral wreaths and bunches of flowers were usually set against a light background. Passionflowers, roses, dahlias, poppies, and auricles depicted approximately life size were most popular. By 1850 exotic blooms such as the "Victoria Regia Lily" and huge Arum Lilies, shown in Illustration 16, found more favour. These oversize blooms were depicted with great naturalism. The lilies used in Berlin wool-work contained no associations with symbolism, but were merely used because they were visually attractive.

CHURCH EMBROIDERY

In the 1840's, both the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches took a particular interest in embroidery and the first attacks on the deadening influence of Berlin wool-work came largely from ecclesiastical quarters. As a result of Catholic Emancipation in 1829, a great number of new Churches needed furnishing. This opportunity was exploited to the full by Church architects, notable Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852), the great Gothic revivalist of the 19th century. It was logical that Pugin's plea for a return to Gothic architecture should be accompanied by a plea for the revival of medieval styles of Church embroider. (19)

Pugin's Glossary was intended to provide suitable motifs for Church work of all kinds. Condemning the low level of ecclesiastical embroidery, as practiced by the ladies of that time, he writes:

> *"At present the generality of their productions covered as they are with hearts, rosebuds and doves, stand forth in all their 'prettiness' like Valentine letters on a large scale and truly it would seem as if they derived all their ideas and authorities from such sources."* (20)

Pugin intended to provide suitable motifs for Church work of all kinds, condemning the low level of ecclesiastical embroidery, as practiced by the ladies of that time. The remarkable series of vestments that Pugin designed for St. Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham in 1841 (see Illustration 17) demonstrates how closely he adhered to his own principles.

SIR NINIAN COMPER

From the latter part of the 19th century, Sir Ninian Comper (1864-1960) was a Scottish Church architect who designed Church embroidery. The lily survives in St. Brigid's Cathedral, Kildare and St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin on three of a series of five richly embroidered altar frontals designed by Comper.

Comper did not like to design windows, furniture and embroidery for Churches without knowing who was the building's patron saint and its date. He wanted to establish his work in local tradition and make it an integral part of its architectural context. [21]

At Kildare, pictorial iconography was forbidden under a severe application of the Church of Ireland's canons; so the legend of St. Brigid inspired the frontal's symbolism. The altar frontal (Illustration 22) is elaborately embroidered. St. Brigid's external flame executed in rose-red and pink floss with lilies in green and white floss heavily outlined, stand in a vase of couched gold thread, symbolising her virginity. The super frontal is worked with a row of six Fleur-de-lis.

Comper's design is not a replica of 15th century work even thought it exhibits the mentality of a Flemish painter. It is a fusion of his own personal elements, for instance, the vase of lilies is taken from the outer panels of The

Annunciation in Jan Van Eyck's painting from the Ghent altarpiece (1420) (Illustration 23) [22].

Anthony Symondson, S.J. says of Comper:

> *"The success of the Kildare frontal led to further commissions in the 1900's, one of them being the National Cathedral of St. Patrick, Dublin (Illustration 22). A figure of St. Patrick occupies the centre of seven panels on a softly patterned ground of crimson silk. The frontal is unified by borders of white Crown Imperial Lilies and roses in white and rose floss silk."* [22]

Both altar frontals appear to have excited muted antagonism, despite their beauty and standard of execution. The frontal for the Lady Chapel, for instance, was not used after the formation of the Irish Free State in 1922 because the Fleur-de-lis and rose were considered to be Royalist symbols. [22]

Most of Comper's designs contain a circle and he also tried to include, where possible, one of the flowers contained in his wife's wedding bouquet. Possibly the lily could have been one of the flowers in her bouquet; if so the lily may have held its own personal symbolism for Comper.

MORRIS EMBROIDERIES

Embroidered hangings were among the earliest products of the firm of Morris and Co. founded on April 11th 1861. Like Pugin, William Morris rediscovered the beauty and symbolism of medieval vestments. They studied the copes, for

example, the Syon Cope (Illustration 18) of the 14th century and were greatly inspired by their matchless technique and dignified designs. In contrast to the naturalistic rendering of hearts, roses and doves in Berlin work made for the Church, Pugin and Morris extolled the refinement and elegance of medieval flowers. These qualities can be seen in the Madonna Lily in the pre-Raphaelite painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti The Girlhood of Mary Virgin (1849) (Illustration 19). It depicts the Virgin seated at a frame stitching the flower under the watchful eye of her mother, Saint Anne; she has finished the three blooms and is now at work on the leaves and stem, her gaze directed at the real lily in the pot before her. The picture was first shown in 1849, when books on floral symbolism both religious and secular were extremely popular - deciphering the complex meaning in the picture would therefore have added to its appeal. Rossetti's contemporaries would have recognised the lily as the symbol of humility. The completed embroidery of the painting can be seen in Illustration 20. In the painting Ecce Ancilla Domini - Annunciation (1850) these paintings truly demonstrate how the lily's symbolism was revived by pre-Raphaelite artists such as Rossetti.

Morris chose the lily in many of his designs for carpets and wallpapers etc. Illustration 21 shows a woven cotton fabric from 1876 with a Crown Imperial Lily pattern. Flowers retain their natural forms in all his designs and it is the pattern, not nature that conforms. An embroidery of the period of the lily is one designed by Candace Wheeler of New York in 1879 (Illustration 24). It is called "Consider the Lilies of the Field". The text is complete on the top of the embroidered portieres when both curtains are seen side by side. The name of

the embroidery was most probably a reference to the Bible's 'Lilies of the field" in Matthew 6:28-30.

The interest in embroidery brought about by the Church, above all by William Morris, led to the foundation of a number of societies for the propagation of needlework as art.

The basic principle adhered to by all such societies and organisations was that a true revival of the art of embroidery could only come about as a result of a thorough knowledge and study of historic examples.

The flowers found in what was known, as Art Needlework became almost as much cliches as did the Cabbage Roses and Victoria Regia Lilies of Berlin wool work. As in the days of Berlin wool work, most of the embroideresses of the later Victorian period relied on printed patterns although most of the volumes on art needlework advocated the worker designing her own patterns if this was at all possible. The most common advice given was to study actual plants and flowers and make drawings from them. The direct study of nature was the method put forward by J.D. Sedding in a paper published in 1893. He regarded most of the patterns put out by the commercial houses as sterile and lifeless:

> *"Flowers we embroider were not plucked from field land garden but from the camphor-scented preserves of Kensington (ie. South Kensington Museum)."* (23)

The remedy was to study nature:

> *"An hour in his garden, a stroll in the embroidered meadows will do more to revive the original instincts of a true designer than a month of sixpenny days at a stuffy museum. The old masters are dead, but the flowers last always."*[23]

By the end of the Victorian era the emphasis on floral designing of embroidery was the revival of medieval standards of work. Designers like William Morris, Burne-Jones and Ninian Comper felt strongly about reviving embroidery to its true potential.

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE DEPICTION OF THE LILY IN CONTEMPORARY EMBROIDERY AND PAINTING

In researching the use of the lily in contemporary embroidery, I have found no examples of lilies used in art embroidery for symbolic purposes. However, I have found that the lily's symbolism is used in other areas. The first example that I came across was the lily printed and embroidered on a wedding dress. The dress was made in 1998, as shown in Illustration 25, by Denise Assas Wedding Dress Couture based in Dublin and the fabric was designed by Jacinta Edge, a textile designer from Carlow.

I contacted Jacinta Edge and asked her was there any reason why she chose the lily in particular? She said that the main reason she chose the lily was its elegance and that she particularly loved to draw the flower. She said that in using the lily on a wedding dress she did recognise the association between the lily and purity and virginity. However, she did not use the lily with the intention of using it because of its symbolism. She commented on how the lily has become a very fashionable flower today, not only in its use in bridal bouquets but also its association with minimalism in interiors. This is true. I contacted Therese Florists, a thriving floral business in the Dublin area, and they told me that about 5 years ago lilies were not very popular flowers to have in a house or even for bridal bouquets. In the last two or three years the lily has become increasingly fashionable and there is a high demand for the flower. Obviously many people are not superstitious about the flower anymore as the demand has grown.

My mother would not bring lilies into our house, as they are traditionally symbols of death.

A contemporary artist who uses the lily and other flowers as a metaphor for birth and death and the existence of time is Robert Janz. Originally from Belfast, Janz finds in the short lifespan of flowers that they are useful metaphors for change and circularity. [24]

Illustrations 26 and 27 show work by Janz called Lily: 8 Day, dated 1985. He drew the lily every day showing its changing state of growth. I'm not sure whether the lily itself held any symbolism but the use of the flower signifies the changing state and fragility of life and death.

