



Raised work embroidered picture, Esther and Ahasuerus

Not on display

Title/Description: Raised work embroidered picture, Esther and Ahasuerus

Born: 1650 - 1680

Object Type: Textile

Materials: Metal, metal purl, Metal threads, seed pearls, Silk, Wood, Wool

Technique: Back stitch, Brick stitch, Couching, Detached buttonhole stitch, French knot, Long and short stitch, Raised work, Rococo stitch

Measurements: h. 310 x w. 420 mm

Accession Number: 1246

Production Place: Britain, England, Europe

This schoolgirl-embroidered picture depicts the biblical tale of Esther and Ahasuerus with the aid of dramatic raised work. In the picture's centre Ahasuerus sits under a grand canopy and is flanked by four figures. The subject can be confirmed to be the story of Ahasuerus and Esther, rather than Solomon and Sheba, because in early modern needleworked depictions of the tale, Ahasuerus always extends his sceptre toward Esther [1]. Because the king extends his sceptre behind the canopy, only the top of the sceptre is visible, lightly touching Esther's finger.

Several aspects of the depiction of this narrative are unusual: first are the worked metal crowns both Esther and Ahasuerus wear, and second is the inclusion of a second figure accompanying the king. While Ahasuerus is usually accompanied by a sentry, who in this picture is on the viewer's far left, here he is joined by another figure in what looks to be a long robe. The figure holds a staff and extends a finger toward the sky. It is unclear if the figure is included for a specific reason or if he merely serves to make the composition more symmetrical.

In the very centre of the scene sits Ahasuerus, shaded by a rich, silver canopy that extends far from the picture through the aid of a pillow placed underneath the canopy's top. Ahasuerus is also depicted in raised work, as are the four other figures. Esther kneels to the king's left and is accompanied by an attendant who holds her gown's train. Clumps of wool used to create the raised work are visible underneath the attendant's skirt.

Directly above the scene are clouds and rays of sun shining directly on Ahasuerus. The sun is flanked by a pair of birds perched on trees. One bird has a fish in its mouth while the other nibbles at a piece of fruit. Framing the birds are two fruit trees with embroidery-covered wooden fruits. Below the scene of Esther and Ahasuerus are the royal animals and a fountain. A stag and lion sit to the viewer's left of the central fountain and a spotted leopard and unicorn to the right. In between the four animals are portions of oak trees with acorns and a flower, caterpillar, and snail. The royal animals and the oak tree imagery suggest monarchical overtones.

Isabella Rosner, March 2022

[1] Melinda Watt, 'Mirror with Jael and Barak,' in Watt, M. and Morrall, A. *English Embroidery in the Metropolitan Museum, 1575-1700: 'Twixt Art and Nature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 232.

Further Reading

Melinda Watt and Andrew Morrall. *English Embroidery in the Metropolitan Museum, 1575-*

1700: 'Twixt Art and Nature (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

Xanthe Brooke, The Lady Lever Art Gallery: Catalogue of Embroideries (Liverpool, England: National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside, 1992).