Another renowned artist who used the lily in her paintings was Georgia O'Keefe. O'Keefe had begun painting flowers in 1918 but it was not until 1924 that she first produced the magnificent flowers with which she is most frequently associated. She said:

> *"A flower is relative small. Everyone has many associations with a flower. - Still in a way nobody really sees a flower really it is so small we haven't time, and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time. So I said to myself I'll paint what I see - what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking the time to look at it - I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers."* [25]

The flower that she regularly treated in larger than life format was the Calla Lily. The painting Two Calla Lilies in Pink of 1928 (Illustration 28) is a magnification of Calla Lilies. She is also concerned in her flower painting with formal simplification. An example of the lily painted by her with such

simplicity is the painting Single Lily with Red of 1927, shown in Illustration 29. This may be the reason why the Calla Lily, a flower fascinating for its structural simplicity, was one of her favourite subjects. The Calla Lily subsequently became her 'emblem' in the eyes of the public, and one which the Mexican artist, Miguel Cavarrubias took up in his caricature of O'Keefe as "Our Lady of the Lily", (Illustration 30) which appeared in the New York Times in 1929.[26]

Another aspect of the lily, which I have not yet mentioned, is the use of the Orange Lily to represent King William III. The Orange Lily has been used from the mid-eighteenth century to symbolise Williamite allegiance. In the July the Twelfth celebrations of King William III's triumph of the Battle of the Boyne in Belfast in 1857, Orange Lilies decorated houses, their windows, arches and buttonholes. In contrast, the Easter Lily is employed by the Irish Republicans to commemorate the Rising of 1916.[27]

An Irish artist who uses the Easter Lily to represent republicanism or nationalism and the Orange Lily to represent Loyalism is Micky Donnelly. Micky Donnelly's painting A Wonderful Irish Painting from 1988 shows lush versions of the Easter Lily and the Orange Lily (Illustration 31). The intermingling of signs and emblems parodies the mocking of politics. If the political troubles in Northern Ireland are about anything they are about the persistence with and clash of identities in which emblems are a kind of cultural scoreboard.

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CONCLUSION

Among the textile arts, embroidery is unique, a law unto itself. Its realm extends from the smallest personal possession, the handkerchief, to underwear and costume, from curtain, cover and cushion to furniture and wall hangings. It adores the things of everyday life, yet is called upon for effects of splendour. The state robes and thrones of princes, ecclesiastical ornaments, and the vestments of the Church are the supreme creations of the art of embroidery.

In exploring the changing symbolism and depiction of the lily, various periods in which embroidery thrived, had to be discussed. I have found in researching my thesis that there have been many influences, which have brought about changes in embroidery throughout history. I feel that there are many areas of embroidery that I have not touched as it would be impossible to include wider influences without writing another thesis; for example, the oriental influence on flowers and embroidery. I have also found that the chapters could even have been broken down into further sections, for example embroidered lilies in dress, in furniture and in art. However, I feel I have captured and researched a general view of how embroidery and the lily's depiction and symbolism has changed throughout medieval and Victorian times. It was difficult to find examples of contemporary embroidery where the lily was used but, in giving examples of artists who have used the lily symbolically in their work, I do feel it remains relevant.

One may say that the symbolism of flowers in embroidery has died and that may be true because many young artists may see flowers as just visual images instead of seeing the symbolism behind them. However, if the lily was used in

embroidery as in painting, as Georgia O'Keefe or Mickey Donnelly have done then the symbolism of the lily in embroidery may re-emerge.

In saying that, today there are many embroiderers who use flowers and plants as inspiration for the manipulation of fabric and of course nature has been, and always will remain, an inspiration for textiles. However, in terms of using flowers symbolically in embroidery, they are not as common and widespread as our medieval and Victorian ancestors had used them.

The amazing embroidered copes from the medieval era and the fantastic altar frontals from Ninian Comper from the Victorian period all serve as reminders of how the lily embodied such profound symbolism in Church embroidery. These pieces remain as examples of how timeless embroidery is and it is not that the flowers in embroidery have ceased to be made but that people's perception today of symbolism in embroidery is no longer understood in the way that it was in the past.

Today, some symbolism still remains connected to the flowers: for example, the poppy is used for remembrance of the dead and the rose which used to have such deep symbolism and which stood for divine love in the 15th century. Today it still symbolises love when it is given to a partner. Even though we may not use flowers symbolically in embroidery, we still use the symbolism of flowers.

I can realise how the lily has remained one of the most symbolic flowers. It still holds its symbolism in terms of purity and virginity when worn in a bride's bouquet and, when it is placed in a wreath it still holds its poignant symbolism of death.

In 1932 Karl Blossfeldt describes how we use nature in all areas of life:

> *"The plant may be described as an architectural structure, shaped and designed ornamentally and objectively. Compelled in its fight for existence to build in a purposeful and objectively. Compelled in its fight for existence to build in a purposeful manner; it constructs the necessary and practical units for its advancement, governed by the laws familiar to every architect and combines practicability and expediency in the highest form of art. Not only, then in the world of art, but equally in the realm of science, nature is our best teacher."* (28)

Nature has been and will always remain an inspiration for embroidery.

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Interview with Denise Assas, Dame Street, Dublin.

17.11.98

Murphy, Joanne

Interview with Jacinta Edge, Carlow.

20.11.98.

Murphy, Joanne

Interview with Collette Adams, Therese Florists, Dublin.

17.12.98

ILLUSTRATION 1

French Tapestry 1500
Titled 'Embroidery'

ILLUSTRATION 2

'Calla with Leaf' (1930)
by Imogen Cunningham

ILLUSTRATION 3

'Two Callas' (1925)
by Imogen Cunningham

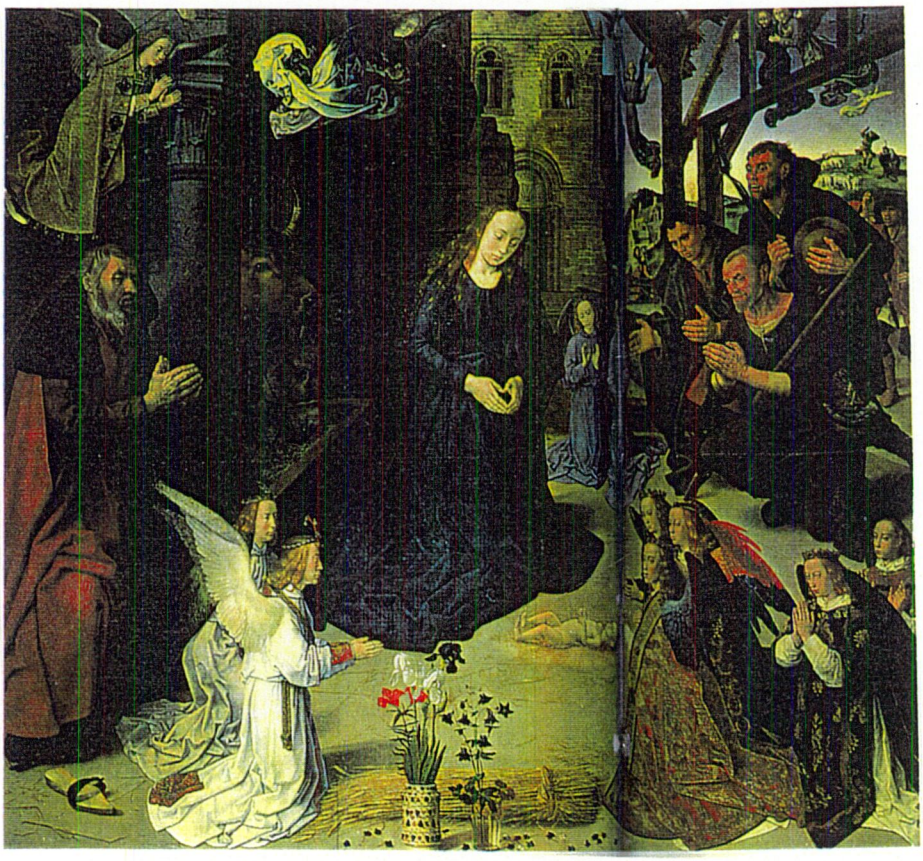


ILLUSTRATION 4

The Portinari Altarpiece
Hugo Van de Goes 1475-76

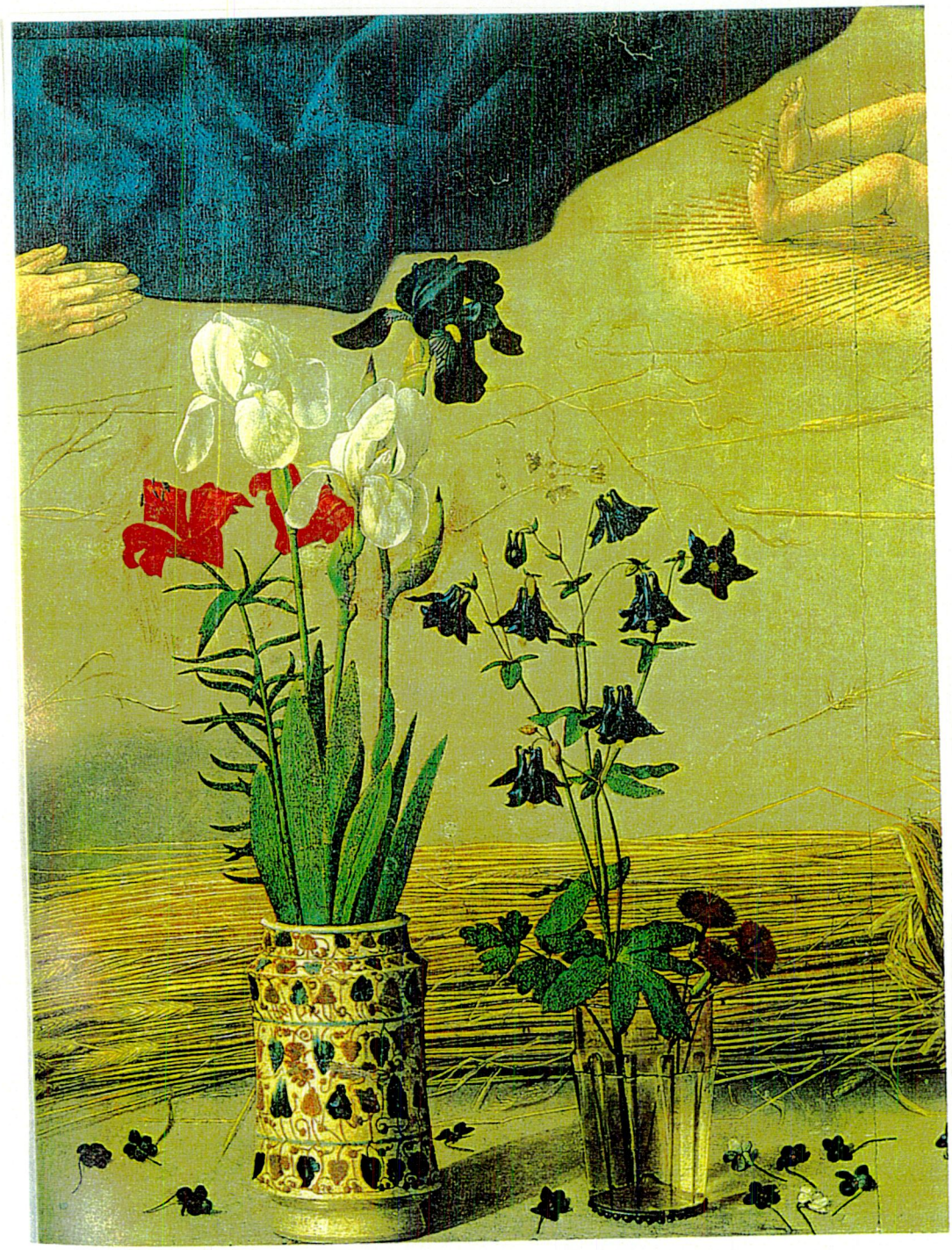


ILLUSTRATION 5

Close-up of still life in
"The Portinari Altarpiece"
1475-76

ILLUSTRATION 6

Temple Hanging
Buddha emerging
from flower

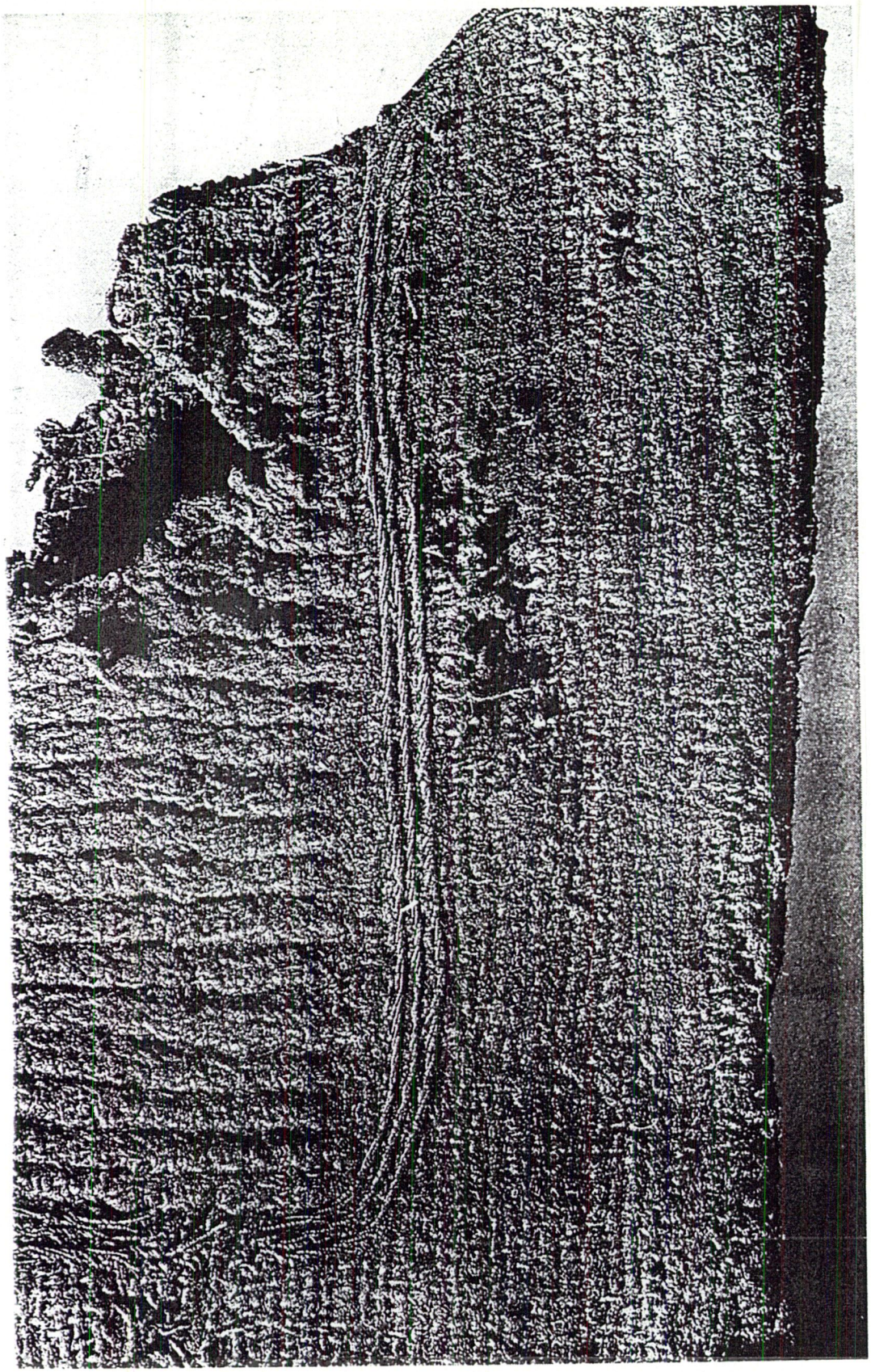


ILLUSTRATION 7

Decorative stitching on the sleeve of a 'blouse' from the early Bronze Age. Denmark.

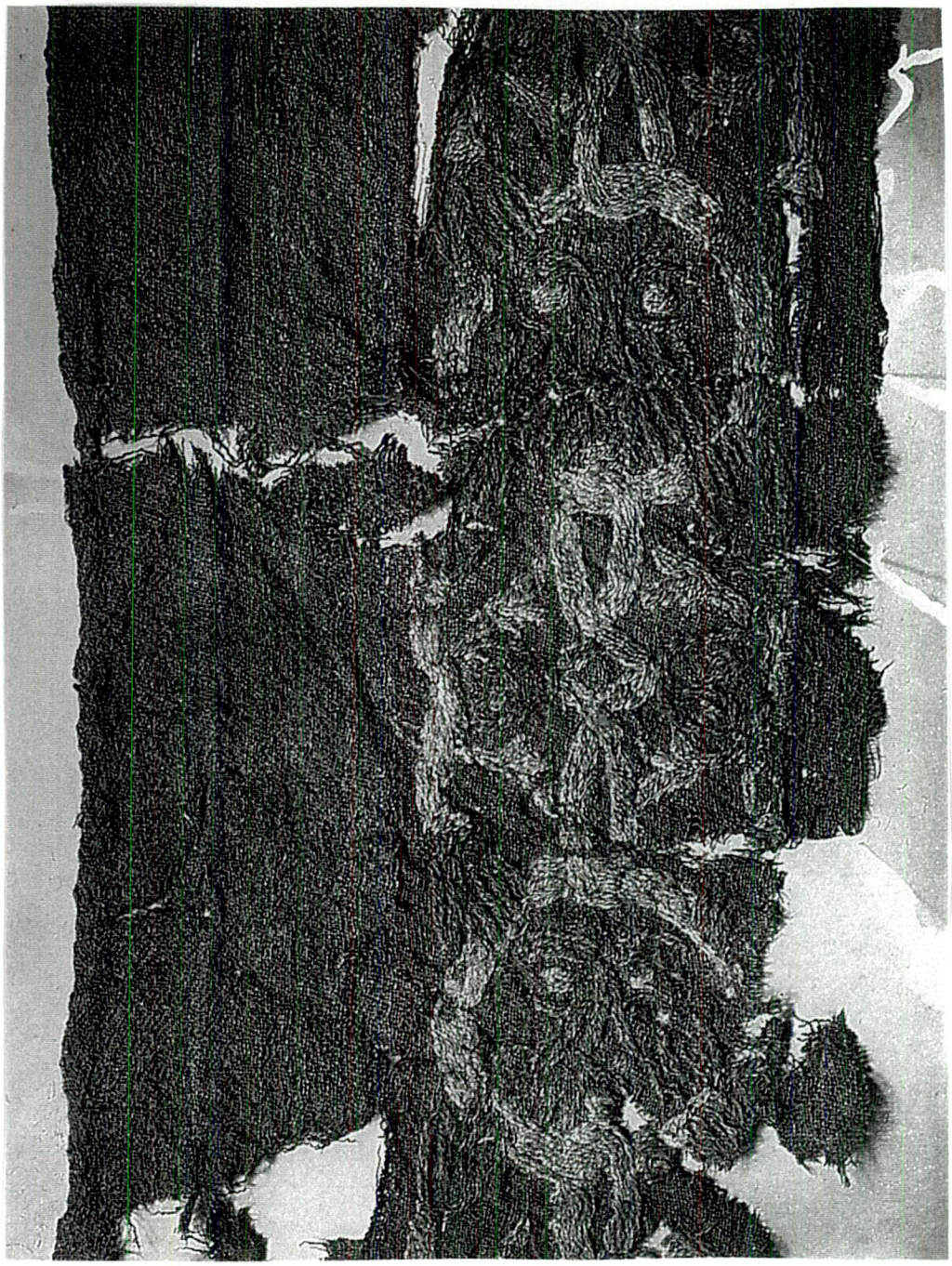


ILLUSTRATION 8

Medieval embroidery. Denmark Bronze Age. Depicts male faces linked by an Interlacing pattern.

ILLUSTRATION 9

Annunciation scene
Anne de Felbrigge
British Library.

ILLUSTRATION 10

The Annunciation and Visita
Coptic Art 6th-7th Century.

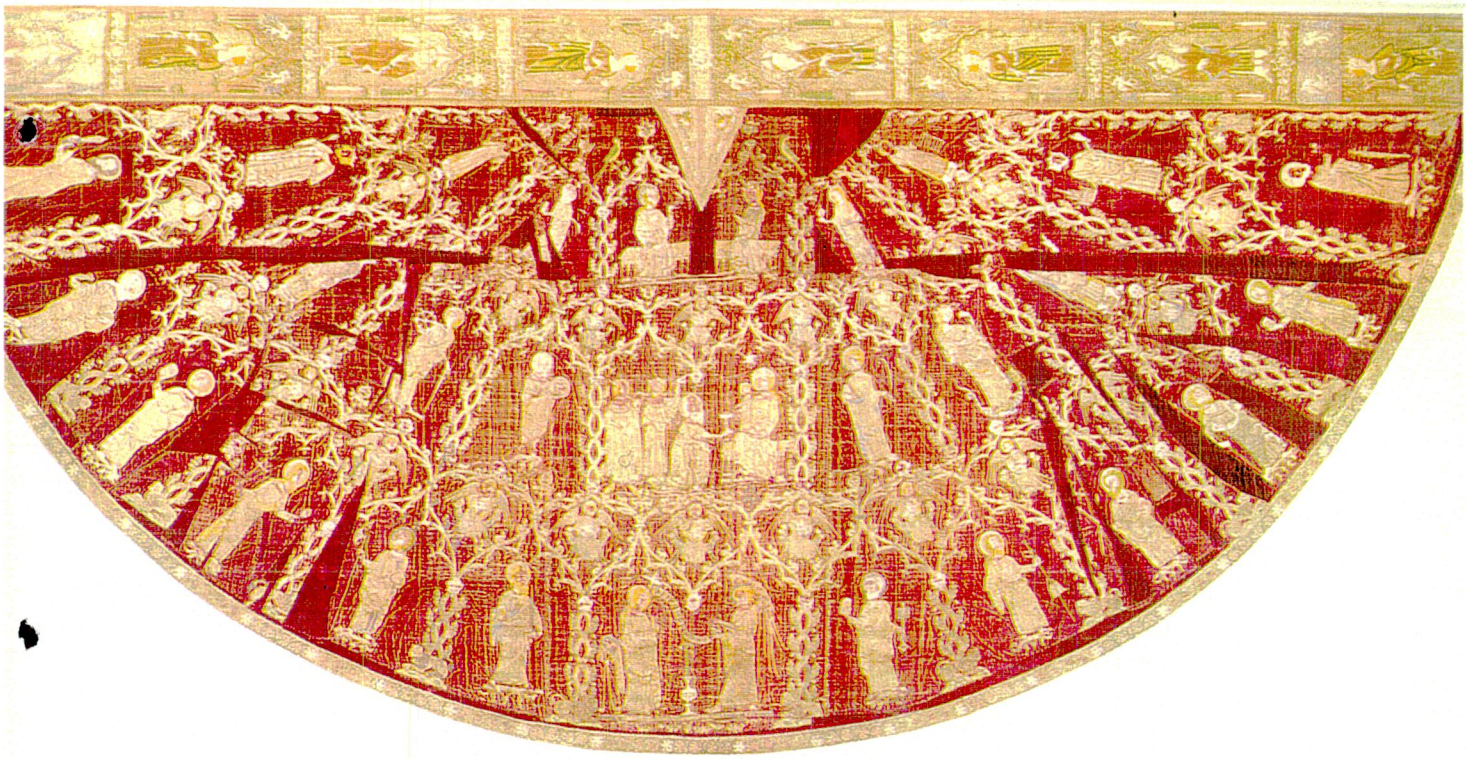


ILLUSTRATION 11

The Butler-Bowden Cope
London 1330-50.

ILLUSTRATION 12

Ornamental Hanging
Flight of the Eagles to
Alexander the Great
Germany 10th Century.

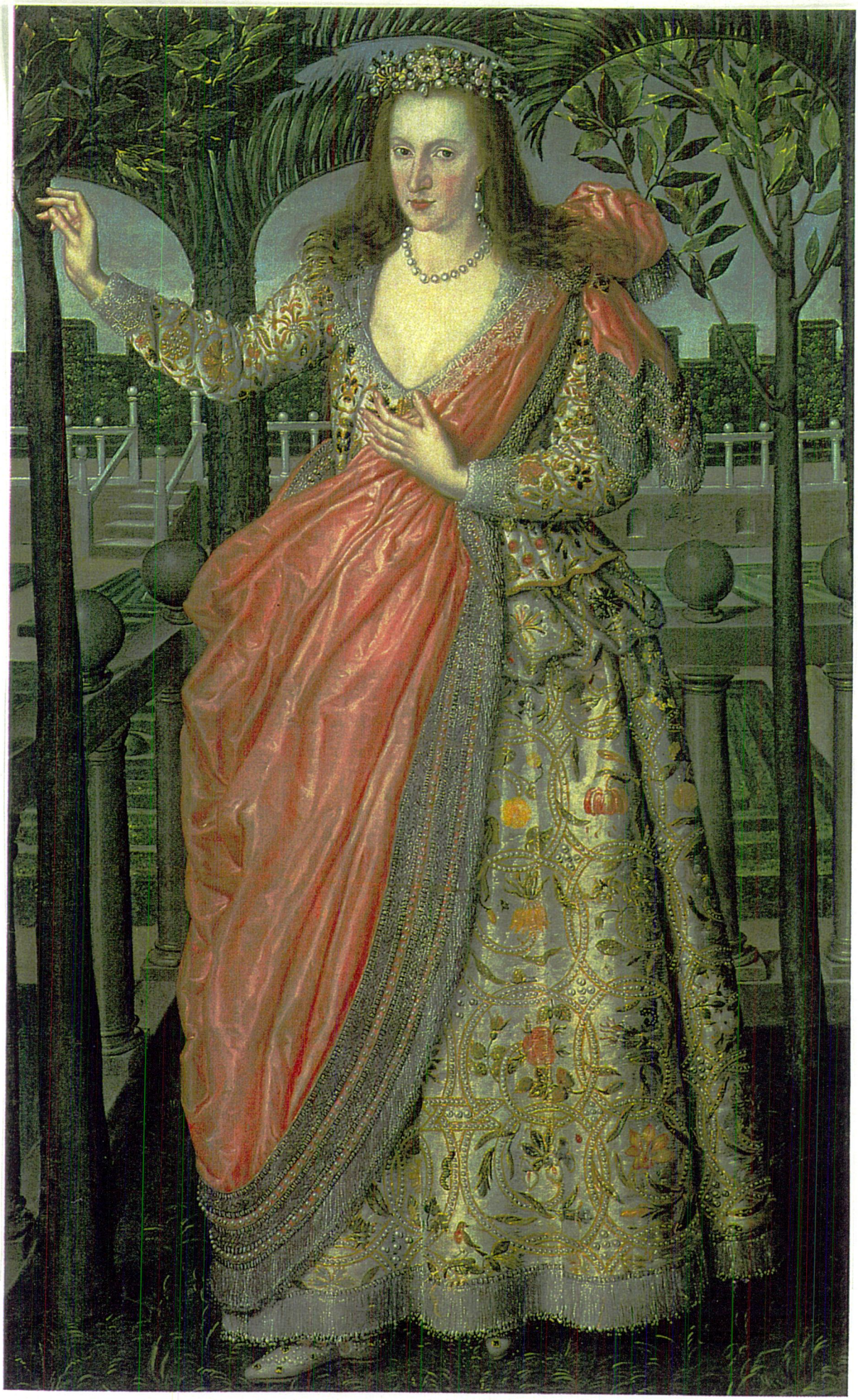
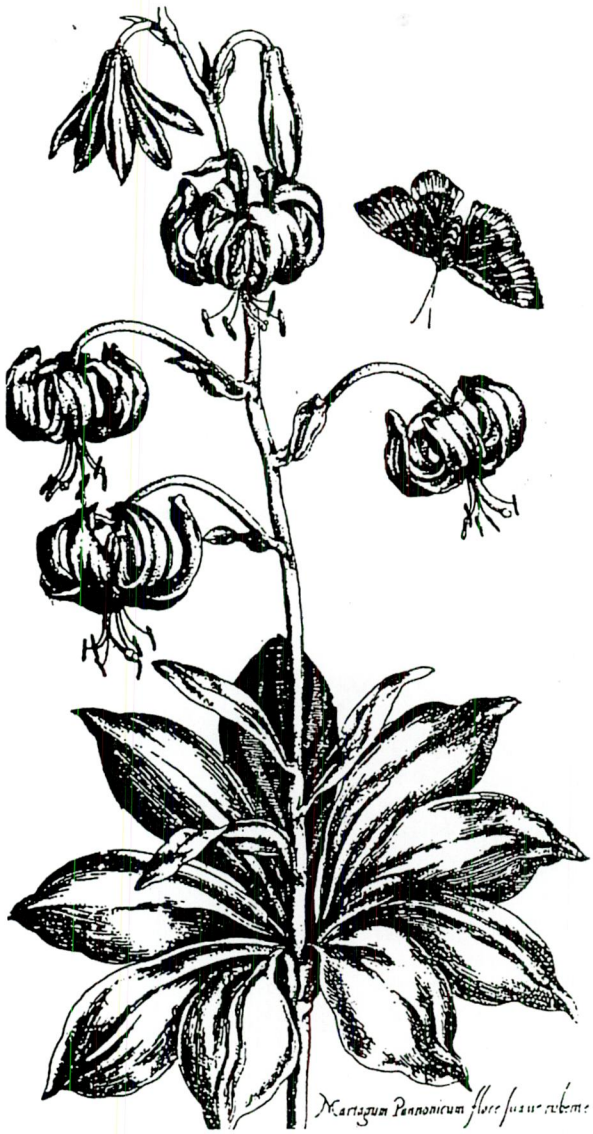


ILLUSTRATION 13

Painting – A lady of the Hampden Family



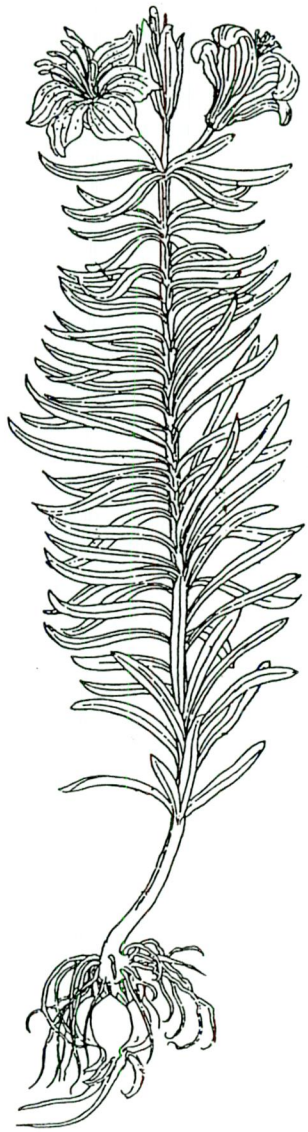


ILLUSTRATION 14

Pierre Vallet's etchings of the Martogan Lily and the Orange Lily.

ILLUSTRATION 15

Cushion cover
About 1600.

ILLUSTRATION 16

Pattern for Berlin wool-Work for the back of a chair. 1850.

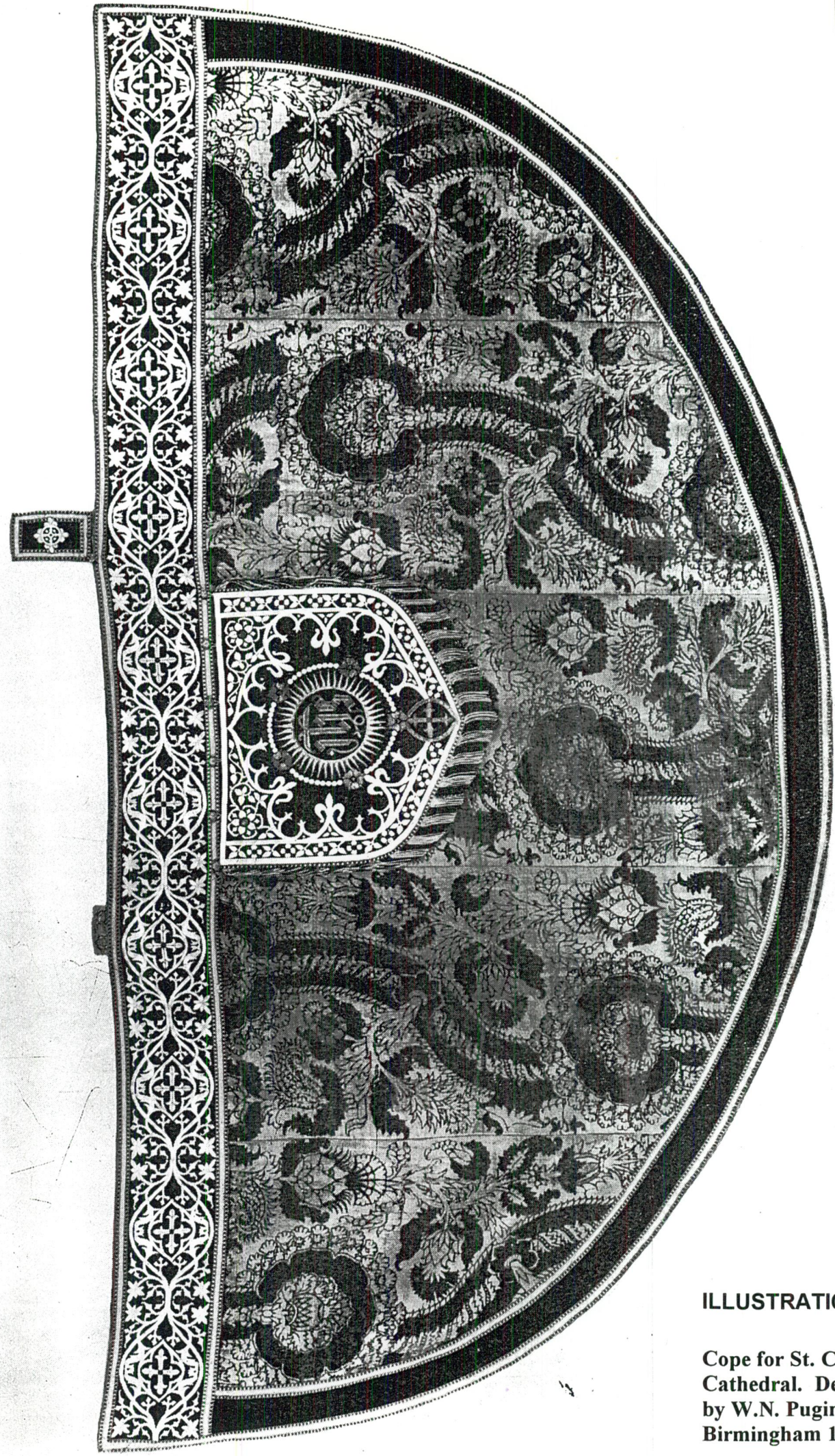


ILLUSTRATION 17

Cope for St. Chad's Cathedral. Designed by W.N. Pugin. Birmingham 1841.

ILLUSTRATION 18

The Syon Cope
London 1300-20

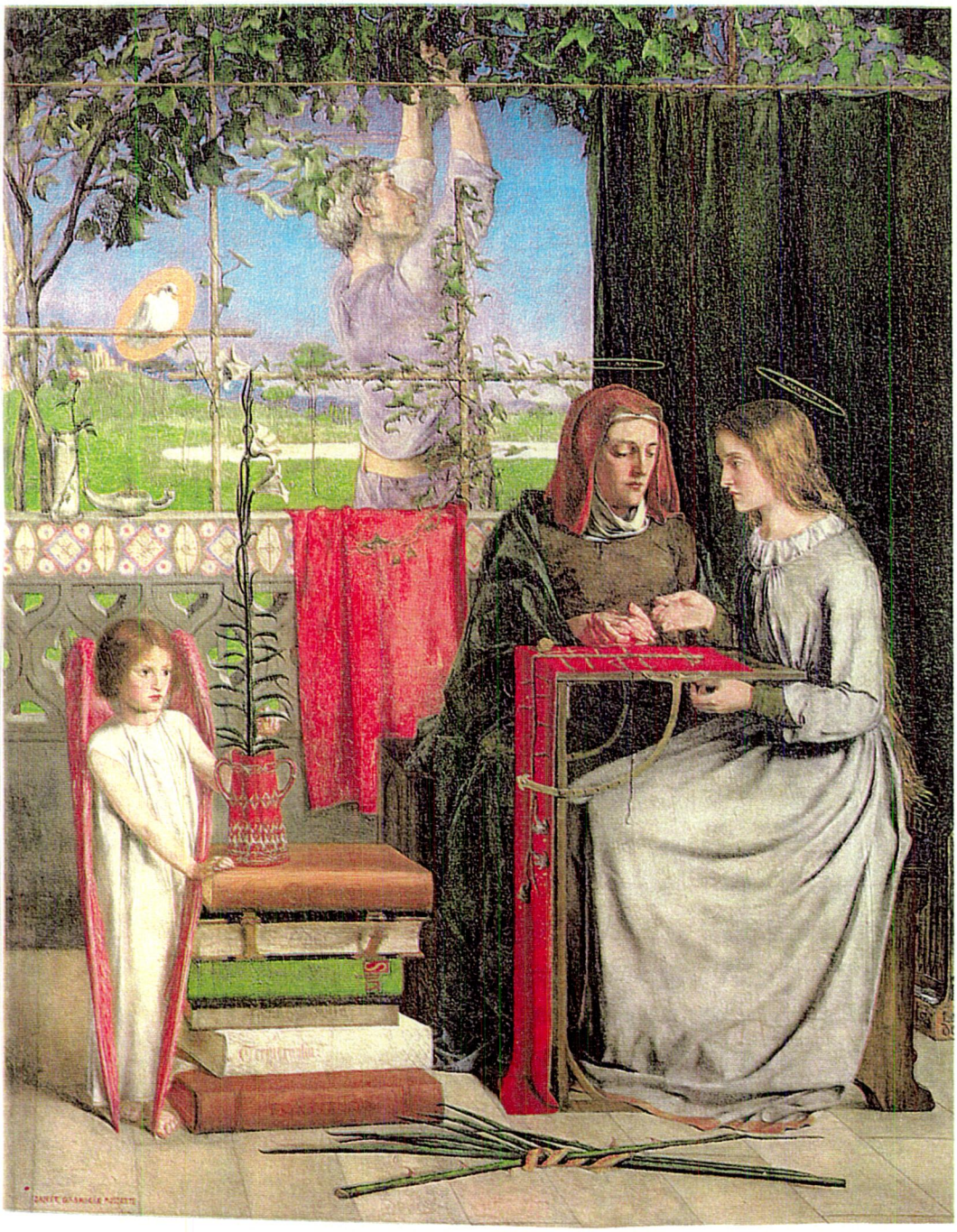


ILLUSTRATION 19

The Girlhood of Mary Virgin. Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1849

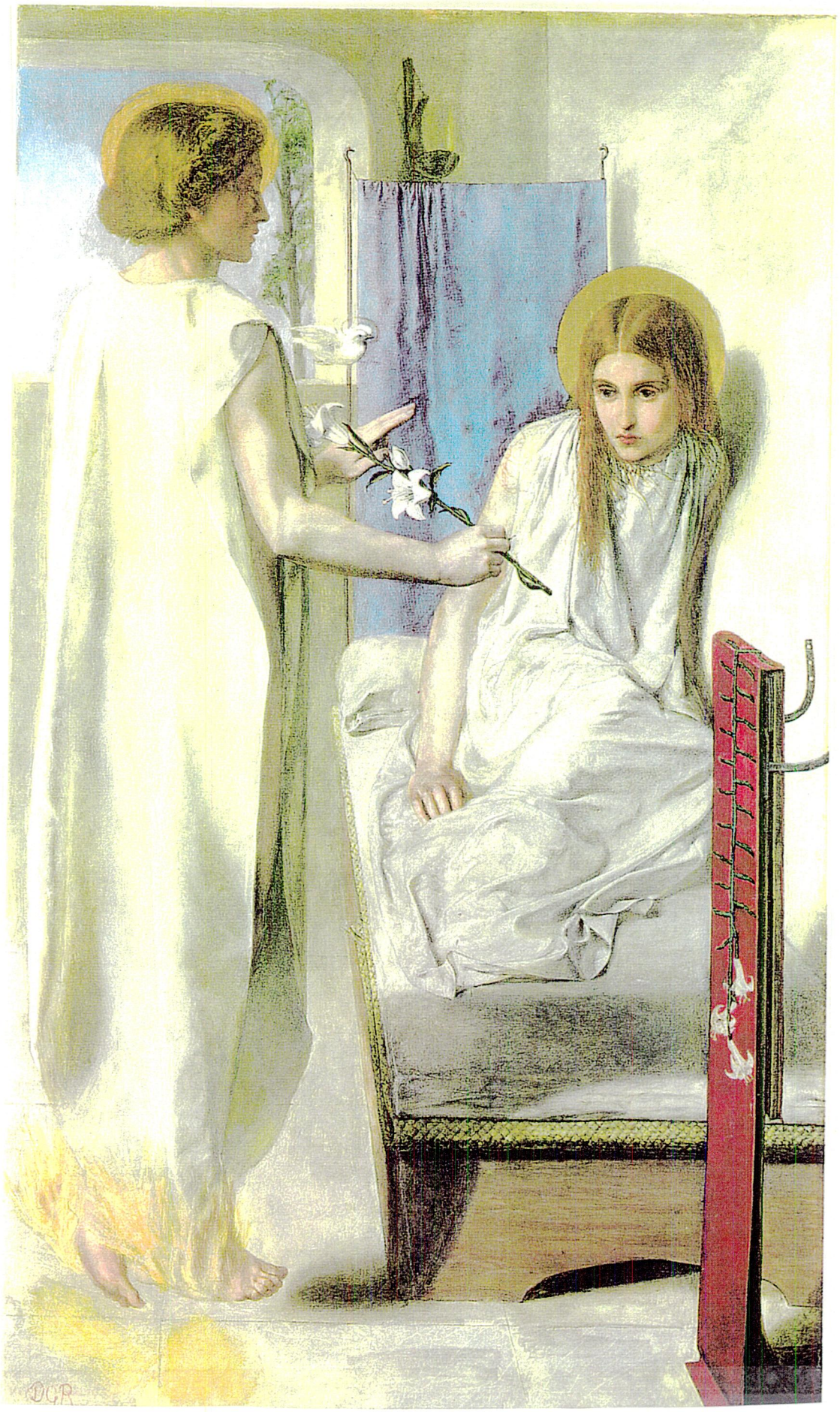


ILLUSTRATION 20

Ecce Ancilla Domini –
Annunciation
Rossetti

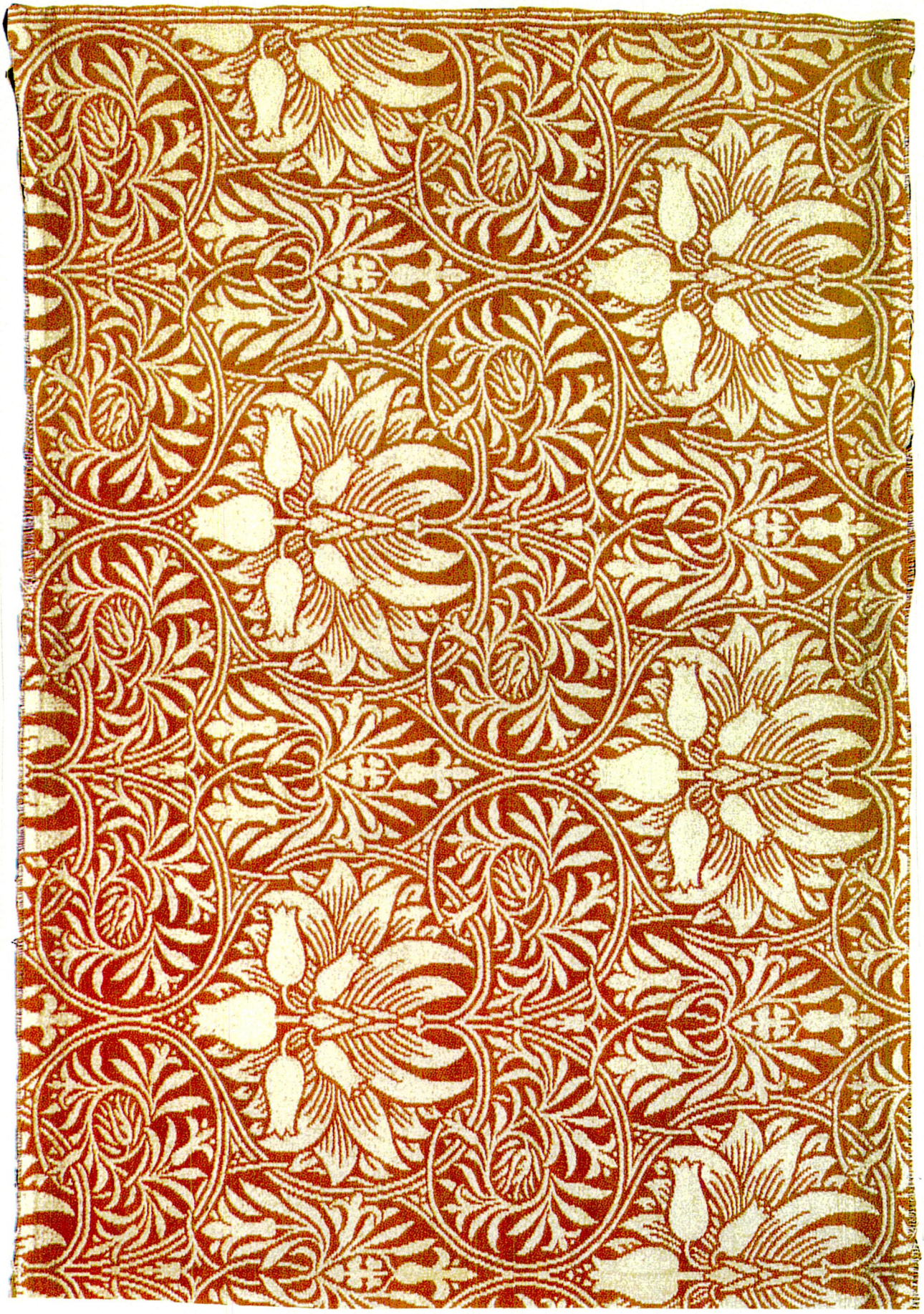


ILLUSTRATION 21

Woven fabric with Crown Imperial lily pattern
1876. Morris and Co.

Crimson frontal for the high altar, St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, 1899-1900, 280 x 150 cm.

Rose-red frontal for the lady chapel, St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, 1900-01, 213 x 110 cm.

Rose-red and gold frontal for the high altar, Kildare Cathedral, 1897-98, 230 x 100 cm.

ILLUSTRATION 22

Altar frontals – desig
By Sir Ninian Compe
1897-1901

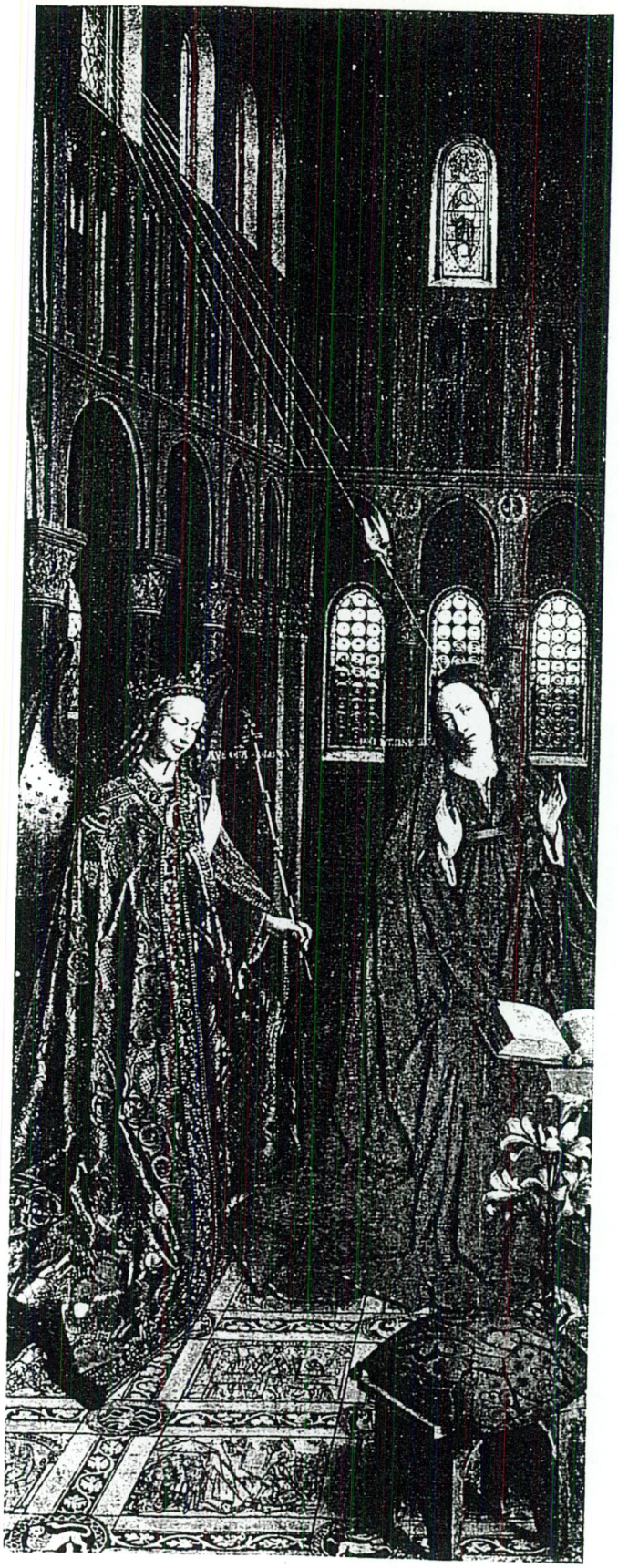


ILLUSTRATION 23

The Annunciation
Jan Van Eyck

ILLUSTRATION 24

"Consider the lilies of the field".
1879 Candace Wheeler

ILLUSTRATION 25

Wedding dress designed
By Denise Assas Couture

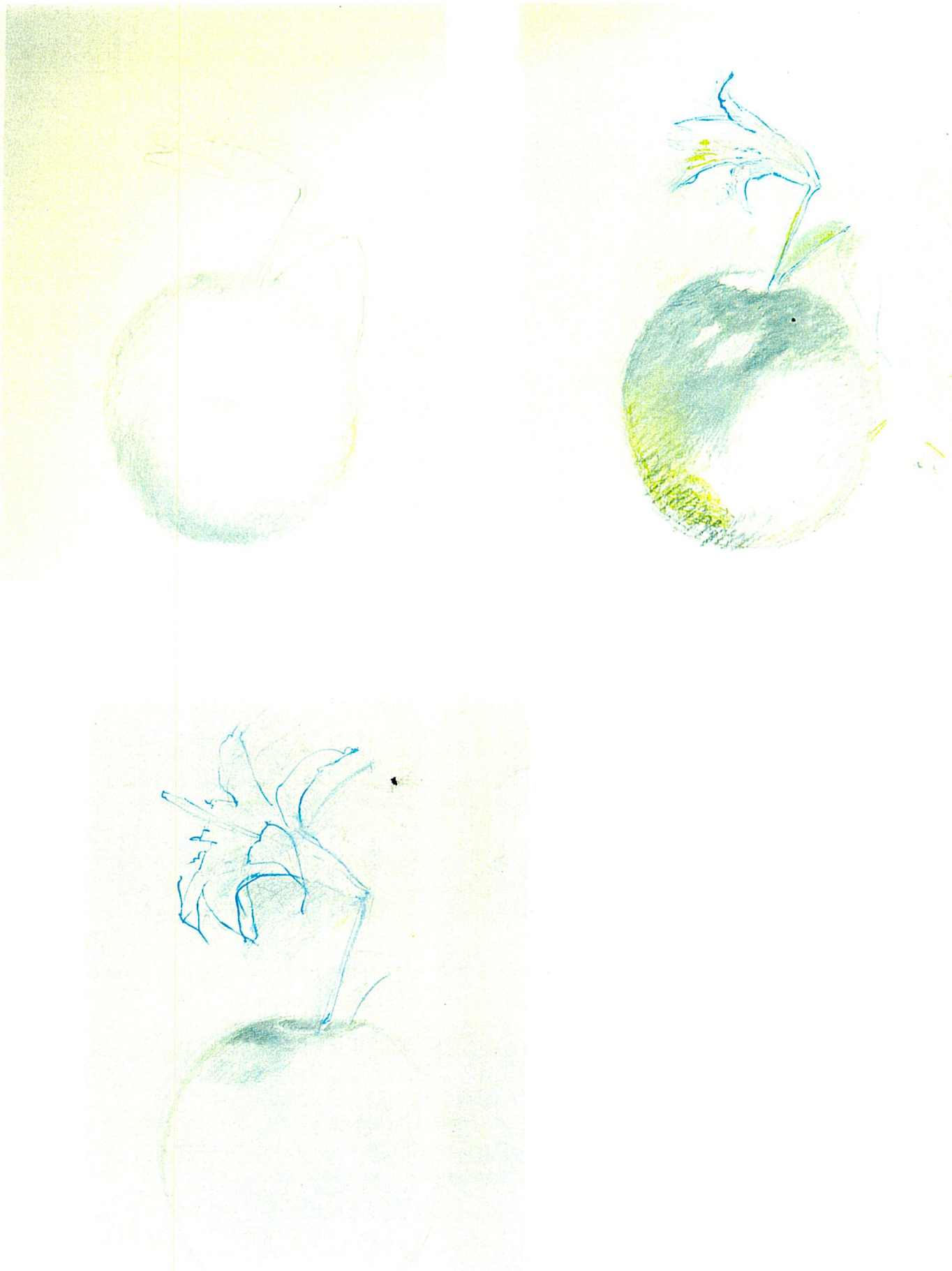
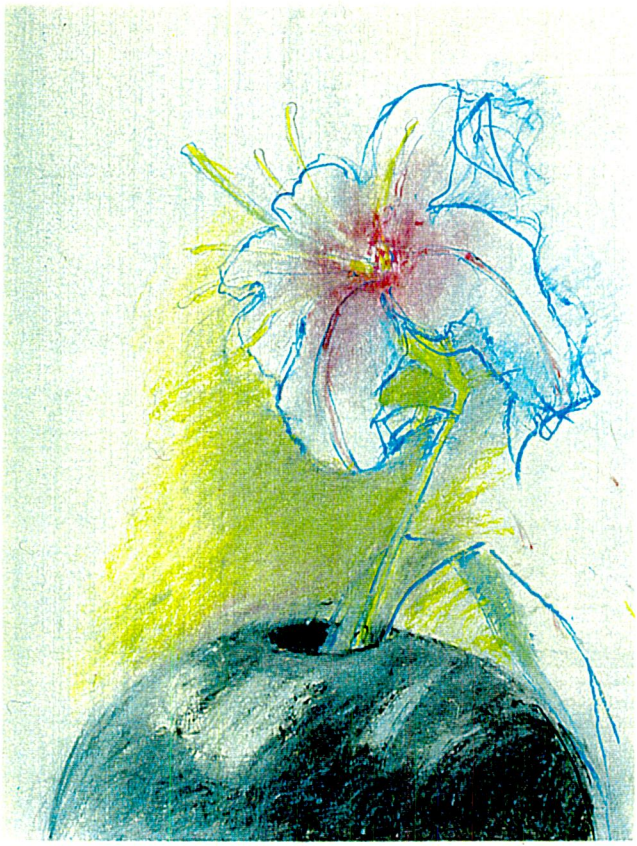


ILLUSTRATION 26

Lily: 8 day
1985 Robert Janz



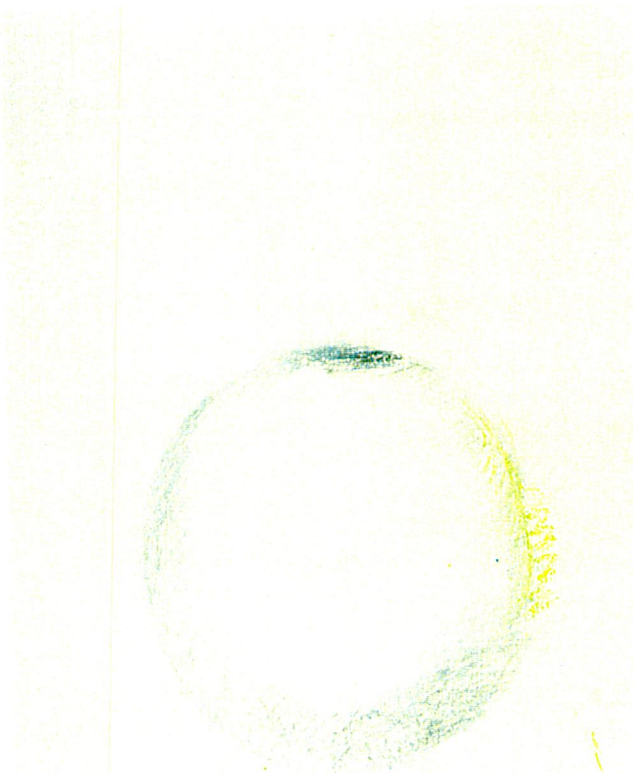


ILLUSTRATION 27

Lily: 8 day
1985 Robert Janz

ILLUSTRATION 28

Two Calla Lilies in Pink
1928 Imogen Cunningham

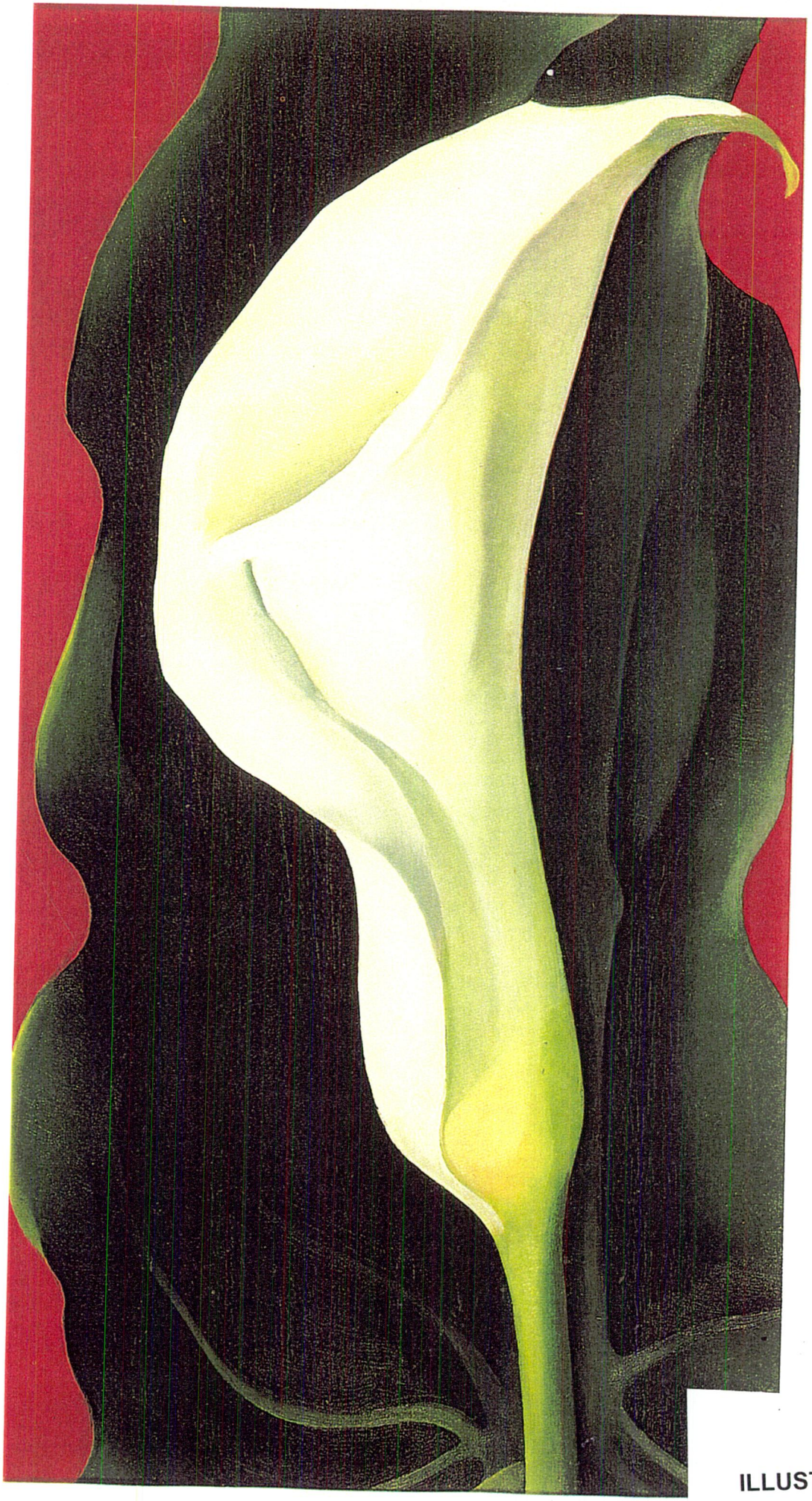


ILLUSTRATION 29

Single Lily with Red
1927 Imogen Cunningham

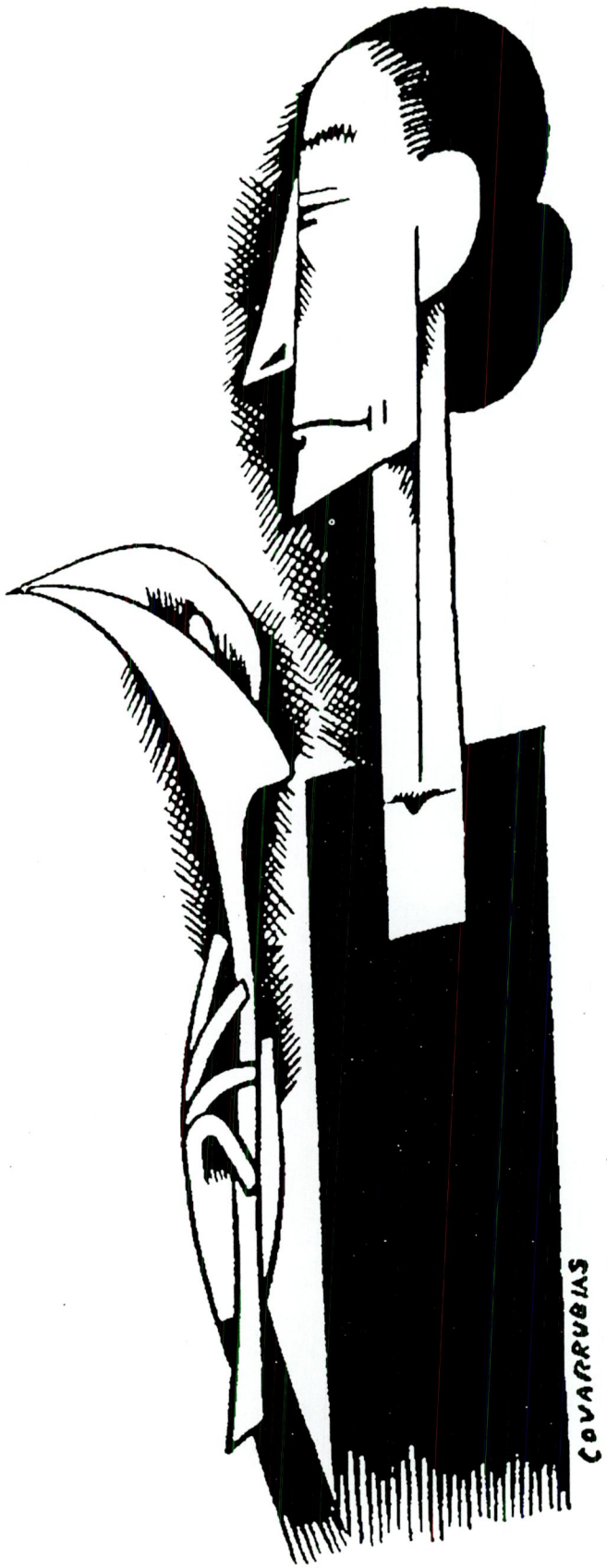


ILLUSTRATION 30

Our Lady of the Lily
Georgia O'Keefe, 1929
By Miguel Covarrubias

ILLUSTRATION 31

Micky Donnelly
A Wonderful Irish Painting 1988